

ABSTRACT

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Caroline Stefanie Clay, Masters of Fine Arts in Performance, 2013

Directed By: Professor Leigh Wilson Smiley, Director, School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies

Let It Flo! is a theatricalized imagining based on the real life of the late attorney, and feminist Florynce “Flo” Kennedy? It was borne out of my deep artistic need to understand the intersections between activism and identity. Kennedy’s audacity, flamboyance, sharp tongue, and intellect were her currency in the world of 1970’s racial and gender politics. In later years, Flo faces increasing anonymity among the very generation of women who benefitted most from her willingness to fight for their rights. This scholarly query is measured through the lens of Kennedy’s life choice to walk the road less travelled as a free woman. Hers was a trajectory marked by verbal radicalism, personal triumph, contradiction, and ascension. As Flo faces her final transition, she fights to spur into action the current generation into a life of advocacy, equality, and authenticity.

LET IT FLO! THEATRICAL PROCESS AND PRODUCTION

By

Caroline Stefanie Clay

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Leigh Wilson Smiley, Chair
Dean Bonnie Thornton Dill
Dr. Faedra Chatard Carpenter

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Dedication

For my niece Simonne Ashya Clay, age 11. Future Feminist.

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Let It Flo! would like to acknowledge those whose hard work have helped to make this process a truly rewarding one. Faye Kennedy Daly, Joy Kennedy, Eric Ruffin, Angela Ingraham, Walter Dallas, Gloria Steinem, Leigh Wilson Smiley, Faedra Carpenter, Suzanne Clay, Patricia J. Clay, Anu Yadav, Q. Terah Jackson, Missy McTamney, Julie Espinosa, Amy Hendrick, Ellie Walton, and Katharine Pitt.

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Chapter 1: Vision

Opening Night

On February 1 and 2, 2013, I walked out into the lobby of the Kogod Theatre at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center after performing *Let It Flo!* based on the life of Florynce “Flo” Rae Kennedy. Well-wishers began to ask me why they had never heard of Flo Kennedy until that night? They asked, “Was she a real person or did you make her up?” I was confused. I had worked diligently with the support of a design team to illustrate the trajectory of Flo’s life and accomplishments. Was it so hard for them to believe that such a spectacular, irreverent, flawed, intelligent, and unapologetically black woman existed? Their confusion however, was understandable given today’s technology. I could have conceivably created an imaginary visual and theatrical history for a character named Flo Kennedy. Yet why would I do that? And why was her existence being questioned? Had this been a white woman of accomplishment, would her authenticity been questioned? This query inspired my artistic and scholarly inquiry to share with the world all I can about this amazing woman, Flo Kennedy.

Genesis and Beginnings

My solo piece *Let It Flo!* is a stripped down play chronicling the life and times of feminist Flo Kennedy who was only the second woman of color to graduate from Columbia University Law School in their 300 year history in 1951, and played an important role as a criminal and civil rights attorney throughout the tumultuous

1960s and 1970s. In the 1950's it was Flo Kennedy who defended and won monies for her clients in the estate cases of musicians Billie Holliday and Charlie Parker. The scholarly compilation, *The Papers of Florynce Kennedy 1915-2004 (inclusive), 1945-1993 (bulk): a Finding Aid*, owned by Harvard University's Schlesinger Library, states the following, "she met blues singer Billie Holiday (Eleanora McKay) and agreed to represent her estate in the legal battles it faced. At this stage in her career, Kennedy specialized in entertainment law. She was especially interested in cases involving intellectual rights and potential infringement of copyright whereby large corporations profited while artists received little or no monetary compensation for their work. For years she focused intently on a compilation of cases she dubbed the "Piracy of Ideas," or the theft of intellectual property. She represented the estate of jazz legend Charlie Parker (1962) in a case that incorporated both of these issues (Morgan)."

When reflecting of the treatment her clients received in *Color Me Flo*, Kennedy said this, "we did finally manage to collect a fair amount from the record companies, but the story of the exploitation of black performers by the people who make fortunes from them has yet to be told (Kennedy 52)." *Let It Flo!* asks what will it take to incite and motivate the current generation regarding issues of social justice? In the play, Florynce takes the audience into her confidence in order to inspire them with her story of struggle defiance. In a world that had no place for Florynce Kennedy, she created her own space and refused to be silenced.

Finding Flo Kennedy

As the lights dimmed in the theatre at the beginning of *Let It Flo!* I, Caroline Clay, creator, actor, and co-director of *Let It Flo!* was at the thought that what I shared with the audience was a result of a year and a half's worth of my creative life. I felt proud as I shared the extraordinary life of Flo Kennedy. As my figure was slowly revealed out of the shadow I felt an electric charge go through me. Flo's legacy had fused with all of my desire, passion, and intention to tell her story, and together, we were unstoppable. Through her books, essays, and speeches, I was given permission to tell not only her story and the narratives of thousands of women like her.

In an interview in the 1970's given at Cal State University, Charlotte Reid Cornet asked Kennedy to define a "political movement". Kennedy answered, " a political movement is the literal occupation of areas that the Establishment is unwilling to yield out of fear." The process of creating this play has revealed to me areas of personal rigidity where I too, "have been unwilling to yield out fear." Over time, I realized that that I could only find creative freedom by shifting and re-arranging behaviors and habits in myself that no longer served. I had to surrender control when necessary, learn to collaborate, and delegate. In doing so, I found an artistic and personal liberation unlike I had never known. So we begin at the beginning, how did I find Florynce Kennedy?

Chapter 2: Research

The Roar of “Radicalism’s Rudest Mouth: 8/15/11 9pm

It has been almost two since I first heard the voice of Florynce Kennedy. As I watched *Gloria Steinem: In Her Own Words*, the HBO documentary chronicling the life of the feminist icon, I was drawn to a character in the archival footage that was completely unfamiliar to me. The footage revealed a black woman scuffling with security personnel at a speaking engagement, yelling, “Get your fucking hands off me!” With her natural salt and pepper Afro, manicured nails, long false eyelashes, cowboy hat and large gapped teeth: all I could think was, “Who is she and why don’t I know her?” When I researched her name, I discovered that she originated the famous quote: “If men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament (Crawford 156)!” Kennedy later said she heard the phrase from a New York cabbie, yet it was her charisma as a speaker that popularized it. Florynce Kennedy was a defense attorney whose clients included Charlie Parker and Billie Holliday. She worked tirelessly for women’s reproductive and civil rights. A radical free thinker, Kennedy’s fearlessness, along with her keen ability to articulate herself were attributes that I admired and wanted to explore in myself.

I immediately ordered Kennedy’s autobiography online, *Color Me Flo: My Hard Life and Good Times*, which, I was to learn, had been out of print for over twenty years. My investigative sleuthing had officially begun. What first attracted me to Flo was her seeming invincibility. However, as I read her book, it became clear that emotional fragility was the quality that she and I shared. On the surface, Kennedy

represented my black superwoman: flamboyant, outspoken, unapologetic, and blunt. I was seduced by her legend. In reality however, Kennedy's life was punctuated by contradictions that I could identify with in my own life. It was difficult for me to embrace the more complicated aspects of her biography: her low self esteem, crippling illness, abuse, marriage, alienation from other blacks, and gravitation towards a predominately white social circle. When I read and saw pictures of Flo Kennedy's embrace of white counter culture, I was stunned. My superwoman had a white husband and mostly white friends. This was not how it was supposed to be! The empathy and frustration I experienced with Kennedy legacy were dialectical opposites that I was not able to fully reconcile with the fantasy I had built up around her.

Facing My Own Fear

The first step in approaching what would eventually become i was to separate fact from fiction and come to terms with my own biography. Although Flo and I led very different lives, her struggles with identity speak to me in terms of my own journey as an African American woman. Having grown up in the predominately white upper northwest section of Washington D.C. in the 1970's, I was one of five blacks in my entire elementary school. I was called "nigger" in second grade and was so ashamed of failing to defend myself that I never told a soul. How wonderful it would have been to have a defender like Flo by my side! My fantasy of Flo Kennedy was a projection of courage in the spaces of my biography where I had felt myself a coward.

I found further emotional parallels for myself in that Kennedy and I both professionally and personally often found ourselves racially integrating the spaces we occupied. For Kennedy: the courtrooms, the classroom, and the picket line. For me: the stage, the screen, and the sound booth. Being the only African American has afforded me many privileges, however it has often been accompanied by tokenism and a lack of trust in white culture. Overtime, as I have grown in my own skin, I question issues of diversity in my life and art. I wonder if Flo examined the issues or whether she enjoyed the status of being the only voice for black women in the room.

Kennedy was keenly aware the effect her presence had in a world of whites. In a 1974 article from the *Des Moines Register* Kennedy says, “ I happen to be a very conceited person, and I have found I can use white people faster than they can use me (Voss 7).” Kennedy was also uneasy with what she saw as the less than genuine overtures by white women regarding the recruitment of black women into the movement. In a speech transcript from 1970 given at Boston University, she describes her disenchantment, “The women’s movement is always saying why don’t you recruit some blacks? They don’t want to admit that there’s a problem of horizontal hostility between black and white women, so they feel more comfortable if they have more black women, but the black women are very often not into the thing, and they’re skeptical and for very good reasons (Kennedy 85).”

In 1985, *On the Issues* Magazine conducted an interview with Flo entitled, *Flo Kennedy and Irene Davall: Forever Activists*. In the article, Flo addressed her ongoing frustrations working with white women, “I still work with white women because I think they’re important and I understand the pathology- but there’s no

reason for black women to be with you guys because you're not relevant to them and you don't come to them when the issues are simple and simple numbers could make a difference. They're sophisticated and you need them worse than they need you. So they don't believe you're interested in them, and you don't believe they're interested in you and you're both right. Never the twain shall meet (Hoffman).”

This assessment is not only searing in its precision, but shows Kennedy's clear knowledge of her own place in history as a black woman. In her book, *Black Feminist Thought*, the scholar Patricia Hill Collins goes further, “U.S. Black feminism itself illustrates this dialogical relationship. On the one hand, there is U.S. Black feminist practice that emerges in the context of lived experience. When organized and visible, such practice had taken the form of overtly black feminist social movements dedicated to the empowerment of U.S. black women. Two especially prominent moments characterize black feminism's visibility. Providing many of the guiding ideas for today, the first occurred at the turn of the century via the black women's club movement. The second or modern black feminist movement was stimulated by the anti-racist and women's social justice movement movements of the 1960's and 1970's and continues to the present (Collins 34).”

