

# Ntozake Shange Biography

Born Paulette Williams on October 18, 1948, Shange, at the age of twenty-three, adopted the Zulu name Ntozake (pronounced "en-toe-zak-ee" and meaning "she who comes with her own things") Shange (pronounced "shon-gay" and meaning "who walks like a lion") as a name more appropriate to her poetic talents. She felt that her Anglo-Saxon last name was associated with slavery and her given name was a feminized version of the male name Paul. Shange once stated in an interview that she changed her name to disassociate herself from the history of a culture that championed slavery.

Shange grew up in an affluent family and read voraciously in English, French, and Spanish (the latter with the aid of dictionaries). She also associated with jazz greats Josephine Baker, Chuck Berry, Miles Davis, Dizzie Gillespie, and Charlie Parker, who were friends of her parents. She led a privileged existence, but she felt overprotected and not an active part of the Civil Rights movement taking place around her, though racism affected her daily school life in St. Louis during the family's five-year stay in that city. She explained, in an interview with Jacqueline Trescott in the *Washington Post*, that "nobody was expecting me to do anything because I was colored and I was also female, which was not very easy to deal with." After graduating from Barnard with honors, she moved to Harlem and became closely acquainted with the plight of impoverished black women in the city. The anger she felt as a result of the victimization she witnessed and experienced was expressed in the poem "Beau Willie" (later to be adapted as "a nite with beau willie brown" in *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*), which she wrote while listening to the screams of a woman being beaten by her husband, who laughed as he hit her. Shange experienced more unhappiness while briefly married to a law student, and attempted suicide a number of times. Still undecided on a career, she earned her Master of Arts degree in American studies at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, in 1973 and began teaching classes at various colleges in Northern California.

One night while driving home after teaching an evening class and feeling especially depressed, Shange saw a huge rainbow over the city of Oakland, California, and realized that women have a right to survive, because as she asserted in a 1976 *New York Times* interview, they "have as much right and as much purpose for being here as air and mountains do." In that same interview, Shange explained that she realized that the rainbow is "the possibility to start all over again with the power and beauty of ourselves." Her experience inspired the title of *for colored girls ...*, composed of twenty poems she wrote over a period of years and read in women's bars in San Francisco during the summer of 1974. She later took her choreographed poems to New York. After two years of off-Broadway performances and with the help of a New York director, Shange combined her poems and formed them into a production that ran for 747 performances on Broadway. Shange continues to write drama, fiction, and poetry, but *for colored girls ...* remains her biggest commercial and critical success. She has indicated that she would prefer to be known for more than this work. She would rather be known for her current non-commercial work, including her bilingual work with Latin American working people's theater, her association with the Feminist Art Institute, and her construction of installation art.

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