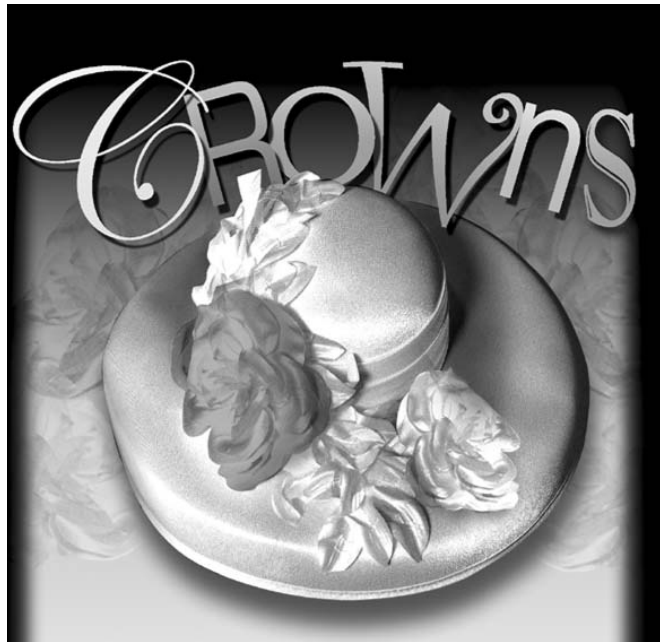


STUDY GUIDE

2004–2005 SEASON

THE REPERTORY THEATRE OF ST. LOUIS



WRITTEN BY REGINA TAYLOR

ADAPTED FROM THE BOOK BY MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM AND CRAIG MARBERRY

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What's the Story?

Crowns, a play with music and dance, is adapted from a book by Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry. Unlike plays that follow a sequential story or "plot line," *Crowns* weaves together a variety of stories from different characters, time periods and perspectives that, when integrated with music and dance, create a tapestry of voices that transcend time and place. The essential story of *Crowns* is that of Yolonda, a young African-American girl trying to figure out her identity, her place in the world, and her place in her own culture.

Yolonda is a tough girl from Brooklyn who is proud of her status as a true New Yorker. When *Crowns* starts, Yolonda has been sent to South Carolina to live with her grandmother after her brother has been shot. Mother Shaw, Yolonda's grandmother, welcomes her granddaughter into a circle of women (Wanda, Jeanette, Velma and Mabel) and a Man who takes many roles. These characters help Yolonda begin linking her own experiences to the stories of her relatives, her history and her people.

Crowns follows Yolonda, Mother Shaw and the other characters through a church service. Through its many parts, the service draws Yolonda out of her isolation and grief, teaches her the history of her ancestors and her people, and initiates her into a place in her new community. The women spend the early morning getting dressed and ready for church. The service starts with a Processional, with Yolonda reluctantly wearing a hat that Mother Shaw has bought for her. The women teach Yolonda the "hat queen rules" of etiquette and proper hat wearing.

When the Morning Service begins, Mother Shaw takes over and ushers in the Spirit, which temporarily transforms the space. Shadows of the past take the place of stained glass windows, and echoes of ring shouts and slave songs envelope Yolonda. She pulls away to perform her own "rebel dance," a movement that evokes the urban landscape of her Brooklyn home and her homesickness. The congregation tries to embrace Yolonda with their message of everlasting love and their own stories of loss. Yolonda tells them her story last, describing her brother's death and his funeral. She remembers him with sadness and longing, and the women open their arms to her and soothe her with song. In a final movement, Yolonda is baptized, welcomed and accepted into the legacy of these women and all the ancestors who have gone before her. She recognizes the unique ways her ancestry manifests in herself as she declares, "The more I study Africa, the more I see that African Americans do very African things without even knowing it. Adorning the head is one of those things... whether it's the intricate braids or the distinct hairstyles or the beautiful hats we wear on Sundays. We just know inside that we're queens. And these are the crowns we wear."

Who's Who?

Each of the characters in Crowns possesses the essence of an Orisha, a deity in the Yoruban belief system. Please see pages 16 and 17 of your Crowns program for additional information, or visit the following page on The Rep's website: www.repstl.org/mainstage/crowns2.shtml.



The cast in The Rep's production of Crowns. Clockwise from left to right: Chaundra Cameron (Mabel), Darryl Reuben Hall (Preacher/Man), Denise M. Thimes (Mother Shaw), Jannie Jones (Velma), Gayle Samuels (Wanda), Erin Cherry (Yolonda), and Stacie Precia (Jeanette)

Words to the Wise

Yolanda – Ogun

Yolanda is a young woman from Brooklyn. After her brother died, she was sent to live with (and to learn from) her grandmother in South Carolina. Her Orisha is Ogun, the deity of iron, war and modern technology. She is known as the clearer of paths, and her colors are green and black.