Kennedy's creation of Feminist Party in 1972 was in response to her disenchantment with the mainstream women's movement. She said in *Color Me Flo*, “I would think to myself, “I can't waste my time with this bullshit”, and go off and set up a committee. I founded the Feminist Party after *NOW* got to be so boring and scared: I can't see leaving my house and getting into a subway or a cab to go to a meeting where everybody is more terrified than I am. I saw the importance of the

feminist movement, and stayed in there because I wanted to do anything I could to keep it alive, when I got to see how retarded *NOW* was, I thought, “My God, who needs this (Kennedy 62)?”

Gloria Steinem and Flo Kennedy: A Sisterhood

Kennedy had grown restless and ready to branch out on her own as a speaker, essayist, and organizer with a national profile. However, her friendship with famous feminist and *Ms. Magazine* co-founder Gloria Steinem endured for three decades. So powerful was their chemistry on the speaking circuit, they had nicknames for one another. In a 1973 *Ms. Magazine* article, Gloria Steinem writes about her years on the speaking circuit with Kennedy. “By the time I met her in 1969, she had become well known as a founder of the National Organization for Women—though, characteristically, she had left to form other feminist groups when *NOW*’s rough early days were over and the going got too tame. Because we both wanted to emphasize racism and sexism as parallel problems of caste, we ended up speaking together in what Flo referred to as our “*Topsy and Little Eva*” team. Several times each month, we would go off to campuses and communities in Texas or Michigan or Oregon, with Flo describing herself as “tired and middle-aged” as I tried to keep up with her energetic, nonstop, and generous-hearted pace (Steinem 1973).”

Years later, the legacy of Kennedy’s mentorship would pierce not only the lines of color, but of gender. In a 2013 article in *The Washington Post* profiling actor Richard Schiff of *The West Wing*, he remembered his unlikely friendship with Flo. “In ’68 I found myself on the podium at Columbia University during the Columbia

takeovers, listening to (activist) Flo (Florynce) Kennedy speak. She took a liking to me for some reason. So I learned a lot from just hanging around her (Pressley E6-7).”

Finding the Family: Getting the Blessings of Joy and Faye Kennedy

Due to the biographical nature of the play, I knew there were gaps in my *Let It Flo!* My source material was strong, yet I wanted to find family members if I could. I decided to find out there were any surviving members. From my research, I knew Flo had four sisters, Grayce, Faye, Joy, and Evelyn. (Kennedy 24) I was lucky enough to locate her two surviving sisters: Faye and Joy. Faye, at age eighty-two, was a political organizer and retired corrections officer who lived in Honolulu, Hawaii with her husband of over fifty years. Joy, at age eighty-four, was a composer and novelist who lived in Newark, New Jersey. Both sisters were invaluable resources in filling in the biographical gaps of ancestral data: timelines, names, dates, and details Flo’s writings had not revealed.

Thus, Flo’s sisters became collaborators in the creation of this play. They helped me realize that I had been writing from a place of fear and obligation. I wanted to get the story right: for the Kennedy family, for Flo legacy, for my Thesis Committee, and for everyone but myself. I was so busy trying to please I had forgotten to breathe, and for an actor, that was completely counterproductive. They had given me their trust and I had to take it and graciously. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop regarding rights: a call from the sisters’ lawyer pulling the rights to Flo’s story, a problem with rights from the Schlesinger Library, or Gloria Steinem’s Office wanting her name pulled from the show. Luckily, none of that happened. Everyone was proud to be associated with *Let It Flo!* and prouder still, that Flo

Kennedy was taking center stage in a renewed conversation around issues of critical race theory and women's studies.

Chapter 3: The Writing Process

Working with Faculty

The personal and artistic growth that I experienced from writing *Let It Flo!* has fundamentally shifted the way I approach creative work. As an artist without experience in solo creation, I was forced to tap into sources of instinct and wisdom that had grown dull from doing productions where the script was already written, and production concerns were in the hands of others. This project was a creative process that was my responsibility from its inception: I was responsible for its success or failure. I learned that there was no place for perfectionism. I had to be available to the reality of obstacle: misunderstandings, writers block, frustration, and an occasional maddening silence from the creative muses. However, given the challenges inherent in devising work, when the stars aligned and the sentences flowed, I was reminded how magical this opportunity was for me. I was successful because I was able to share the story of Florynce Kennedy as told through the lens of a life lived by Caroline Clay.

Throughout the process, I met with my Thesis Committee, Dean Bonnie Thornton Dill, the Dean of the Arts and Humanities, Dr. Faedra Carpenter, and Professor Leigh Wilson Smiley. I brought in Flo's 1976 autobiography *Color Me Flo: My Hard Life and Good Times*. In the Zen-like comfort of Dr. Dill's office we talked and brainstormed the story. Dr. Dill said, "Well, Flo is free. She is a free woman." This struck me and provided me with an anchor for all that followed. I never forgot those words in writing or in performance: "Flo is free."

My dramaturgy professor and Thesis Committee member Dr. Faedra Carpenter encouraged me to actuate my descriptions and imagery. Through writing exercises, I freed myself of the obligation of having to stay true to biographical fact. In doing so, I liberated my imagination, wrote new scenes, made up scenes, and was unencumbered by logic. I began to invite into my process a new creative permission and allowance that helped battle what my Thesis Committee Chair Leigh Wilson Smiley refers to as “the paralysis of integrity.”

River Stories Workshop: Fall 2012

The creation process continued heavily into the fall semester 2012 with a *River Stories* workshop taught by Committee Thesis Chair and Director of The School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies Professor Leigh Wilson Smiley. *River Stories* is a form of storytelling created by actress and vocal coach Nomi Noel where the actor draws on a piece of paper points of reference indicating the main events in their lives. These reference points are drawn to look like stones inside a rushing river. The actor then physicalizes this journey by creating a ritualized progression from birth to adulthood. The actor shares the meaning of each “stepping stone” with selected text and movement with the ensemble.

I was deeply moved doing this exercise. I thought that this workshop would confirm some deeply held character assumptions I had held about Flo: her flamboyant personality, loud speaking voice, and tendency not to listen to others. Those were mere suppositions. What was revealed in the improvisation was a shy, retiring, available, generous young Flo who because of a series of illnesses, overcompensated with a bold personality. Whether any of this was actually true, for the actor, these

clues were as priceless as diamonds. Known as the “backstory for a character,” these rich details of my imagination provided: texture, complexity, nuance, and world of choices for me as I continued to craft my characterization of Flo.

Pen to Paper: Summer and Fall 2012

Putting pen to paper began in the summer of 2012, and continued into the fall under the tutelage of Thesis Preparation Class instructor Walter Dallas. My early drafts were mostly exposition and little action. My initial efforts were one-dimensional, lacking in nuance. One draft included an elderly Flo chatting with Death as they sip tea and reminisce over events in her life. It later became apparent that this characterization was limited. The Flo I had come to know was not ready to welcome Death, no matter how serious her health challenges were. I had turned to cliché and I knew it. It was clear that *Let It Flo!* would never leap off the page until I was willing to stop seeing Flo as a character, but rather, as a person. *Let It Flo!* had to become a testimony of my own life as well as Flo Kennedy’s life. I engaged in informal critique sessions in which I had my classmates read my work so I could listen for the language’s flow, its performance potential, and narrative resonance. I slowly found confidence through the collaboration process and looked forward to feedback. It was important that my play was in service to a life that was lived in the shadows of history.

Chapter 4: Collaboration and Production

Working with Director Eric Ruffin: Process and Production

I chose director Eric Ruffin. Eric taught at Howard University and at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Eric Ruffin who came highly recommended by Dr. Carpenter, and Professor Walter Dallas, who both made phone calls to him on my behalf. Our meeting and subsequent collaboration was a gift for which I will be forever thankful. After my first meeting with my director Eric, my approach to the work fundamentally changed. He encouraged me to reconsider an idea for a set populated with a plethora of props to indicate a “storage facility.” He convinced me I needed none of it. Instead I decided to make use of the compartments provided in the set itself: a decision the designers appreciated. I decided to let the backdrop I decided to let it do its share of the storytelling. Armed with only a costume rack and a chair, the space became in which memories and recollections are stored.

I performed for Eric what I had rehearsed. “Why did you write this play?” Eric asked. I felt myself become defensive. I did not know Eric, and without a context for his question, I was unsure whether he was challenging my talent as an actor, a writer, or both. I told him that I wrote the play because I considered Flo’s work a testimony to the power of our highest selves, regardless of obstacles. I continued with saying that I was drawn to Flo Kennedy’s willingness to sacrifice all to live a life of authenticity, truth, and freedom. Finally, I told him I was moved by the paid the price of ill health, anonymity, and skirmishes with the Establishment to

be free. The length of my explanation was evidence that I still was working through an answer that instinctively I already knew.

What I wanted to say, but didn't, was that Flo Kennedy was who I desperately wanted to be. That was a truth I could not yet articulate. "When you are ready to admit how much this story is about not just Flo but about you, Caroline, then you will fly." Eric said. Clearly he knew me better than I realized. The first ten days of rehearsal was frightening because Eric had a prior commitment and was not available. During that time I was leading all aspects of rehearsal, from stage management team, how we conducted span of day: all decisions large and small were mine.

Once Eric was able to attend rehearsals we immediately created a safe space for table work and discourse. We engaged in two days of pure table work. That was a process whereby Eric and I went through the script line by line, page by page, and asked questions about the Flo's relationship to herself, to the other characters, and to the larger world of the play. This investigation moved with precision and detail, as Eric and I continued to uncover the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual core of Flo. From there, things moved quickly. My stage life, also known as "blocking" came out of the fact of the newfound clarity I gained as Flo. Organically, I knew where to move and where to go. There was an instinctive intelligence that was motivating my steps and prompting my inner logic. As a director, Eric knew how to create stage pictures that had visual balance and emotional fire. He blocked the show with mindfulness towards economy and simplicity: which allowed me to make it through the hour long solo.

Working with Choreographer Angela Ingraham: Process and Production

I selected my choreographer, Angela Ingram because of her vast knowledge of Afro-Brazilian, African American, and popular dance idioms, and also because of her encyclopedic knowledge of music. She was well versed in popular rhythm and blues, gospel, sacred hymns, and chants from the Yoruba. I also involved my director friend Timothy Douglass who used unique musical choices in his pieces. Many derived from the WPA 1940's research Folkways Culture Projects. In these projects, ethnologists such as Zora Neale Hurston went through the American South and gathered authentic Negro singing, ring shouts, chain gang songs, and narratives from the people who lived there.

