

By Margaret Spillane

**T**HE IRISH FARMER/POET Patrick Kavanagh once said that "all true poems laugh inwardly/ Out of grief-born intensity." The poetry at the heart of Zora Neale Hurston's short stories—about African-American country people either making their way in the Deep South or transplanted to Harlem—is all about that core of laughter, that gleeful defiant voice that emerges out of the weight of enormous pain.

Playwright George C. Wolfe has made riotously funny theater out of unsparing examination of the centuries-old burden of suffering borne by African-Americans. Four years ago his play *The Colored Museum* offered a tour around various cultural artifacts excavated from more than 350 years of black experience in the Western world. Many people were offended by Wolfe's gleeful stripping away of the pieties that have grown up like ivy around such icons as Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange.

Such a nose for trouble may have predisposed Wolfe to the work he's done of bringing three of Hurston's short stories to the stage. *Spunk*, which began as a cabaret in California last spring and became a full-blown production at Crossroads Theater in New Brunswick, N.J., last fall, is currently exhilarating audiences at New York's Public Theatre with its story-theater simple staging and its wealth of blues music. In her lifetime, Hurston was excoriated by writers such as Richard Wright for what were considered retrograde depictions of black experience. "At that time," explains Wolfe, "black Americans were trying to prove their legitimacy. I think she may have been an embarrassment, because she was so comfortable being colored."

**SOUTHERN MAJESTY:** What the era's black literary figures considered Hurston's hewing to the stereotypes of minstrelsy demonstrated not her artistic limitations but their own fears of judgment. Hurston didn't care what she looked like to the "legitimizing" eyes of white people. "She understood the elegance of black Southern culture," explains Wolfe. "She understood its majesty—extraordinarily so. Whatever figures she may or may not have cut with white people has very little to do with the breadth and depth of her work."

The three stories Wolfe selected—"Sweat," "Story in Harlem Slang" and "The Gilded Six-Bits," have a straightforwardness and clarity of line: "There's a simplicity of idea operating that camouflages complexity of feeling and emotion," which Wolfe has uncovered and exalted through stage techniques. In "Sweat," for example, a physically and emotionally abused wife survives to see her husband taste justice. "So much of what 'Sweat' is about is repressed sexual energy. That's not what the story's about, but that's what's being played—that's what I've directed."

Wolfe has suffused these African-American tales with a Japanese dramatic sensibility: "It's Noh theater, to me. I knew I wanted the blues as a mode, but also Japanese woodcuts." Noh theater, with its language of codified gestures, stately dances, spare scenery and tight focus on the gestural interplay between very few (usually two) characters, provided Wolfe with a "ritualized but simple way of stylizing the story, so that you're watching heightened human behavior—but performed with a degree of intimacy." This means that when actress Danitra Vance, as a domestic who's strolling down Lenox Avenue on her day off, tosses her hip and casts a glance sharply to one side, the shape made by the whites of her eyes is as precisely composed into the scene as the hand on her hip or the guitar chord that echoes her gesture.

It's not unusual for a gifted director to use the theater techniques of a remote culture to find the tools that allow him or her to get the "authentic" flavor of the writer's world. In the early '80s, when Ariane Mnouchkine used Japanese theater techniques to stage Shakespeare, critics marveled at the genuine Elizabethan textures she created.

Wolfe performed his Japanese overlays with the same respect for Hurston's intentions that would be brought to a contemporary restoration of a master painting: a significant portion of his appropriation consisted of determining "which voice saying what line implies tension and which voice does not—things like that. So as opposed to me imposing my rhythms onto it, this allowed me to keep Zora's rhythms and just figure out how to transport them theatrically."

Zora Neale Hurston's stories take the stage in director George C. Wolfe's *Spunk*.

# II TOWN

Martha Swope



Chic Street Man and Ann Duquesnay in a scene from *Spunk*, George C. Wolfe's adaptation of three Zora Neale Hurston stories.