Mother Elsie Shaw – Obatala

Mother Shaw is Yolanda's grandmother and a very well-respected religious woman. She embodies Obatala, the Orisha of the mind, wisdom and creativity. Obatala literally means "Chief of the White Cloth," and white and silver are her colors.

Preacher/Man – Elegba

The Preacher/Man portrays many characters, from Reverend to brother to husband. He possesses the spirit of Elegba, the Orisha of the crossroads and the messenger between the physical and the spiritual worlds. Elegba's colors are red and black.

Jeanette – Yemaya

Jeanette is a great admirer of Mother Shaw. Nonetheless, she wouldn't even think about loaning a hat to Mother Shaw—or to anyone else. Jeanette's Orisha is Yemaya. Often referred to as the "Mother of All," Yemaya is the Orisha of seas and lakes. Her color is blue.

Velma – Oya

Velma grew up on a tobacco farm and later worked for a funeral home. She represents Oya, the Orisha of storms, and she is a fierce warrior. Her color is purple.

Mabel – Shango

Mabel grew up on a farm and afterward became a preacher's wife. Shango is the Orisha of fire, lightning, drums and dance. Her colors are red and white.

Wanda – Oshun

Wanda, like the other women in the play, is a "hat queen." She developed her love for hats from her Grandma Em. Wanda shares the nature of Oshun, the Orisha of flowing waters and love. Her colors are gold and bright yellow.

crow—1) a reward of victory
2) a royal or imperial headdress
3) the highest point (such as the upper part of a hat or mountain)
4) a circular ornament for the head
5) something that imparts splendor, honor or finish

"hattitude"—a neologism describing the proud and somewhat showy personality of a "hat queen."

Yoruba—a member of a West African people living chiefly in southwest Nigeria, or the belief system, culture or Benue-Congo language of that people

Darlington—a town in the northeast of South Carolina.

glaucoma—Glaucoma is a disease of the eye marked by increased pressure within the eyeball that can result in damage to the optic disk and gradual loss of vision.

Andy Gump—Gump was a character from the comic strip "The Gumps" by Sydney Smith, started in 1919 and syndicated by the Chicago Tribune. It was the first comic strip to continue a storyline from one day to the next.

"Eshe o Baba eshe"—This is the Yoruba phrase for "Thank you Father, thank you."

Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church—a protestant church which emphasizes expressive worship and the receiving of spiritual gifts, such as faith healing

"to speak in tongues"—to speak in a language unknown to the speaker and inspired by the Holy Spirit

"the Spirit"—refers to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity in Christianity

"getting my praise on"—to expressively and dramatically worship God and experience the presence of the Holy Spirit

"When Gibraltar tumbles"—The Rock of Gibraltar is the rocky peninsula on the south-central coast of Spain. "Gibraltar" has come to be synonymous with stronghold or fort. In the play, this phrase means "when you have lost everything."

Tobacco worm—a green worm, filled with tobacco juice, that is long and clingy

"Gaffney woman"—a woman from the town of Gaffney, South Carolina.

"bank the potatoes"—to preserve potatoes by piling them into a conical shaped mound and covering them with straw or earth

Bennett College—Bennett is a traditionally African-American, small, four-year liberal arts college in North Carolina. In 1926 it became a college for women only.

Spelman College—Spelman is a prestigious African-American college in Atlanta, Georgia. Founded in 1881, it is the oldest black women's college in the United States. Many students at Spelman participated in and organized sit-ins and boycotts to protest segregation in the 1960s.

Dr. Player—Dr. Wilma B. Player was president of Bennett College from 1956 to 1966, and under her leadership the college grew dramatically. She went on to become the director of the Division of College Support in the U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education and Welfare. She died in 2003.

Woolworth's—This store in North Carolina was the site of protests during the civil rights boycotts of the 1960s.



Bio & Beyond



Regina Taylor

A distinguished artistic associate of Chicago's Goodman Theater, Regina Taylor collaborated on and appeared in the play *Millennium Mambo*, which premiered at New York's Signature Theatre in early 2001. As a playwright, Taylor was honored by the American Critics' Association for *Oo-Bla-Dee*. *Drowning Crow*, Taylor's adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, was produced in 2002 at the Goodman. She also wrote the stage production of *A Night in Tunisia*, which was performed at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick, NJ, among other theaters.



Regina Taylor played the pivotal role of Lilly Harper in the critically acclaimed television series *I'll Fly Away*, which earned her a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress in a Drama Series and an NAACP Image Award. She recently received the Women in Film Gracie Allen Award for her portrayal of Anita Hill in the television film *Strange Justice*.