Angela and I worked on creating a specific vocabulary of movement. We explored moments: a teenage Flo slips and falls at a white-owned luncheonette counter, Flo's first attack of diverticulitis, Flo's subsequent spinal fusion surgery, and Flo's first trip to New York. Based on post-show feedback, the choreography was challenging for to follow for the audience because it was lacked specificity. If movement is to work as a narrative tool, the dance and music must be meticulously researched. Social and secular dances in black culture can assist greatly with time period, place, and story. I was unable to take full advantage due to lack of rehearsal time. When I perform this play again, the spinal fusion sequences will be more based in everyday authentic movement rather than spirals, undulations and contractions.

Fugue of the Muthafucka Chorus

I began to tentatively make eye contact with people in rehearsal. When Committee Chair Leigh Smiley visited rehearsals, I would connect with her as well, knowing that she knew my struggle with eye contact. A perfect example of testing bravery in the rehearsal room was when Eric first suggested the “muthafucka chorus”. I thought he was kidding, and yet was getting to know Eric’s child-like belly laughter that said, ”When it comes to fun, I’m dead serious.”

We talked about how in *Let It Flo!*, when Flo tells the audience about the need to free themselves and the liberation in just saying the word, “*muthafucka*.” Flo needed to be a teacher and she had to make the audience her students at a class they would never forget. He likened the rapport I would need to create to that of “Miss Pat” in the play *The Colored Museum* by George C. Wolfe. In that play, an overly happy stewardess readies the audience as they board a slave ship set to cross the Middle Passage bound for bondage in the New World. “Teach them the rules of the game, Caroline, he would say, and the audience follow you anywhere, even if its straight to hell!” Out of this came the choral deconstruction of one of Flo’s favorite words, “*muthafucka*.” I split the audience into four sections and gave them their assignments:

- The first section, Section A spoke: “MUH.”
- The second section, Section B spoke: “THA”
- The third section, Section C spoke: “FUH”
- The fourth and final section, Section D spoke: “KAH”

After coaching the audience, I then had them do it in rounds until the fugue rose to a crescendo and fell apart into hysteria. “There, doesn’t that feel better!” My character says as Flo. It took almost until the last show until I figured out how to really break it down into a rousing fugue of voices. It was an amazing release of laughter and shock. The audience became collaborators in a deliciously forbidden experience. It was liberating to say a profane word while protected by the anonymity of a darkened theatre. Saying it playfully in a round ignited hilarity among even the most conservative of participants. I am confident that Flo Kennedy would have wholeheartedly approved of the “muthafucka chorus.” Feedback has been positive bordering on elation, with audiences thanking me for laughter, tears, and a heartfelt release of tension.

Working with Eric Ruffin was a joyous experience. His work ethic and personality was much like I imagine Flo Kennedy’s to be: blunt and razor-sharp observations in service of the best product humanly possible. He was relentless in his expectations of excellence, and in so doing: I was not about to let him, my team, or myself down. I look forward to working with Eric Ruffin anytime and anywhere. He was a consummate professional.

Design Team: Process and Production

Lighting

The symbolic choice to begin the show in total darkness and have the character of “Flo” maneuver negative space was key creating the world of play. It represented my artistic process of coming out of darkness into light. After seeing *Let It Flo!* University of Maryland Dance Professor Alvin Mayes likened Flo’s entrance

to that of opera diva Leontyne Pryce in a production of *Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini. In that production, Pryce's voice emerged out of the darkness at the top of the show and at the end, her character, just like Kennedy in *Let It Flo!* ascended into light.

Sound

The design team, Eric Ruffin, and I were very interested in metaphors of light and dark, illumination and shadow, enlightenment and ignorance, sound and silence. Throughout the show, Flo experienced a recurring dream brought on by the sound of rushing water. The sound of water represented Flo's mother, Zella washing clothes in their St. Louis backyard when Flo was a child. In the final moments of the show, Flo decided that life in an assisted living facility is not the way to live. Rather than return to a nursing home, she willed herself die among her belongings in her storage facility. In this way, she was able to exit this world on her own terms: with dignity and self-respect. Flo heard the sound of rushing water and recognized it as the song of her mother calling her home to her ancestors. Upstage, the flats separated into two the audience Flo thanked the audience for accompanying her on this journey and walked upstage. As she did, she cast a shadow that grew larger as her legacy flooded the stage as she embarked on her final journey "home".

Costumes

The designers and I talked at length about the color palette of the costumes and how the lights would reflect off of or be absorbed by the fabrics. In 1990, I had the opportunity to wear the costumes of late Judy Dearing (*For Colored Girls 1977*) in a 1990 production of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in Philadelphia. Judy's work

shifted what I considered muted colors in the prism: browns, mustards, burnt sienna, and tan. As I wore her clothes, my sensibilities were completely rearranged and informed new sensibility. She knew how to highlight and celebrate the undertones of African American skin through the draping, texture, and weight of fabric. Through watching Judy Dearing I knew how to tell Flo's story through a timeline of signature clothing pieces: a country dress from St. Louis in the 1930's, a hat from the 1940's, graduation cap from her Columbia in the 1950's, 1960's full length fur, and 1970' bell bottoms.

Discoveries regarding production process happened throughout, yet and none more crucial than those surrounding costumes. Relatively late in the game, the design team realized that a most of the costume pieces I had requested: wigs, hats, and gloves that early on were so important, were getting in the way. Costume designer Rebecca DeLapp and I had not factored in the time element of putting on and taking off clothing. In theatre, these costume transitions are known as "quick changes." The costume shop was working frantically to accommodate my wishes but no matter how much rigging was added for these quick changes or the suggestion of dressers in the wings to help, which I did not want; it was impossible to achieve the seamlessness I sought. We agreed the clothing would become points of touchstones in time, displayed on a chair set center stage rather than being physically worn. As Flo found clothing pieces from her life, her "*magic realism*" storage facility, memories resurfaced one by one. A delicate ecosystem of creative interdependence bloomed in that tiny storage room: Flo's memories hinged on the costume pieces, the music needed the projected images to flourish, the soundscape was governed by Flo's

imagination in order to merge the elements of past and present, and future into a final burst of light at the end of the play.

Lighting

The Cohort was shown a unifying sculptural relief by set designer Andrew Cohen inspired by the work of artist Louise Nevelson. To Andrew's credit, he tried to incorporate elements of each of the individual shows in the compartments of the set. However, I think he would admit that trying to create a design that honored seven performances, which at that at the time were still in flux, was a daunting task.

Projections

The projections turned out to be a wonderfully happy accident that both Andrew and I were thrilled about. They served as exquisite storytelling tools that we were unsure of until the "eleventh hour." Many of the images were copies taken from books, clippings and lithographs that were over a century old. Yet, when the projections hit the multi-textured values of the set, combined with lighting, the effect was magical. I watched Andrew have fun, and take pride in his work. The collaborative moments of this process were never more satisfying than when I had the opportunity to see my colleagues emerge triumphant as a result of something they did in service of mutual success. I will always be grateful to Andrew Cohen and his team for their work on *Let It Flo!*

The technical process of putting together *Let It Flo!* was challenging simply due to time constraints. Normally, technical rehearsal for a one show is a minimum of two full theatrical working days depending on the contract. This festival was limited to five hours for the insertion of all technical elements per show. Pedagogically, I am

pleased that there will be a post mortem opportunity so that the actors, designers, production team, and faculty heads can all gather in a facilitated environment and honestly look at what can be done so that the future the MFAP Festival of New Work can set a realistic tech week schedule that allows for everyone's needs and sets the students up for optimum success.

Eric, Becca, and I all agreed that the clothing would become touchstones in time, displayed on a chair set center stage rather than being physically worn. As Flo found clothing pieces from her life her "magic realism" storage facility, memories resurfaced one by one. A delicate ecosystem of creative interdependence bloomed in that tiny storage room: Flo's memories hinged on the costume pieces, the music needed the projected images to flourish, the soundscape was governed by Flo's imagination in order to merge the elements of past and present, and future into a final burst of light at the end of the play.

Chapter 5: The Future of *Let It Flo!*

Gloria Steinem's Ongoing Support of Let It Flo!

On April 23, 2013, I will have the opportunity to perform excerpt of *Let It Flo!* for Gloria Steinem when she visits the University of Maryland, College Park. To have the opportunity to embody the words and spirit of Steinem's dear friend is an incredible honor. *Let It Flo!* is second in my triptych, *Sepia Sculptress*, my piece written in 2011 about the life and career of 19th century sculptor and freedwoman Edmonia Lewis, was the first. Lastly, is a piece about the life of 1940's activist cartoonist and social satirist Jackie Ormes, creator of the "Patty Jo" doll and "Torchy Brown" comic strip. I am submitting *Let It Flo!* to New Works festivals including the Usual Suspects Reading Series at New York Theatre Workshop, New York Stage and Film, and the Smithsonian. My plan is to continue researching, writing, and refining *Let It Flo!* for performances here and around the country.

What made Flo Kennedy so extraordinary was the way she straddled the fine line between the intellectual rigor of her law practice and her ability to move among people with the common touch as she took her battles for social justice to the streets. Kennedy had no problem standing up and asking the hard questions. At the end of each of the five performances, I received on Flo's behalf, standing ovations. As long as Flo stands in my memory I will continue to spread the gospel of her humanity, and those qualities that are extraordinary in each of us. This experience is and was a joy for me.

My next step is to go to Harvard's Schlesinger Library where all of Flo's estate papers are donated and look through the almost 400 hours of VHS film of the Public Access *Flo Kennedy Show* that aired from the early 1970's through the '90's. This piece joins two other one-woman vehicles that are in stages of process showcasing the lives of unsung warrior women of color. *Let It Flo!*

I will look to introduce the legend and lessons of Flo Kennedy to young adults for whom her life story may serve as a template for the power of determination and audacity. Kennedy's virtuosic agility with the spoken word often obscured a deep wisdom and a gravity of intent that were keys to her enduring legacy. She lived her truth and her joy; believing that it was the inalienable right of a person, regardless of race or gender: to be free.

Chapter 6: *Let It Flo!* Thesis Performance Script

LET IT FLO!

Written and Performed by Caroline Stefanie Clay

TIME: 2000

LIGHTS: House Out

Silence. A woman's voice is heard in the darkness. We hear her before we see her.

Flo: Goddammit!

LIGHTS reveal woman in full view of audience. She is in the back of a N.Y. taxicab.