"I had to cultivate Zora-type muscles inside of my emotional makeup. Her characters have a gentleness that is startling to me. I needed to live around that and get to know that. There were so many times when I wanted my rhythm, my edge, to come out—and it couldn't! I still feel as though my voice is present in this piece, but I view it as more a learning experience than a personal-expression experience."

But beautiful technique would be just an ornament without compelling characters. The three stories in *Spunk*—two set in the rural South and one in Harlem—give rich expression to the prickly antagonisms between women and men. In "Sweat," the sinuous evils nesting like snakes in the mind of a rural husband finish him off but end up sparing his much-abused wife. In "Story in Harlem Slang," two sharp-dressing street geniuses twist themselves into pretzels trying to wear each other down with braggadocio, then compete for the privilege of trying to separate a quick-witted young woman from her money. In "The Gilded Six-Bits," the sweet, sharp appetite that a newly married couple display for each other is suddenly damaged when an out-of-towner tempts the young bride with his wealth.

A tight ensemble of four actors—Danitra Vance, Kevin Jackson, Reggie Montgomery and K. Todd Freeman—plays all the parts, each performer aiming for an overall texture of rhythms and gestures. "Sometimes," says Wolfe, "someone would say to me, 'I think I should say this, but I shouldn't say that.' And we'd argue about it for a while until we figured out where the voice belonged. We were busy figuring out how to physicalize these things, how to maintain them as they are and still make them theatrically compelling."

**THE RAW AND THE COOKED:** Wolfe was determined that use of the Noh techniques would not be just a foray into exoticism. "If things are just emotional, they look raw; if just stylized, they look empty. One seems so organic, the other so technical. It took the cast a long time to realize that something as stylized as this piece could still have intense emotions going on. It took them a long time to realize that they could still breathe freely inside of the stylized form."

"The actors were very frustrated; I think they felt undervalued because it meant one actor would start an emotion but somebody else would complete it. It took them a while to find their through lines, to be able to hit their marks emotion-

ally as well as technically. I don't think it was an easy experience, but they're extraordinary performers and they hung in there."

Wolfe was first compelled by Hurston's stories "about four or five years ago. I read them and was hooked; I said, 'This is theater.' I didn't know how or when they'd take shape, but I knew that it would happen—I thought at one point I might turn them into blues operas. But I just put them aside," until about a year ago when he got a call from Gordon Davidson, artistic director of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. "He said they had a little cabaret that they did every Sunday afternoon in a restaurant around the corner from the theater. He asked me what I'd like to do, and I said, 'Well, there are these three short stories by Zora Neale Hurston.'"

"I flew out there and worked with a wonderful troupe of actors and Chic Street Man"—the brilliant blues guitarist who, with singer Ann Duquesnay, provides *Spunk*'s music. "We rehearsed for three days and, much to my surprise, the critics came—to see actors sitting on stools before music stands, reading. And it got these rave reviews." *Spunk* ended up playing every Sunday for two months at the Taper and shortly thereafter went to the Crossroads Theater in New Brunswick, N.J., before its present incarnation at the Public, where Wolfe was recently hired as a guest director for the next year.

Wolfe's own theatrical incarnation took place in kindergarten: "Even then I would never act in plays; I would stage them. While everybody else was taking naps. I remember this girl named Paula Marshall. While she was sleeping I'd wrap a towel around her head so she'd have long hair, and she'd become Sleeping Beauty. When I was eight or nine, I decided I would become an actor so I could make enough money to open an amusement park like Disneyland."

In college, he started writing "to give myself something to direct. I wrote this play called *Up for Grabs*, a totally outrageous black identity search, set against the rhythms of a sort of 1970s vaudeville. It's about a guy named Joe Thomas who gets locked up inside a soundproof booth on the day he was born. He's fed only TV commercials and given cereal boxes to read. Then, on the day he turns 21, he's released into what he thinks is the real world but is actually this game show called "Up for Grabs." On the show, this panel of people sit back and place bets on him as he passes through four different

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