While attending Southern Methodist University, Taylor made her professional acting debut in the CBS television film *Crisis at Central High*. Her additional television credits include the series *Law & Order*, the films *Cora Unashamed* and *Making the Case for Murder: The Howard Beach Story*, and, on CBS, the mini-series *Children of the Dust*. Her feature film credits include *The Negotiator*, *Courage Under Fire*, *A Family Thing*, *Lean on Me*, *Losing Isaiah* and *Clockers*.

Taylor was the first black woman to play Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* on Broadway. Her other

Broadway credits include *As You Like It* and *Macbeth*. She has appeared Off-Broadway and regionally in numerous productions including *Machinal* and *A Map of the World* at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, *The Illusion* at the New York Theatre Workshop, and *The Tempest*, for which she received a Dramalogue Award. Taylor also starred in the Off-Broadway production of *Jar the Floor* at the Second Stage Theater in New York.

Michael Cunningham

is a commercial photographer whose clients include Coca-Cola and Sara Lee. Two of his photographs are currently on loan to the Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum, and his works have been featured in *The New York Times* and *Ebony*. He lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.



Craig Marberry,

a former TV reporter, holds a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University and is the owner of a video production company. He has written articles for the *Washington Post* and *Essence* magazine. Marberry is also the grandson of the late Louis Henry Ford, former Presiding Bishop of the Church of God in Christ. He lives in Greensboro, North Carolina.



A Conversation with Playwright Regina Taylor

Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats by photographer Michael Cunningham and journalist Craig Marberry, published in 2000, is a collection of photographs of African American women in their most resplendent Sunday finery, accompanied by heartfelt oral testimonies that capture the faith and fashion statements these hats represent. The book lovingly evokes the lives and stories of 54 “hat queens,” ranging in age from 22 to 78, who are photographed in the hats that they wear to church each Sunday. From young women to grandmothers, the women in the book reflect the history—and the “hattitude”—that is passed from generation to generation.

Before the book was even published, Craig Marberry approached writer and director Emily Mann, artistic head of New Jersey’s McCarter Theatre, about transforming the material for the stage. Mann commissioned a stage adaptation from actor and writer Regina Taylor, who spent two years devising a theatrical language for the play, including a three-week residency at the Sundance Theatre Lab. In addition to introducing music and movement, Taylor distilled the women represented in the book to six female characters (and one man) and created a new character—a young woman from Brooklyn who is sent to live with her grandmother in South Carolina after her brother is shot.

Directed by Taylor and co-produced by McCarter Theatre and New York’s Second Stage Theatre, *Crowns* received its world premiere at McCarter in October 2002. It has since been produced to acclaim at theatres around the country, and was honored in New York with seven 2003 Audelco Awards for Excellence in Black Theatre, including Musical Production of the Year.

During rehearsals for the world premiere, Regina Taylor took a few moments to speak with the McCarter Education staff about the experience of developing and working on *Crowns*. The following are excerpts from that conversation.

What was your response when McCarter first approached you with this project?

I was very excited because I recognize all of these women. They have a sense of community and family that I know well, and I was attracted to the power of the truthfulness of their words. I was very much compelled to bring these women to the stage.

How did you come from looking at the stories that are all separate in the book to creating something with a through line?

The tradition of adorning oneself for worship is something that comes from Africa. This was something that was passed down over the waters and that African Americans retain here in our church services. So when I looked at the book again within this context, I thought of church music, which harkens back over the waters to African music and I thought about the movement of ring shouts, which goes back directly to Africa. I began to consider things that are passed down in terms of African cultures, and then I followed that thread from African traditions to church traditions to how

that has filtered down into all of American society. So now you have field songs, you have the blues, you have rock, you have rap, you have jazz. All of that is connected—it has a line with a definite root. So in looking at doing the play I began to look at how I could weave together the narratives, the hat stories, which reveal so much about the women and where they are going. At the same time, knowing that not everyone knows about these stories, I introduced the character of a young woman from Brooklyn who is living too fast and her brother has been shot, so her mother sends her down to Darlington, SC, to live with her grandmother. That’s where she is initiated into the circle. She is our surrogate through this evening and she is indoctrinated and is baptized in this history. And that’s the journey that I’ve created.

All of the stories in the book are so compelling, how did you choose which stories to include?

That was very hard. It became about the arrangement of the piece and the way the stories fit into the structure. I started with a Sunday and I divided it into different parts. In the play the audience follows the course of that day even though we are going back and forth in time. We start at sun up and we have the morning ritual of getting ready for church. We have the procession to church, the morning service, a wedding, a funeral, a baptism and then a recession. So that is the structure. Then I started choosing which pieces fit into those sections. I then started grouping those pieces so that the stories in the book, from all these different women, became narrowed down to six different character types. The seventh character became the Man. And from there the voices kind of fell into place.