Flo: *Goddamnit!* That cab driver just closed the door on my muthafuckin' toe! As if I am going to limp after him in a full length fur. "Sir," I said, "I've memorized your ID# number Mr. 2456529." New York taxi cabs. Thank god he sped away before I tipped him because now I might need that money for an ambulance for my toe! A lot of people say I have that kind of face; the kind you've seen before. Well, I'm not in the habit of giving my name to strangers, much less my personal information. Flo. Flo Kennedy. Yes, I was the lady with the show on New York Public Access, *The Flo Kennedy Show* ran for almost 20 years. That was me- Afro, nails, cowboy hat, *Radicalism's Rudest Mouth*.

(She sings)

My Country Tis of Thee

Sweet Land of Bigotry

Of thee I Sing!

(To the Tune of the Battle Hymn of the Republic)

You have told us to speak softly

To be gentle and to smile

Expected us to change ourselves with every passing style

That the only work for women

Was to clean and fuck and file

That's why we're marching on!

March! March! March!

Move on over or we'll move on over you! Move on over or we'll.....

SOUND: Car horns the honking. NYC cabbie cursing, traffic jam.

Flo: Alright! Alright! New York City, I love it! I guess that's your cue to move on over. Thanks again for your kindness Mr. Cabdriver.

(To the audience)

Flo: I did it! I've escaped! Now I don't know if that makes me a *fugitive* but I do know it makes me free. And freedom is like taking a bath, you've got to do it every day. Imagine me, a fugitive in New York City, as if anybody cares! I moved here in 1942, and although I've lived other places I always returned. It's like a love affair that leaves you black and blue, but I've always loved a good fight. *(To the audience)* Can anybody tell me the time? Thank you.

Now, from my years as an attorney I know that I have not been gone long enough to be classified as a *missing person*, and that neither the residents, the nurses, nor the staff at the assisted living facility at which I reside and have recently fled are particularly fast on the uptake. You should've seen me. *(She mimes her escape)* Needles, tubes, and monitors: out. Fur, jewelry, lashes: on. They'll notice, sooner or later... or not. Anyway. I'm on my way to a party! Like I used to have at my apartment here in New York which, since the mid-fifties has also doubled as my law office. But that was before all this. First things first, I'm Flo. Florynce. F-L-O-R-Y-N-C-E. The "y" was gifted to me by my mother, Zella. She put a question mark, a "Why" in the middle of my name. "Florynce," she said, "in this life, the least you should be able to afford is a 'y' in the middle of your name." And I've been questioning shit ever since. But for now, let's get where we're going. I say *we*, because you are invited. Consider yourselves VIP.

LIGHTS shift as we follow Flo into her storage facility

SOUND: Storage facility padlock. Door opening. Door closing. "Click" sound of a pull chain.

LIGHTS reveal a storage facility unit.

Flo: Well, here we are. Welcome to my party! A bit on the low-key side but I like to keep it simple. Tonight is an anniversary of sorts, because on this night, every year until recently, I'd throw a party for myself. A memorial party. Yes honey, a memorial service and party all in one! Don't ever leave your legacy to others, I promise you they'll fuck it up. You are talking to a woman who, in 1976 at the age of 60, wrote her autobiography and bi-centennial gift to the planet, *Color Me Flo: My Hard Life and Good Times*, because I didn't trust anybody to speak for me after I was gone.

SLIDE A: COLOR ME FLO! Book cover.

Fabulous book, and I'm not just saying that because I wrote it. There's a wonderful picture of me on the cover giving the middle finger to the Establishment, literary gold.

It's been out of print now for almost twenty years, and if you can find it in your local library consider yourself among the lucky.

I look at it this way, why should you wait until you die to find out how folks feel about you? Find out now. Forget the funeral theatrics. Let them tell you now, while you can still enjoy it and them. Let it flow!

Even if everything they tell you is a lie, enjoy it! This storage facility is filled with a lifetime. Mama is home now.

(Looking at the wall installation) I look at all of my things, from my homes in Orange, New Jersey in the 1970's; the two summer shares in Fire Island and Nova Scotia, my apartment on the Upper East Side. Normally, am not one to wallow in the past; it's not as if all of these memories are diamond-encrusted! I cannot tell you how many times over the last 40 years, I have been stopped by the New York City Police Department on the Upper East Side who, upon seeing me enter my apartment have questioned me as to why I'm there and where I think I'm going.

LIGHT SHIFT: UPPER EAST SIDE STREET CORNER: 1969

Flo: Officers, I live here. And work here. No, I will not give you my name. I know my rights. Don't touch me. As a matter of fact I want your names and badge numbers and once you find out who I am and what I do, this will be a day I guarantee you will regret. I understand that in this neighborhood if a Negro woman isn't pushing a shopping cart or a white woman's baby y'all get real nervous but let me assure you, you have no idea with whom you fuck. (To the audience) The year was 1969. I wish I could say I sued the NYPD. I did not. But it was a turning point for me. I began to take my legal fights more and more from behind the legal desk and straight into the streets.

LIGHT SHIFT BACK INTO STORAGE FACILITY. Present Day.

"So Flo," you may ask, "how did you go from all of that to life on the run in a storage room lit by a bulb with a pull chain with barely a pot to piss in?" Short answer, two years ago, I had a small stroke. Not a debilitating one – I could still walk and talk, but I was slowed down. Yet, according to my doctors, I couldn't live alone. (Sighs). So I took initiative and put my things in this storage facility between 11th and 12th Avenue in the West 30's here in Manhattan and I moved into an assisted living facility, where fun is a dirty word. I had to escape. I went there to get better, not to die! As with all oppression, life there is tacky and unaesthetic. They don't like me and I don't like them. They think I'm trying to rabble-rouse the residents. The food is terrible! I'm thinking about organizing a protest. (Pause)

I am not getting better. The truth is, I've been in the infirmary for the last week, hooked up to a lot of shit, and so my doctors say, severely dehydrated. I'm not going to die there. I refuse.

The "mollygrabbles", that's what I've always called my bouts of lousy health, are getting worse. If I *am* to go...*if* I am to go, it will not be among monitors, Jell-o at noon, nurses and needles. No! It will be among my hats, my furs, my music, and my things. I know this is not my home in Orange, New Jersey, or my apartment on Park Avenue, or my property on Fire Island or Nova Scotia (which by the way were *shadow purchased*, meaning I gave my white friends the money to buy them on my behalf and then one day BANG! my black ass shows up and POOF! there goes the neighborhood! Now everything I own is here: safe, sound, and enchanted. Just like their mama.

Oh, I'm hot let me take off my fur. (Goes to costume rack and hangs up coat) "You and I have been through a lot tonight, haven't we?"

(She sees a man's hat hanging on the wall) What's this? My daddy Wiley's hat. Wiley Choice Kennedy.

SLIDE B: Wiley Kennedy

SLIDE C: The Kennedy Family

What a man he was. Never took shit off nobody. My daddy loved this hat, so much so that he was known as "Wiley with the Hat". Born and raised in the 1880's in Kansas City, Missouri, he took one look at my mama, Zella Rae Zachman, and the rest, as they say, was history. He started as a Pullman's Porter on the railroads and then owned and ran a taxi stand on 12th Street in downtown Kansas City in the Jazz District.

So, here we were, one of the only Negro families living on Walrood Avenue in Kansas City. Naturally, the Ku Klux Klan wanted us out.

Now, I suppose if the Klan had shown up in the middle of the night, as was their way, it might have been different, but they came during the day in an attempt to intimidate my dad. So daddy grabbed his rifle and staring right down the shaft, he said:

SOUND: The cocking back of a rifle.

Flo as Wiley: *"The first foot that hits my steps gets shot."* And they left. I guess they figured anybody that black and crazy ought to be left alone. I see it this way- my daddy was willing to kill and willing to die. He and countless folks like him whose names never made the history books. Which is why, during my lifetime, I have never understood theoretical non-violence and why oppressed people are always being made to take a vow by the establishment of non-violence.

Now, I loved Martin Luther King, God knows he accomplished far more than I ever could have and made fantastic changes, changes so fantastic that they killed him; but he died as if he were trying to take San Juan Hill, with a bullet in his head. The difference between him and me is merely a stylistic approach towards the pathology of oppression. I own no guns nor do I ever plan to; I do feel it is simply bad form for any movement committed to social change to lay down all your swords, shields! Why?! They don't! If you're in a so-called movement, then MOVE, and not to the rear!

Humming Onstage (to represent Mama Zella)

I digress. I came from a wonderful family. My Mama, Zella Kennedy, she looked like a movie star to me. Daddy Wiley was the soil, Mama Zella was the root and tree, off of which hung five branches Evelyn, Grayce, Flo, Faye, and Joy. We also lived with our Grandmother, a large woman with an ill temper and foul odor. When she would rise up from a seat the little ones would sniff behind her seat and say:

“PeeeeeeYewwww!” Stupid, I know, but she was mean and they were young. She couldn’t stand me because I looked like Daddy with big gap teeth. (*As Flo’s Grandmother*) “You better hope and pray you find a high yella man with good hair to marry, otherwise them babies is gonna look just like monkeys”, she’d say. My sisters hated her. I was too proud to admit how much she hurt me, but in my head I would argue with her and *win*.

Even then I was a lawyer. My mother’s people, with their light skin, and creole features represented all that I was not. Mama was a seamstress by trade; she made all of our clothes. She learned to do so much with so little. Growing up, I never knew I was poor, and Mama Zella and Daddy Wiley were determined to make sure we never would.

Flo: When the Depression hit, Mama Zella went to work as a maid even over Daddy’s objections.

Well, one day this white lady accused Mama of stealing and she said, *Ma’am I’ve watched you. I’ve watched you watching me. Constantly running your finger over things I’ve cleaned looking for dust, checking behind my every move, but today, when you accused me of stealing, you have gone beyond the pale. Why in god’s name would I ever have to steal from you. You wanna search me? You want to search me? All right, go ahead (she strips down to her slip).*” Mama Zella took off her panties and left them right there in the middle of that white lady’s floor. *“There, you see. I don’t have to steal from you.”* And then she turned and stormed out. That was my Mama.

LIGHTS: Shift.

SOUND: 1930’s Kansas City Jazz.

Flo: In 1932 I graduated Lincoln High School at the top of my class: It’s at this point that I knew that I had to be a lawyer and I’ll tell you why.

As a teenager, I slipped and fell at a luncheonette counter and severely injured my back. Not only did the white owners refuse to acknowledge my injuries and pay for my medical bills, it was also my first introduction to injury and “discrimination law”. Yes, I thought. I would be a lawyer. I quickly learned that that no matter how loved I felt at home; in the larger world, Mama Zella and Daddy Wiley’s little girl was a Negro, and in for a rude awakening.

Luckily, I was a planner. I planned like a spider spinning a web, it might take a week or a year, but this girl was getting out of Kansas City, the question was how? In the meantime, my eldest sister Gracye had moved to New York City with her husband. She would send back the most beautiful straw hats.

Always resourceful, my sisters and I duplicated the hats, decorated them with orange and peach blossoms, and sold them for \$5. We called our operation Kay’s Hat Shop. The year was 1934, a year of firsts.

SOUND: Jazz Music Out

Around this time, I joined the Kansas City chapter of the NAACP, and came very close to having an affair with its director Mr. Carl Johnson, who also happened to be a big-time lawyer.

It was at this time I got my hands on my first Socialist newspaper from New York City and read about the great leader the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell. When the Kansas City Coca Cola bottling Plant refused to hire black drivers, we organized a boycott and won, my first political action! It was also the first time I almost died. After several injuries involving my back as a youngster, a bout of serious stomach flu later finally revealed that I had a congenital condition-called *diverticulitis*, otherwise known as an inflammation of the colon.

This is when I decided to name it the “mollygrabbles”. If I was going to die from it, I was going to be able to pronounce it. The doctors wanted to do an exploratory operation with no guarantees I’d even survive. My parents refused. Those doctors could’ve cared less about a colored gal dying in a segregated hospital ward and my parents knew it. I willed myself well. Somehow I knew I had to be strong and I was right, because my mama was dying.

SOUND: (Water/washing sound) and humming onstage to represent Mama Zella

In 1938, Mama Zella was diagnosed with cancer. After a brave battle, she passed away in 1940. It was the same year my back injuries made it necessary to have a section of my spine fused together. I knew that my Mama’s dying wish was to see me set out on my own path.

SOUND: Water/Washing Sound out along with humming from onstage

And with my Daddy’s blessing, in 1942, that’s exactly what I did!
I followed my sister Grayce to New York City! Harlem, USA!

SOUND/LIGHTS: “Drop Me off In Harlem!” Dance Break.

SLIDE D: LEONARD AND GRAYCE

The reality of living with Grayce and her husband Leonard wasn’t easy, but I didn’t care. I was determined to make it work, even if Leonard was an asshole. Leonard was a military serviceman was from Iowa, but hadn’t grown up around Negroes. He hated colored folks! He couldn’t stand them. He’d always say, “*Niggas ain’t this, Niggas ain’t that.*” My sister Joy, who loved to fight, would say, “*Excuse me, Leonard, but where exactly are you from? Buckingham Palace?*” and then she beat him up good.

Flo: It’s funny how sister Joy, had to beat up most of our men at one time or another. They ALL deserved it!

LIGHTS: Shift

From there I worked my way through Columbia University undergrad without scholarships in just 3 years from 1944 to 1947. Upon graduation, I was determined to

attend the Columbia University School of Law, mostly because folks told me I couldn't.

"Go to community college and become a nurse, that's what Negroes do." I knew that simply would not do. I applied to the Columbia University School of Law and was rejected. I proceeded to raise hell. (As if speaking to the Dean Willis Reese)

Flo: "I'm sorry Dean Reese, could you repeat that please? Now let me get this straight. I've already graduated with my Undergraduate Degree from Columbia working at the library during the day, taking classes at night and juggling a job on the weekends; I don't sleep, I've never missed a day of class in three years, and now you are telling me that I am not being accepted into the program not because I'm Negro, but because I am a woman? Yet I know for a fact that you've admitted Constance Motley. (Breaking 4th wall to audience): Connie Motley was the first Negro Woman to be admitted to Columbia Law she would ultimately go on to become a big time judge in the New York Court System.

The difference between Connie and me was well, Connie knew *when and where* to say things; she knew how to play the game. I was different, I figured, *"Shit if I was going out, I going out with a bang!"*

(Back to Dean Reese) "Dean Reese, if you admit any white man with lower grades than mine, and I find out about it, I will sue the Columbia University School of Law."

SOUND: Triumphant Ivy-League Graduation Music

In **1951**, I became the second Negro woman to graduate from Columbia University Law School in their three hundred year history. I graduated at the bottom of my class. I had absolutely no head for law. Some folks would not admit that but I think it's important to cop to your struggles, because you never know whom you might inspire. I was lucky to graduate. Not that those white folks at Columbia did me any special favors, it's just that, even then, I knew that justice, real justice, particularly if you were black, poor, or a woman was then, and is now, a crock of shit. I was good in college, but Law School was like an obstacle course. They set your ass up to fail, and you know they were waiting with baited breath for me to drop out.

SOUND: Fade Graduation March

Columbia Law School wanted you to have an almost mathematical mind- the kind of person who could walk past a pool of blood and think, *"My, what a beautiful shade of red"*, and called that *objectivity*.

So, I'm out of Law School but don't start practicing right away. I can't, because I can't seem to pass the damn bar. I was just as cute as I could be, so what was the god damn problem?

In the meantime, I had to get a job. I was hired as a clerical bookkeeper at the law firm of *Hartman, Sheridan and Telusky*.

SLIDE E: Flo at Law Firm

The staff starts tutoring and prepping me to take the bar again.

In 1952, with a lot of extra study, I passed the New York State Bar. I stand here, Ladies and Gentlemen, as living *proof* that you can be rejected, graduate at the bottom of your class, fail, almost fail again and still succeed! Let's hear it for the BOTTOM of the barrel!!!!

Crossfade LIGHTS/SOUND

Now once I got that all together, I had to prove my worth. In **1952 I started my own firm and took a law partner:** Don Wilkes (who would later go ass-crazy and leave me \$50,000 in debt, but that's another story).

For now, we had just been retained as the attorneys to handle the high profile estate of a one Eleanora McKay, also known as Billie Holiday.

SLIDE F: Picture of Billie Holliday Sound of a Judges Gavel

Billie's fight came down like this: She's on tour in Europe, her crooked agents, the Associated Booking Corporation, conveniently neglected to tell her that there was a federal statute requiring a person like herself who had been convicted of narcotics charges to register when they leave the country. Billie, as we all knew, was constantly convicted of narcotics charges, but she had been trying to go straight, and was doing well.

So why did her representation fail to tell her about the need for her to register before she travelled overseas? I'll tell you why. Because there was money to be made by *not* telling her. That's why!

Naturally, the US Attorney was waiting to indict her upon her return to the U.S./ Money for the U.S Attorney/ money for the N.Y. Circuit Court Judges/ money for her agents/money for her bookers/money for her managers/ money for everybody/ but Billie!

Fortunately, I was able to persuade the US Attorney not to indict. Instead, Billie was hospitalized, and then out of nowhere, narcotics are found sitting on top of a Kleenex box in her hospital room. Now I ask you – is that a crock of shit or what? It was an obvious set-up. Thankfully, we were able to get Billie to testify in front of the Grand Jury, a tactic that kept her from being indicted for the felony of *Narcotics Possession*, which would have sent her butt right back to jail. Not long afterwards, Billie Holiday died. After her death, I went to work to collect delinquent monies owed her estate. I was scared shitless....

LIGHT Shift: Courtroom SOUND: Judges Gavel

Flo: “Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, today you will hear testimony on behalf of the estate of the late Elenora McKay also known as Billie Holliday that will lend indisputable evidence to the fact that through the negligence and stupidity of her agents:

Billie Holliday was denied a lifetime of monetary benefits from all performer's unions and monies from her final European tour.

The evidence will show that her agents did not, however, neglect to pay themselves. Billie Holiday paid into sickness and death benefits for 25 years and never saw a dime. The defense intends to show this through the utilization of an ordinance called the Order of Discovery.

(Talking to the audience) Now, the Order of Discovery was a defense used primarily by landlords to find out which tenants owed money on a piece of property. I intended to use it to prove that there were at least **15 to 20** record companies who had been living as tenants off of their creative landlord: Billie Holliday.

LIGHTS: Shift to indicate time passing while we wait for verdict.

Flo: (breaking fourth wall looking directly to audience) Well, I won! I managed to collect a fair amount from the record companies; which unfortunately, is much easier to do after the artist is dead.

Artists, law students, listen up because I am talking to you – it doesn't matter what color you are; intellectual property, copyright infringement, and unfair media practices are all subjects with which you should be intimately familiar. Whenever I lecture in Law schools around the country I encourage students to go into these branches of law. Know your rights. Demand.

SOUND: Wedding March

Flo: Around this time I met my husband to be. Charles Dye.

SLIDE G: Charles Dye

Did I mention I was married? Marriage for me was proof that when it comes to love, we women often have to bite now, suck later. Being married was like eating from a bowl of bridge mix- you know that *complicated* candy: chocolate, nuts, raisins, mint pieces, and caramel. Now, as long as you suck on it you're fine, but bite into that stuff, and you've got a mouth full of blood. And there you are thinking, "How did something that started out so good, turn into chocolate covered bullshit?" That was my marriage. I was 41 and he was 31.

Charlie was wonderful when he was sober, but the problem was, that wasn't very often. He was a Welsh poet and science fiction writer whose claim to fame was a novel called *Prisoner in the Skull*.

SLIDE H: Prisoner in the Skull

It was 5 years after his book had been published and Charlie was a hot shit on the literary circuit. He showed up at a cocktail party that I threw for some people at my law firm in the early 50's. He says:

Flo as Charlie: (thick Welsh accent) I like you. I like you a lot. How about it?

Flo: That was our first conversation. And I married him, just like that.. I had been single too long. Sometimes you just get tired of being alone. Black men rarely, if

ever, approached me. I was either too black, not black enough. And certainly not pretty, Charlie told me I was pretty, at least at the beginning. Charlie got drunk the morning of our wedding, it was pouring rain in New York City and we couldn't catch a taxi uptown to save our lives, so my little Welshman says:

Charlie: We walk the 15 blocks! I refuse to take public transportation! It's beneath me! It's not like you care Flo, you won't even move in with me!

Flo: He would talk more shit. And it was true – I never moved out of my own apartment. Ladies, never EVER give up your apartment! On our wedding night, Dylan Thomas refused to bathe.

LIGHTS: Shift

Flo as Charlie: And stop telling me to bathe woman! I do not like to bathe. What I *will* do is go into the bathroom and turn on the water if it makes you feel better to know I am in a room with running water, but I will not get in. Then, I will sit here nude in the middle of the floor, and listen to my beloved jazz recordings and read my girlie magazines. I love you Flo.