What made you decide that the character of the Man was important to this story?

I think it is important to have that male/female element. And there is a different energy to the piece with him being present. It’s not the same as “girls night out” because when you introduce a male persona the energy responds and changes. I thought that dynamic was important. And, because he takes on the roles of all of the different men in these women’s lives, I felt we very much needed his voice to complete the story.

What do you hope that people who see Crowns will walk out of the theatre with?

Generally I hope that people will be open to seeing how this affects their own lives and how the specific stories are also universal. The piece harkens upon where you come from and what you pass down and the importance of passing something down to someone else. That passing is taken into another person and transforms his/her life, and then that person creates what was passed down anew. This is what I hope people will see in it, and it is what I hope they will be thinking about as they leave the theatre.

The interview with Regina Taylor appears in full in the McCarter’s Teacher Resource Guide (www.mccarter.org/crowns.cfm); these excerpts are reprinted by permission



“Sundays are a precious gift to hardworking women who have labored unceasingly through the workweek...”

“If the woman is African American, she has some fancy hatboxes on a shelf in her closet. ... She dresses in the finest Sunday church clothes she owns, layers her face with Fashion Fair cosmetics and sprays herself with a wonderful perfume, and then she puts on THE HAT. ... She looks at her reflection from every possible angle. And then, she leaves home and joins the company of her mothers and aunties and sisters and nieces and daughters at church whose actions had been identical to hers that morning. They too had waited longingly for the gift of a Sunday morning. Now they stroll up and down the aisles of the church, stars of splendor, beauty beyond measurement. Black ladies in hats.

“To a compliment directed at the hat, each Black lady will give a little frown and deprecatingly say, ‘This thing? I almost didn’t wear it it’s so old.’ As she turns away the Black woman’s smile is resplendent.”

—MAYA ANGELOU



“But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head.”

1 CORINTHIANS 11:5



“We just know inside that we’re queens. And these are the crowns we wear.” —FELECIA McMILLAN, JOURNALIST



Throughout African cultures and the African diaspora, men and women have traditions of adorning their heads in creative and distinctive ways. For daily wear or for special ceremonial occasions, hairstyles and headgear show respect and veneration of the head, which is believed to be the seat of spirituality and identity and the site of connection to the divine. Among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, the head (*ori*) is seen as the seat of the person’s vital force (*àṣẹ*, pronounced “ah-shay”). The Yoruba believe that the physical head is the visible representation of the invisible but equally real spiritual head—so, to honor the spiritual, one must treat the physical with respect.

African-American culture retains many traditions, rites and rituals that can be traced back to ancient African ancestry. These rituals commemorate each passage into a new stage of life. African-American traditions take new shapes as time alters them, but trace their roots back to African cultures. In *Crowns*, the church service includes a baptism, a wedding and a funeral, marking three important passages.

Birth

In almost every culture, the birth of a child is marked with ceremonies to honor the important event. Ancient-African tradition says that the name of the child will affect the rest of his or her life. Great care is taken to choose a positive, unique name that will guarantee the child a happy, healthy and successful life. Baptism also marks the child’s entrance into the community. Baptism in a pond or river symbolizes a watery grave, and when the individual emerges from their brief submersion, they are born again into a new life, no matter how old they may be. Throughout that new life, they will be important members of a community that will accompany them in celebration and in sorrow.

**A few of
the many
types of hats
in *Crowns***



Pillbox

a brimless woman’s hat with a flat crown and straight sides

African-American Heritage and the Tradition of Adorning the Head



Marriage

“Jumping the broom” emerged as a wedding tradition during slavery, when it was illegal for slaves to marry. When a bride and groom jump the broom, it symbolizes sweeping away past problems and welcoming the new life of a married couple. For the Kgatla people of southern Africa, it was customary on the day after the wedding for the bride to help the other women in the family to sweep the courtyard clean, symbolizing her willingness and obligation to assist in housework at her in-laws’ home until the couple moved to their own home.

Wine is also an important part of the marriage ceremony. The ritual of pouring wine is complicated and very strict in some African societies. A libation, or offering of wine by pouring it on the ground to call departed ancestors to witness the wedding, can be a dramatic part of a wedding celebration. The libation ceremony offers a moment to pause and reflect on the importance of family and heritage.

Weddings are lively, loud and full of joy. The ceremony and celebration involve lots of music provided by bells, drums, horns and other instruments. The bride and groom hear their guests yell out wishes for them, such as this one, “May the spirits on high, as well as the spirits below, fill you with grace.”

Death

Traditionally African Americans consider death to be a critical part of the life cycle, not its ending. African-American funerals, often held at night, may reflect a blend of African customs with Western Christian practices. An African-American funeral often includes a long procession in which everyone passes the grave, shouting, chanting and singing.

The African tradition of marking graves with the household possessions of the departed continued in the New World. Many Africans and their descendants believed that the spirit would need the use of the person’s best pots, vessels, clocks, and so forth after death, so those items were placed on top of the grave so that the spirit would be located and would not haunt and make trouble for the living. Shells also often decorated graves, in keeping with the African BaKongo belief that a sea shell can enclose the immortal soul.



“When the Apostle Paul wrote an open letter to the Corinthians, decreeing that a woman cover her head when at worship to symbolize her obedience to God and the church hierarchy, he could not have imagined the flamboyance with which African-American women would comply. For generations, black women have interpreted Apostle Paul’s edict with boundless passion and singular flair, wearing platter hats, lampshade hats, why’d-you-have-to-sit-in-front-of-me-hats, often with ornaments that runneth over. These captivating hats are not mere fashion accessories. Neither, despite their Biblical roots, are they solely religious headgear. Church hats are a peculiar convergence of faith and fashion that keeps the Sabbath both holy and glamorous.” —CRAIG MARBERRY



“Listen, never touch my hat! Admire it from a distance. Those are the hat queen rules, honey.”

—PEGGY KNOX, CHILD CARE PROVIDER



“You can flirt with a fan in your hand. You can flirt holding a cigarette, too. But a woman can really flirt with a hat.”

—DOLORES FOSTER, REAL ESTATE AGENT (RETIRED)



“My husband said, ‘You don’t need another hat. You don’t have but one head.’”

—DOROTHY WYNECROFF, MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER (RETIRED)



“Our crowns have already been bought and paid for. All we have to do is wear them.”

—JAMES BALDWIN



Fedora

a low soft felt hat with the crown crested lengthwise



Top Hat

a tall crowned hat, often black



Derby

a man’s stiff felt hat with a dome-shaped crown and a narrow brim



Gele

(pronounced gay-lay) a Nigerian head wrapping which can take many different shapes



The Music of Crowns

"I envisioned a Gospel music-driven piece... a crazy-quilt of music and movement and storytelling that takes us through the rituals of a Sunday in the South with characters breaking out of the framework to deliver 'arias,' direct addresses to the audience that may start in the Sunday church service but jump off into memories of life experiences in different times and different places."

— REGINA TAYLOR

Music is an essential ingredient interwoven into the stories and the storytelling of *Crowns*. For the characters in the play music functions as a way to tie the past to the present and as a way for them to commune with the spirits, with the Lord and with their ancestry. In order to fully appreciate the significance of music within this world, some knowledge of African and African-American musical traditions is helpful. The following is a brief overview of some of the various styles of music you will experience in *Crowns* as well as an introduction to a few of the rituals that were influential in the development of African-American music.

Field Holler

The field holler is a kind of African-American music originating in the early days of American slavery. A kind of work song, used as a form of communication among black plantation workers in the South, the field holler made use of call and response.

Ring Shout

The ring shout was one of the features of slave Christianity that made the faith so powerful for the enslaved Africans and so foreign to European cultures. Enslaved Africans rarely had their own church buildings, so they usually had to meet in homes or outdoors, in the woods. While singing and moving the body were an integral part of worship, the seeming chaos and abandon with which the ring shout was conducted were frightening to owners who wanted complete control over the slaves. The ring shout was not, however, all chaos. It was actually a gratifying combination of emotional release and controlled community behavior, and it is directly linked to the counter-clockwise circle dances of African Spiritual expression and ancestor worship.

Spirituals

A spiritual is a religious song made famous by the African Americans of the Southern United States. Spirituals are emotional songs that have a strong rhythm. A leader sometimes sings one or two lines alone, and a chorus joins in the refrain. Spiritual singers often emphasize the rhythm by clapping their hands. Slaves based most of their spirituals upon characters and stories from the Bible. Many slaves

thought of themselves as modern children of Israel and sought freedom from bondage. Well-known spirituals include "Go Down, Moses," "Deep River," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

Blues

Blues developed in America from the various musical expressions of African Americans. The blues are an extremely flexible type of music, and various musicians have created individual styles of performing them. Many blues lyrics reflect loneliness or sorrow, but others present a humorous or defiant reaction to life's troubles. As for its exact origins, blues may have developed after the American Civil War from short solo calls and wails called "field hollers." Blind Lemon Jefferson and Mississippi John Hurt were well-known singers of country blues.