Flo: And he proceeded to black out in the middle of the bathroom floor on our wedding night. To his credit, Charlie was right, I didn't take marriage seriously, nor did I think it would last long. But I did love him. I have to say though, when he was good, he was very, very good. When my law partner, Don Wilkes, ran off with all of my money; Charlie stood by me. And in 1955, when the "mollygrabbers" came back with a vengeance, I had to have 3 feet of intestine removed that had begun to gangrene. Charlie never left my side. He was the kind of man who was at his best when I was at my worst, but as soon I got back on my feet, all hell broke loose.

Flo as Charlie: I could kill you Florynce. You know that don't you? I could kill you with my own bare hands.

Flo: By this time my sisters had intervened and Joy, the one who loved to fight, had to beat him up good to make him leave me alone. Not long after, Charlie took ill, and was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver and he had to stop drinking. Naturally I suggested AA but he wasn't interested.

Flo as Charles: Hell no I'm not interested! Hell fucking no I'm not going to Alcoholics Anonymous.

Flo: In the Fall of 1960, my husband Charles Dye, born Alister Conrad, died. I sent his body to California to his mother and heard from her only later- not to thank me, but to make sure that she received all of his Social Security checks, which she did.

I was dead broke and his widow but it was a hassle to fight so I let it go. Like fishing around an un-flushed toilet with a ballpoint pen.

All of my sisters but one married. None chose to have children. We have been fertile in other ways.

Slides (I-M) of Kennedy Sisters accomplishments

SLIDE I: Faye's Book

SLIDE J: Joy's Book

SLIDE K: The Landlord

SLIDE L: Born in Flames

SLIDE M: The Flo Kennedy Show

All of us are very politically active, and the second youngest Faye, who lives in Honolulu, is even working on a fundraising campaign with this young man from the island named Barry who seems very serious about being a Senator someday. Hmph.

SLIDE N: FAYE AND OBAMA

SOUND: James Brown's "Get Involved"

Oh yes, (The Protest Sounds of the Women's Movement music starts playing Parliament 1970's funk) the 70's!!!! Oh yes!!!! Around this time I also became affiliated with NOW, the **National Organization of Women** and my beloved partner in crime, Ms. Magazine's Founder Gloria Steinem.

SLIDE O: FLO AND GLORIA STEINEM

Gloria always said she was *Thelma* to my *Louise* on the speaking circuit and we got along famously, and sometimes we *didn't*, but we were always, always sisters. Let me say here and now that I continue to be mistakenly credited with helping to found NOW. I did not, although I was at the very first meeting. I stayed with the organization for a few years, but there were too many disagreements on what were the real issues for me to last. Certain feminists always had a knack for finding my ass for any panel they needed, but my name was nowhere to be found at press time. And that pissed me off! And I said so.

Yet, while I was there, I was a star. It's amazing that a lot of women in the movement felt they had to answer to other people about what they did. Of course, nobody ever said shit to me, because they knew I was crazy. They say, "the Women's Movement shouldn't have stars", and of course, what I said was, "If I'm not a star, then what the hell are you doing on my phone at 3:00 in the morning telling me about somebody getting busted for pot and you need a lawyer? Don't call me. If we are all the same, why do you want me to come down and make a speech?" When you want to use me, I'm a star, but if I do anything that looks like I'm going to get any credit for it, then you try to bulldoze me. "It's all a part of what I call the Tyranny of the Weak.

By this time I was getting a bit of a name for myself, making appearances on television, speaking engagements on college campuses, schools of law, fighting to help unionize prostitutes in California and working with the Black Panthers.

Now, my favorite TV appearance was the Phil Donahue Show when I wore my "Super Dyke" T-shirt, which was a gift from some lesbian friends in San Francisco. I realized that to many lesbians, "Dyke" is like "Nigger." I explained right away that it was given to me by a gay group, and I wasn't trying to be cute or insensitive. Now let me be very clear about usage here because folks get very sensitive about the n-word and all that.

I use it as an alternate word for *oppression* and those who are *oppressed*, dig? Whores/ Lesbians/ Handicapped/ Blacks/ Browns/ Students/ Seniors/ Latinos/ Non-Whites/ etc. No, white people, this is not your invitation to say the n-word or even think about saying n-word. So kiss my ass.

Then Phil comes running up and says, "Do you want to take a hostile call Flo?" And I say, "sure." The caller says,

“Flo Kennedy, Who do you think you are? What do you think you are, why don’t you stay in your place, why don’t you help your own people, Black people. And besides, you’re a lesbian!” So I say, “I’m a lesbian just because of my T-shirt? So if I were wearing a string of pearls, I’d be an oyster.”

And he says, *Well, aren’t you a lesbian?* And I say, “Sir, are you my only option?” At some point, you must always, always begin your own thing! Bite now, suck later I always say, so on November 3rd 1971 on the campus of Queens College, I founded NFP, the **National Feminist Party**. At its peak, there were 175 chapters across the nation’s campuses.

We had all sorts of events. In Cambridge, Massachusetts we hosted a **Pee-In** at Harvard Yard protesting the lack of women’s toilet facilities on campus compared to that of men. There was this wonderful divinity student, from the Deep South who came up to me on and said, “*Miss Kennedy, ma’am, I am committed to pee with y’all if that what it takes to free us from oppression!*”

In LA, we staged the **Hollywood Toilet Bowl Caravan**, our version of the Super Bowl, where we protested American males obsession with balls of every kind: I’ve named it the *jock-o-crazy* of America: baseball, basketball, football, golf balls. Who’s got the ball? Who threw the ball? Who broke his shoulder to get out of the way to get to the person who stole the ball? A deeply disturbing pre-occupation with balls that we as women must expose, because it swallows up media dollars that could be better spent on feminist concerns, our reproductive health, financial independence, and future as a gender. (*Incredulously*) Balls!

In 1973 I helped found the **National Black Feminist Organization**, the NBFO, because we were determined to put our support behind Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman to run for president of the United States. She did not win, but it was not for lack of trying. Later, Chisholm would write the forward to my book, *Abortion Rap*, that I co-wrote with Diane Schulder in 1971.

SLIDE P: Picture of the book ABORTION RAP

Based on verbatim legal testimonials by more than 300 women who had filed a law suit in early 1970 challenging the constitutionality of New York State’s abortion laws that had been on the books since 1828 and were considered to be some of the most restrictive in the country.

Abortion Rap described what they went through to obtain an illegal abortion, the outrageous prices paid for procedures, and the heartbreaking decision to give up their children for adoption. For those of you who don’t know, in 1972 I sued the Archdiocese of New York. Yes honey, I sued the Catholic Church.

SOUND: Church Bells

I demanded that the Feds rescind the Church’s tax-exempt status. I argued that the Church used its funds to support legislation against abortion and that constituted illegal lobbying. Centuries of their sins stunk to high heaven! I know this much, if men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament!”

I even wrote a song about it that I sang on the steps of St. John’s Cathedral during one of our many “Coat Hanger Protests”: called:

“Tired of Fucking Fuckers Fucking Over Me”

*Oh we're glad to say our hearts are gay
 And we'll be back for many a day
 We say to you we're gonna turn around
 We're gonna liberate our sisters in this here town
 Abortion on demand is our cry
 For too many sisters who have already died
 Let those who talk about the right to life
 Protest the murder of our sisters and the dirty knife
 The church can no longer be tax exempt
 Our money in that way can no longer be spent
 If men could only get pregnant
 Abortion on demand would be sacrament!*

That same year, the law prohibiting abortion in New York State was struck and three years later, in 1973, *Roe vs. Wade* became the law of the land! (Sitting and looking at the audience intently)

My sisters say I have a nasty mouth, and that we weren't raised that way, but look, I have to say what I have to say.

I really don't care whether I'm loved, respected, whatever, so if any of you feel like leaving, or if you really have somewhere to go legitimately, or illegitimately or whatever, don't hesitate.

You don't have to dig the messenger, just give the messages a chance. Give yourselves a chance. You've got to rattle the cage door of your life. You've got to let them know that you're in there, and that you want out. Make noise. Cause trouble.

You may not win right away, but you'll sure have a lot more fun.

And if that doesn't work I have found that a good, well-placed *mutherfucker* dropped at just the right time, works wonders! C'mon try it. Mmmmm...c'mon, don't be shy, say it with me M-U-T-H-A-F-U-C-K-A! Wonderful!!!

When I used to do speaking engagements, folks used to walk out all the time. People would say, "Flo, about 20 people walked out on you." Of course 20 people walked out on me, that's why I'm talking to empty seats. Understand this, I get a little nervous if somebody doesn't walk out. You see because if you're really trying to change society, you scare people. And if you're talking to scared people they're liable to faint. You cannot live a riskless life. I'm not saying that you should get suspended, that you should get arrested or that you should lead a protest of thousands. I'm saying that you've got to do something, and until you do something that involves risk, you shouldn't (though of course *you* will), complain about anybody else.

(Flo is getting tired and ill. She sits. It is clear that she is not well. Stillness.)

SOUND: A knock on the door.

LIGHTS: Wails of an ambulance.

Flo: Well I'll be. (Flo pulls the string on the light bulb and begins to whisper conspiratorially with the audience.) Shhhhhhh! We've got company. Well I'm not going, they'll have to break the door down and it locks from the inside.

SOUND: Another knock

Flo: Go away! Private party! Despite my protestations, there is something very tacky and unaesthetic about potentially being found among ones belongings in a storage facility.

SOUND: More knocking at the door

(Yelling towards the door) Alright! I'm coming! Watch this. (Beat change- yelling at the ambulance through the door) *"It took you all long enough!"*

(To the audience)

Thank you for helping to make this old lady's party so much fun. I'm just a loud-mouthed old colored lady with a fused spine and three feet of intestines missing who a lot of people think is crazy. Remember the lessons of my life and never let anyone come between you and your truth. Fight for it. You must, everything depends on it. Demand.

SOUND: More knocking

Upstage panels open; Flo walks upstage into blinding light.