Jazz

Jazz music has often been called the only art form to originate in the United States. The history of jazz began in the late 1800s when a new form of music grew from a combination of influences, including African-American music, African rhythms, American band traditions and instruments, and European harmonies and forms. The earliest jazz was performed by African Americans who had little or no training in Western music. During its history, jazz has absorbed influences from the folk and classical music of Africa, Asia, and other parts of the world.

Rap

Rap is a form of popular music that is generally spoken or chanted at a fast pace rather than sung. Rap is performed over musical accompaniment that emphasizes rhythm rather than melody. Often this accompaniment consists of short segments of earlier recorded music combined in new patterns. Rap music first developed in the mid 1970s in New York City, and soon spread to other urban areas, primarily among African-American teenagers. At its earliest stages, the biggest inspiration for rap came from disc jockeys in Jamaica who would talk, or toast, over recorded music they played in clubs.

Source: *McCarter Theatre Teacher Resource Guide*



These questions and activities are designed to help students anticipate the performance and then to build on their impressions and interpretations after attending the theatre. The activities and questions are divided into “**Before the Performance**” and “**After the Performance**” categories. While most of the exercises provide specific instructions, please feel free to adapt these activities to accommodate your own teaching strategies and curricular needs. To assist you in incorporating these materials into your existing curriculum, we have provided the numbers of some of the corresponding Missouri Knowledge Standards and Illinois Learning Standards. In addition, the majority of the content integrates or allows demonstration of the following Missouri Performance Goals: 1.5, 1.9, 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 and 4.1.

COMMUNICATION ARTS

Before the Performance

1 If a copy is available, share the book *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats* with your students. For the most part, the book is a collection of personal stories of black women, and the stories are all tied together through the hats the women wear. Oral history, or storytelling, plays an important role in the history of all peoples. In *Crowns*, Yolanda listens to the stories of her grandmother and extended family in South Carolina, and these stories serve to bring about changes in her life. Have your students ask an older person from their family or community to share a story with them which was unique and memorable. Ask them to take notes as they listen to the story. Have the students relate the stories they were told to the rest of the class. Afterward, ask them to explain what they learned from the stories. What value does storytelling have to the teller? What importance can it have for the listener? What value does it have to our society as a whole? (MO: CA1, CA3, CA4, CA5, CA6, CA7, SS2, SS6 IL: 3, 4, 16, 18)

2 The Orisha, deity-like figures of the ancient Yoruba religion, play a large role in *Crowns*. In fact, many people throughout the African diaspora find the Orisha and Yoruban beliefs to be a way of connecting to their own heritage. Joseph Campbell, who became famous for his work in comparative mythology, once wrote of myths, “Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths.” In this statement, he was encapsulating the belief that myths explore needs and desires that are common to all of us. They serve to bind us together as a community.



Myths share common stories and figures throughout many cultures of the world. Have your students read the article about Yoruba and the Orisha on pages 16 and 17 of their *Crowns* program, or have them visit the following page on The Rep’s website: www.repstl.org/mainstage/crowns2.shtml.

Split the class into groups of no more than four. Have each group do further research on a few of the more than 300 Orisha. Each group should then research the deities of another ancient culture—the Roman, Greek, Native-American, Norwegian and Egyptian cultures are good choices. Based on their research, have them prepare Comparative Mythology Notebooks. The notebooks should give the descriptions of at least 10 Orisha. After each Orisha, they should list a deity from the other culture that is most similar to that Orisha, along with that deity’s description and characteristics. Ask the class these questions: How similar were the deities between the two cultures? What do you think might account for these similarities? What value do you think these deities had for the people that believed in them? Did belief in these figures serve to separate the society or bring it closer together? Why? (MO: CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA5, CA6, CA7, SS2, SS6 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 16, 18)

After the Performance

3 How does Yolanda’s speech and body language differ from the other female characters in the play? What are the differences between her movements and the body language of the Orisha at the beginning of the play? Were there any similarities? What do you believe would account for these similarities and/or differences? (MO: CA1, CA2, CA5, CA6, CA7, FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5 IL: 4, 5, 25, 27)

4 Regina Taylor, the playwright of *Crowns*, related the following about the book on which the play was based: “When I first looked at the photographs and read the stories, I felt a deep sense of recognition—a sense of where I came from, a sense of the women who helped raise me, a sense of the community that was provided by aunts and neighbors and the women who worshipped in the church I grew up in. There was very much a feeling of knowing all of these women at different points in my life.” Why was Yolanda, who was from Brooklyn, able to find healing and identity in Darlington, South Carolina? What do you suspect would be the differences between women in Brooklyn and those in South Carolina? Support your answers. What effect did the stories that the women shared with Yolanda have on her? Why? (MO: CA1, CA2, CA5, CA6, CA7, FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, SS2, SS6 IL: 4, 5, 16, 17, 18, 25, 27)

5 Hats take on many values in *Crowns*. Hold a class discussion on the following questions: What purpose do the hats serve in the structure of the play? What meanings do the crowns have for each of the characters? When the play is considered as a whole, what do the hats symbolize? Have each of your students wear a favorite hat—or the favorite hat of a family member or friend—to class. Ask them to relate a story, either true or fictional, that revolves around the hat. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA5, CA6, CA7, FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5 IL: 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)

6 The hats in *Crowns* serve to tie the diverse stories of all the unique African-American women together. If you were writing a book about your peers that was a collection of their stories, what could you use to unify them? Make a list of the reasons your “tie” would bring the stories together as a whole. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA6, CA7, FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)

FINE ARTS

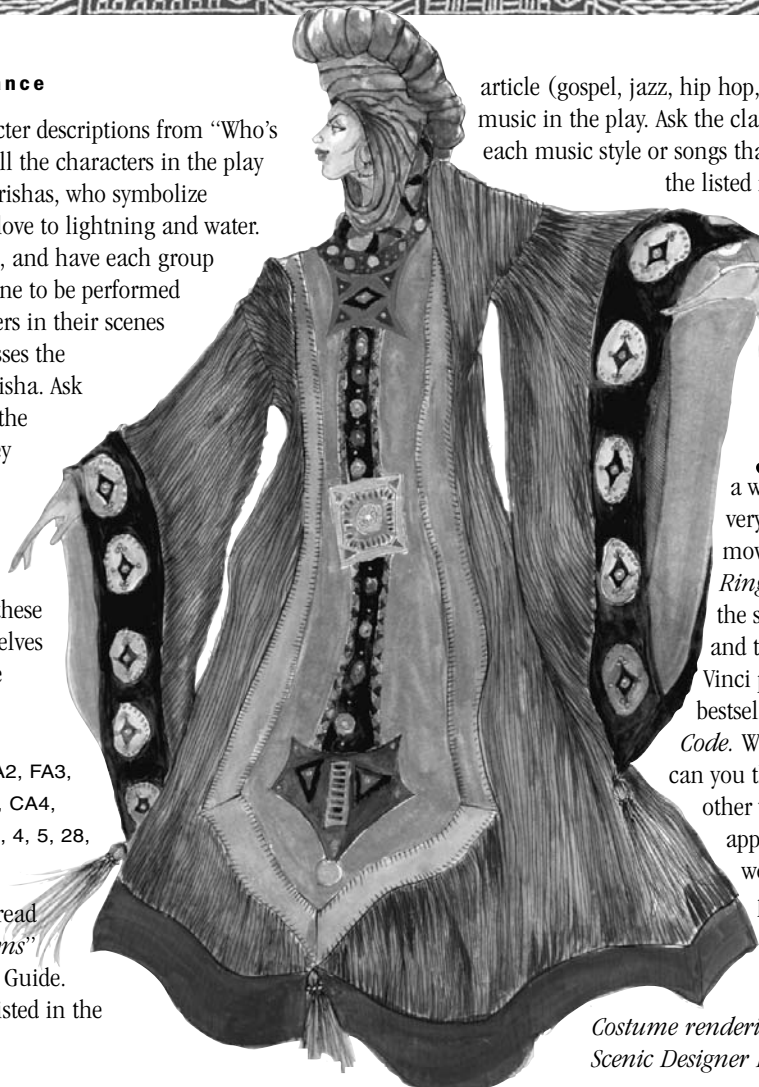
Before the Performance

1 Hand out the character descriptions from “Who’s Who” to the class. All the characters in the play share the traits of Orishas, who symbolize everything from war and love to lightning and water. Split the class into groups, and have each group write a short dramatic scene to be performed for the class. The characters in their scenes should be modern but possess the characteristics of these Orisha. Ask your students to consider the following questions as they write their scenes: What would each Orisha’s personality and behavior be like given the forces she controls? How would these behaviors manifest themselves in a modern person? Have them make a list of these attributes for use after the performance. (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA5, CA6, CA7 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 28, 29, 30)

2 Have your students read “The Music of *Crowns*” earlier in this Study Guide. Each of the music styles listed in the

article (gospel, jazz, hip hop, etc.) has an influence on the music in the play. Ask the class to bring in examples of each music style or songs that are heavily influenced by the listed music styles. How does each song exemplify one or more of the styles of music from the article? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA1, CA2, CA6, CA7 IL: 1, 4, 5, 28, 30)

3 Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats. Basing a work of art on a work from another art form is very common. For example, the movie trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* is based on the books of the same name by J.R.R. Tolkien, and the artwork of Leonardo Da Vinci plays a prominent role in the bestselling book, *The Da Vinci Code*. What books, movies and plays can you think of that were based on other works of art? Why would it appeal to an artist to base their work on the art of another person? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA2, CA6, CA7 IL: 4, 5, 28, 30)



Costume rendering of an Orisha by Scenic Designer Reggie Ray.