THE END

Appendices

Appendix A: Images



Fig. 1. Caroline Clay in full length fur and turban gives the "double-finger" during rehearsal. This is an emulation of a pose by Flo Kennedy on the cover Kennedy's 1976 autobiography *Color Me Flo!: My Hard Life and Good Times*. (photo credit: Anu Yadav, logo: Q Terah Jackson)



Fig. 2. "I know seeing a colored woman in this neighborhood who isn't pushing a grocery cart or baby carriage makes y'all real nervous, but trust me gentlemen, you have no idea with whom you fuck!" Caroline Clay performs in *Let it Flo!* as Flo Kennedy recalling mistreatment while living on the Upper East Side in the 1950's and being questioned by on-duty police officers. (photo credit C. Stanley Photography)



Fig. 3. "I managed to collect a fair amount on behalf of the estate from the record companies. Which unfortunately, is easier to do after the artist is dead." Caroline Clay in *Let it Flo!* as Flo Kennedy re-enacts Flo's legal battles as an attorney. Here, Flo defends the estate of Billie Holliday using the "Order of Discovery" statute. A projection of the real Florynce Kennedy is in the background. (photo credit: C. Stanley Photography)



Fig. 4. Artist rendering sketch of Flo Kennedy by MFA Graduate Costume Designer Rebecca DeLapp. (2013, all rights reserved)

Appendix B: Publicity



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LIFESTYLE

Color Her Flo

Actress Caroline Clay Discusses "Let It Flo," Her New One-Woman Show About Late Feminist, Activist and Lawyer Florynce Kennedy

By Annamarya Scaccia/Photos by Sheila Peake

When Caroline Clay was first introduced to Florynce "Flo" Kennedy over a year ago, she wasn't familiar with her legacy.

She didn't know Kennedy was the second African American woman to graduate from Columbia University, or that she negotiated the estates of Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday. She didn't know Kennedy was an accomplished lawyer, or that she was active in civil rights, women's rights, reproductive rights and performer's rights. She didn't know Kennedy co-wrote the 1971 book, *Abortion Rap*, with Diane Schurder or that she fought to get Holiday monetary, health & pension benefits owed to her by her agents. Clay also didn't know that she filed a lawsuit against the Catholic Church challenging its tax-exempt status on the grounds it used its money to influence legislation, specifically in regards to abortion, or that she founded the Media Workshop in 1966 to advocate for the representation of Black people in the media.

But when the accomplished actress saw Kennedy for the first time on television, she was "riveted."

It was during a showing of *Gloria: In Her Own Words*, HBO's 2011 documentary on feminist pioneer Gloria Steinem. There, playing out on her screen was Kennedy being "man-handled" by security guards. "Get your mother f—ing hands off me!" Kennedy yelled from the old grainy black & white footage—a symbol of the activist's unceasing valor.

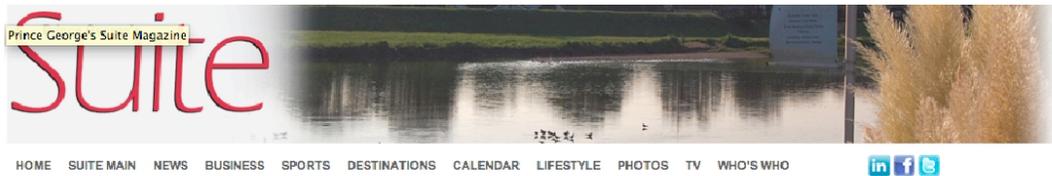
"I fell in love," the 44-year-old thespian says with a laugh. "I thought it was the most amazing thing because there was sort of all of this going on. Then this woman is just going off for, what I could tell, no reason in particular."

Thus began Clay's year and a half odyssey of unearthing everything she could about the feminist and activist, who died in 2000 at 84. In addition to research, she became close to Kennedy's surviving sisters, 84-year-old Joy and 82-year-old Faye, and fostered a digital relationship with Steinem. And what the native Washingtonian learned was that Kennedy was a "true lady of the '70s with high heels to boot and full makeup"—a daring, charming woman who was polished and fervent, fighting furiously against injustice. "I'm utterly seduced by her legacy. Utterly seduced," she says.

It's a journey that accumulated to a mesmerizing one-woman show, titled "Let It Flo," which functions as Clay's thesis for University of Maryland's MFA in Performance program (MFAP), a cross-disciplinary curriculum that trains mid-career theatre professionals to write, direct, produce, act, and teach. In narrating Kennedy's story, Clay starts at the end of her days, setting the play in a storage facility that houses the belongings of her and her family. Outfitted with a cane and hospital gown, she unveils Kennedy's tale through recollection, moving backwards from her 80's to her early years in Kansas City. But the actress doesn't embody the late lawyer as old; rather, she portrays Kennedy as someone "infirm through life punctuated by illness."



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It's a theme that flows throughout the script, representing a woman that, while petite, was "sturdy" and persevered despite the countless surgeries and disease that rage against her body (by her own admission, Clay is not petite but says she shares Kennedy's strength.) "Let It Flo" was staged February 1 & 2 at UMD's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center as part of the Festival of New Works [view photos from the dress rehearsal [here](#).]

What's most telling of Clay's work, though, is how it begins—in total darkness. It was a deliberate choice representing how she—and, by extension, Kennedy—is "literally and metaphorically emerging from the pages of history." "[Steinem wrote to me], 'I am thrilled that now Florynce is becoming a part of the women's studies conversation,'" says the 30-year acting veteran, who also works as an MFAP teaching assistant. "It wasn't that she's becoming a part of the women's studies conversation again. She's becoming a part of the women's studies conversation for the first time."

In many ways, "Let It Flo" also signifies a reemergence for Clay, who put her career on hold to join the inaugural MFAP class three years ago. The award-winning actress, who's lived in New York City for the last 20 years, has performed both on and off-Broadway, appearing in *Doubt* and *The Royal Family*, as well as acted in television and film, with roles in *All My Children*, *Morning Glory*, *Everybody's Fine*, and *Sherrybaby*. But when the chance to take part in UMD's program came her way, she needed in. She wanted to elevate her already-astounding skills, and learn the tools to produce her own works.

"It's time for my voice to emerge because I now have things that I want to say," she says.

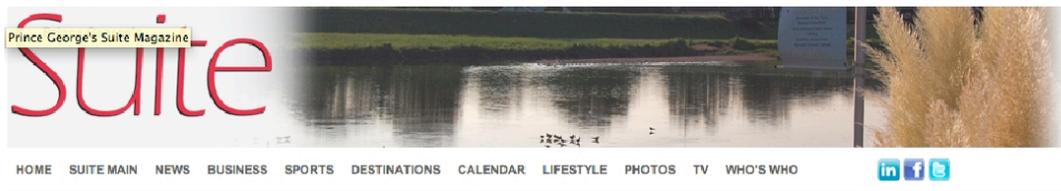
Ultimately, Clay hopes to develop "Let It Flo" into a "true one-woman show," and is actively identifying venues to perform the work. Its new incarnations will possibly involve more media components, including interviews with surviving friends and family.

"This is a testimony I believe needs to be heard," says Clay, who currently lives in Silver Spring. "The thought that they're still talking about Roe v. Wade, that they're still talking about these same issues that [Flo] was...fighting for, I could not be more convinced of the timeliness and the need to share her story. But it's not just a story to move people with and incite conversation. In many ways, it's a public service announcement."

Why do you believe Flo Kennedy is not as acknowledged as she should be?

I think because she played to the fringe. I think it was easy to not take her seriously. When she her autobiography in 1976 [*Color Me Flo: My Hard Life and Good Times*], a lot of things that she said were kind of out there...She wasn't the only one saying the things she was saying but she was a champion of a lot of fringe causes, as well. She had no problem getting there and not being on the popular side...I had some friends comment, "Well, she was really kind of considered an irritant," and I said, "Well, if this is what you call an irritant then I'll be irritating." She didn't play to the mainstream and she had a colorful mouth. She knew how to behavior and elected not to...It was a technique, just like any other activist. Everyone had different ways of tearing down the master's house and this woman was an incredibly brilliant and articulate attorney but she made a choice to deal with things the way she dealt with it.





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How has she influenced you as a person and an actress?

It's interesting. I feel that Flo found me. I don't mean that in a spiritual [sense]. I mean that concretely, in everything that I am...Coming back to this region has been, and I say this cautiously, a bit of a culture shock. I'm the only African American woman in my cohort. I'm the only African American teaching [in my program]. It has been interesting to me having to stand up for myself in a way...There are some pockets of ignorance, and there are some pockets of lack of knowledge and awareness around cultural diversity that raised its head around me and my experiences here that I've been confronted with. It just caught me by surprise. I don't know why I was surprised but I was. Flo has given me the words that I don't know I was going to say on my own...the words that say "Rattle the cage door of your own life. Let them know you're in there and you want out. Make trouble, make noise. Do the things you have to do to be true to yourself"...In many ways, doing "Let it Flo" has been a statement. With that said, the flipside is the very fact that they let me do it [laughs]...Not once was I ever asked to cut, to amend, to shift the content of my show and that is a tribute to the School of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies. For that, I will be forever grateful. In a way, maybe it's great I've been confronted with some of the things I've been confronted [with] here because I don't know had I continued to be comfortable in a more sort of cosmopolitan environment that this show would even come up.

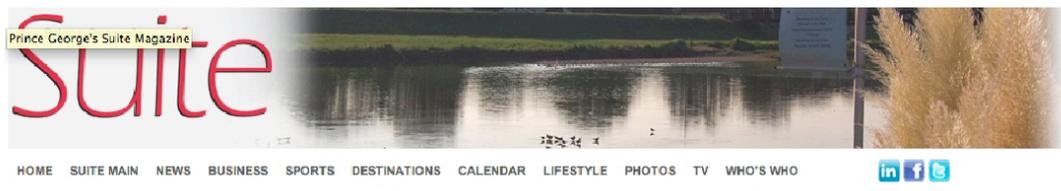
Do you mean that if you stayed in New York City, you wouldn't necessarily feel the need to tell Flo's story?

Not that New York City doesn't have its pockets of that sort of thing [but] that's exactly what I'm saying. What I was confronted with here—and I'm going to stop short of racism because I think that's too easy. I think it's a lack of cultural awareness and a lack of exposure on the part of several people. If I had a dollar for every [cultural assumption]—I think sometimes it's been innocent. "Oh, it's a black woman. Things must be very difficult for you because of x, y and z." That is a pure cultural assumption. You know nothing about me. I've actually had quite a great life, quite a blessed life. I've done TV, film and Broadway. I've done classical work. I've done contemporary work. You know nothing about me. So to project what you think the life of a person is because they are of color, because of your lack of larger exposure, that is culturally insensitive. All of my years in New York City, I've encountered a lot of things [like] rude cabbies [laughs] but never, "Gosh, as a black woman..." I found here that I was being looked to be a spokesperson because there is such a lack of diversity. I think, in many ways, "Let it Flo" is my response of "You think it's hard? I'm gonna show you just how hard it is but my way." It's a response of defiance and laughter.



How can Flo's legacy influence and push forward the movements of today?

It's to keep the discourse going. I came out after [Feb. 2] show and there were a bunch of students in the lobby going at it. Three of the girls were talking in very high pitches to two of the young men...One of Flo's coined phrases is "if men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament."...One of the guys got really angry at that quote and these young women were saying, "You don't get it. How could you not understand it? How could you possibly make any comment on our bodies? You can't imagine what it's like to have a period every month." They were just going for it and going for it. I'm not saying it was right. I'm not saying it was wrong. I didn't say anything. I just stood back and watched as these flushed 21-, 22-, 23-year-old faces talk and get loud. I sat there and said, "This is what I'm talking about. Limitless discourse." They were actually engaged, like they were punched in the stomach by something. [My mom and I] are



huge fans of Rachel Maddow. It's must-see TV every night. Maddow is in that tradition, asking the questions. We might not get the answers today or tomorrow but I'm going to ask the damn question and I'm going to continue to be the flea in your ear. I'm going to continue to execute, and if that makes me an irritant, if that makes me bothersome, if that makes me crude and rude, so be it.

What can young women of color learn from Flo?

"To thy own self be true." To all of her audaciousness, she was true to herself. She was married to a Welshman with a drinking problem. She would say, "Anyone who married a drunk Welshman deserves no sympathy." She was just so self-deprecating and, yet, she had problems just like everyone else. Why she would elect to get into a co-dependent relationship, she also elected to be a part of an interracial relationship. She said throughout her life, black men were never really attracted to her. They didn't find her attractive. They found her too bossy, too this, too that. So she had her own demons. If there is anything young women of color can see in her is someone who is not perfect, who did not see herself as someone [who was] classically attractive, who saw her flaws and, yet, was always steeped in her sexuality, who was audacious, put one foot in front of the other and said, "Let's go. Whatever this means, let's go." I teach acting to sophomores [who are] and predominately women... There's so much [they're dealing with] and all I do every day is try to encourage and invite a little space of allowance for self-love. If Flo can do that for anyone, regardless of race, creed, color, sexual orientation, then her job would have been worth it. There's so much right now, especially with social media, so many images, so many things telling young women what they are not, who they are not, what they are lacking, what they could be more of. Flo, who was clearly lacking, [who had issues] that she chose not to address, put her hand on her hip and said, "I'll deal with that later. In the meantime, F— U—." [laughs]



That's my kind of lady.

Yea [laughs]. I just think it's so needed right now.

Third Photo: Florynce Kennedy/Wikipedia

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Thursday, January 31, 2013

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Master of Fine Arts students at University of Maryland debut original work

Festival of New Works to showcase student pieces

By Cara Hedgepeth
Staff Writer

In the culmination of their studies in the Master of Fine Arts in Performance program at the University of Maryland, students present the Festival of New Works, running the first three weekends in February at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center.

The seven students showcasing their work, which includes everything from adaptations of plays with full casts, to pieces with music and movement, are the first group to complete the program which began in the fall of 2010. Another class of students is expected to begin their studies in the fall of 2014.

Festival of New Works

When: 7 p.m. Fridays, 2 p.m. Saturdays, Feb. 1-15
(dates and times for specific pieces can be found online)

Where: Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center,
Stadium Drive and Route 193, College Park

Tickets: \$25 for general admission; \$20 for subscribers, UMD faculty and staff, Alumni Association members; \$10 for students and youth

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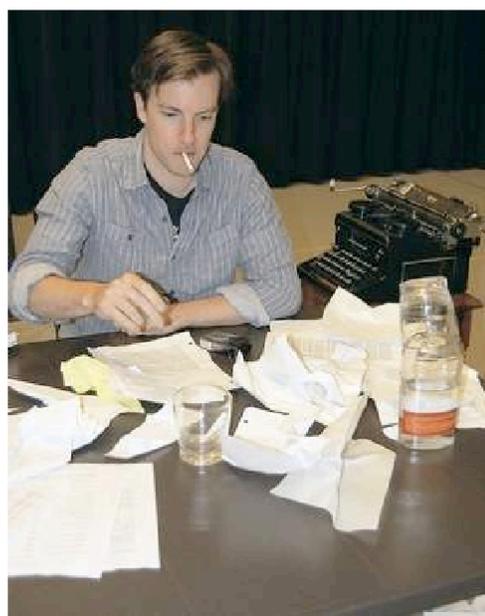
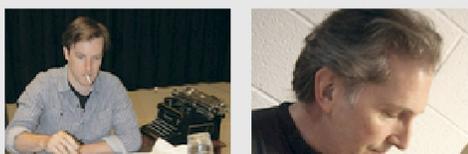


Photo by Bill Dolan. MFA student Rob Jansen in "The Tramp's New World," a screenplay adaptation Jansen will present at the Festival of New Works.



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According to the head of the program, Leslie Felbain, the MFA in Performance program is intended for mostly mid-career professionals who have experience in the performing arts but are looking to address any gaps in their artistic education.

"[Students] are looking for the chance to incubate in an environment for three years and be able to focus on holes in their training," Felbain said. "They have the chance to focus on the craft of performance and then we focus equally on the ability for people to create their own work ... We're interested in training the artist, scholar, teacher, entrepreneur."

Students, who range in age from 25 to 55, spend three years taking technique-based courses. At the conclusion of their first year, the group performed in a physically-based theater piece as a part of the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center's season. The second year, the students participated in another Clarice Smith Center performance and worked as an ensemble to create a piece of their own. This year, all of the students in the program — Caroline Clay, Anu Yadav, Rob Jansen, David Demke, Nick Horan, Claudia Rosales and Teresa Bayer — have each focused on writing his or her thesis project, which will be performed at the Festival of New Works.

"The idea is that it builds and that there are smaller levels of the projects," Felbain said. "The students wrote these pieces, they are working with designers, with all of the production elements, directing production teams, [and] performing in their pieces ... it's a good evolution of what they've been [doing]."

While the styles vary from piece to piece, Felbain says all of the student work in the festival has something in common.

"They all address issues of humanity," she said. "I think that each of the pieces is asking big questions, big themes of life."

Clay said her solo piece, "Let it Flo," based on the life of feminist and activist Florynce Kennedy, is about "legacy and not wanting to be forgotten."

A Washington, D.C., native, Clay had been living in New York City for 20 years, enjoying a successful career on Broadway, with roles in "Doubt and "Royal Family," when she applied to the MFA program.

"I was doing OK in New York but at the same time, I was kind of bored," Clay said. "I always knew there had been a gap in my education ... I just had to get more training and New York was just going to have to wait."

"Let it Flo," is a one-woman show in which Clay uses text and movement to capture the essence of the late female activist. Kennedy, who died in 2000, was a lawyer, a civil rights activist and a feminist who worked closely with Gloria Steinem. In fact, it was an HBO documentary about Steinem, "In Her Own Words," in which Kennedy appeared, that first sparked Clay's interest.

"I heard Flo Kennedy before I saw her," Clay said. "I began this odyssey of finding out [about] Florynce Kennedy."

Clay said she hopes her extensive research and her performance, which she'll present in the first weekend of the showcase, can help to expose details about Kennedy's life and work.

"When I say the name Flo Kennedy, nine times out of 10 I'm met with, 'Who?' and that's heartbreaking for me," Clay said. "There's a whole generation of stories to be told and it's the responsibility of my generation to tell them."

While the Festival of New Works marks the conclusion of the MFA Performance program, both Clay and Felbain said this isn't the end of the road for the seven students.

"It's a culmination but not a traditional culmination," Felbain said. "[We're] thinking of it more as this is showing that part of their work so far ... Some of them will learn from this production and continue to refine the pieces."

"It's been a trajectory, it's not an endgame," Clay added. "Wherever our closing is, that is what it was meant to be. Given the three years, how brave are we now as opposed to when we walked into [Clarice Smith] three years ago?"

chedgepeth@gazette.net


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VOICES OF STRENGTH: MEENA'S DREAM AND LET IT FLO AT THE FESTIVAL OF NEW WORKS

MEGAN PAGADO - FEBRUARY 1, 2013 - 3:03PM

This post is by Sisi Reid, a Junior Anthropology and Theatre Double Major.



Photo courtesy of Caroline Clay

The late activist Audre Lorde once said, "When I dare to be powerful to use my strength in the service of my vision then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid." The same courageous voices are weaved throughout Anu Yadav's and Caroline Clay's MFA in Performance thesis presentations, both part of the Festival of New Works at the Clarice Smith Center. At first glance you wouldn't think Yadav's *Meena's Dream* and Clay's *Let it Flo* are very similar. Knowing each artist personally, reading their scripts, and seeing their rehearsals, I understand how beautifully they both communicate the struggle we have to confront, accept and utilize our own inner strength.

>



The raw vulnerability of profound characters teaches us that we all have a power within ourselves to both love and demand truth.

Yadav takes us on a magical journey centered around Meena, a 7-year-old Indian American girl who uses her love of dreams to discover her great power. Yadav switches from character to character with impressive focus. The innocence and joy of Meena is an enriching experience. Yadav's performance is so engaging that at many times my impulse was to jump onstage and play in the world she creates. Her performance echoes the nostalgic freedoms and carelessness that we feel as children. The breathtaking live music in her piece effectively adds an additional layer of resonating emotions. But beyond the powerful music, Meena's journey to defeat personified common life battles, like anxiety, through her courage and naivety, teaches us that despite our perceived limitations, we have the strength to heal.

Clay as the late activist Flo Kennedy fully embodies the power to fight for truth. She opens the performance in darkness with the sound of her booming voice. Clay's vibrant humor and "tell it like it is" attitude is shocking and engaging throughout the entirety of her performance. Clay creatively recreates Flo's life by reminiscing about her possessions in a storage unit and transforms into key people in Flo's life with flare and pizzazz. It is exciting to hear Flo's story and to learn about such a dynamic individual. Through humor and honesty, Clay offers lessons of how one must demand for one's self. It is through Flo's life that we learn what it means to claim truth despite racial, financial and medical obstacles.

Yadav and Clay capture the essence of audacious girlhood and womanhood in unique ways. The raw vulnerability of profound characters teaches us that we all have a power within ourselves to both love and demand truth. Yadav and Clay have used their timeless wisdom, honed skills as performers and their keen awareness of self to create and perform transforming theatre works.

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