4 Have your students read “What’s the Story” from earlier in this Study Guide. Given the context of the play, how would they design the set and lighting? What type of costumes would they design and how would they be different for each of the characters? Ask them to give their reasons for their design choices. (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA6, CA7 IL: 1, 4, 5, 28, 29, 30)



Rep Scenic Artist James VanWell chalking-in and painting the African designs for the *Crowns* set.

After the Performance

5 The percussionist, James A. Jackson II, plays a large role in *Crowns*. How does percussion support the theme of the piece? Why does the percussionist begin the play, and how does his opening scene forward the story? What type of drum is he playing and what is its significance to African heritage? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA2, CA6, CA7 IL: 4, 5, 28, 30)

6 As a class, discuss the characters of Yolanda, Mother Shaw and the Preacher/Man. How were their roles different from one another and how did each support the story? What effect did each character have on the other two? How did each character change (or not change) throughout the play? Who did you feel was the central character? Why? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA2, CA6, CA7 IL: 4, 5, 28, 30)

7 Have your students read the Designer’s Note by Choreographer Mercedes Ellington on page 35 of their programs. In the note, she refers to a language of dance that reflects “new” Americans. How does the Choreography reflect the heritage of these new Americans? How does the movement change throughout the play to reflect the changes of the characters? How does the Choreography move the story forward? How does it serve to develop the personalities of the

characters on stage? How do the choreography, characters and hats interact? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA6, CA7 IL: 1, 4, 5, 28, 30)

8 Discuss the following technical elements of the play: the lighting, the costumes, the costume fly-ins, the hat framework, the Stairway to Heaven and the African floor patterns. What technical purposes did each serve in the play? How did each of these elements add to the

mood? How did each forward the storyline? Did any of these elements serve to link the characters to their ancestry? If so, which ones? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA2, CA6, CA7 IL: 4, 5, 28, 29, 30)

9 In addition to the music styles listed in the article “The Music of *Crowns*,” Musical Director Timothy Carpenter ensured that the songs also represent the styles of different African-American church movements. For instance, “That’s All Right,” the ring-shout song during which Yolanda is pulled into the middle of the ring, is very characteristic of the Pentecostal church. Can you list the characteristics (soft, fast, heavy rhythms, etc.) of the music from different churches (Methodist, Pentecostal and others)? Which songs in the play sounded like “church music”? What influence has church music had on modern secular music? Support your answers. (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA2, CA6, CA7 IL: 4, 5, 28, 30)

10 How were the qualities of the Orisha reflected by each of the characters? Consult the list of Orisha attributes that you made in “Before the Performance.” Did the characters show some of the qualities that were on your list? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA2, CA6, CA7 IL: 4, 5, 28, 30)



Before the Performance

1 Throughout the many communities of the world that come from African ancestry, there are religions, philosophies and traditions that can be traced back to the ancient culture of Yoruba. Research the beliefs and ceremonies of ancient Yoruba and write an essay that explores and answers the following questions: What similarities do the Yoruban ceremonies and rites of passage have to those of modern African Americans? What might be the reason for these similarities? What were the differences? Is there value to a modern African American in learning about Yoruban beliefs? Why or why not? (MO: SS1, SS2, SS4, SS5, SS6, CA1, CA3, CA4, CA6, CA7 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18)

2 Many of the stories in *Crowns* explore the African-American struggle for civil rights. Create a collage that shows the major events in this struggle. Your collage can be made up of photographs from magazines, copies of photographs from books, copies of headlines from old newspapers, or any other creative items you can imagine that represent the civil rights struggle. (MO: SS1, SS2, SS4, SS5, SS6, CA1, CA3, CA4, CA6, CA7 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18)

After the Performance

3 Many spirituals such as “Wade in the Water” had very special meanings to slaves. What hidden meaning did this song have? What other spirituals had special meanings, and what was the hidden importance of each song? (MO: SS1, SS2, SS3, SS4, SS5, SS6, CA1, CA6, CA7, FA3, FA5 IL: 4, 5, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25, 27)

4 *Crowns* revolves around the stories of African-American women. What were the central themes of these stories? At the end of the play, Yolanda says: “The more I study Africa, the more I see that African Americans do very African things without even knowing it. Adorning the head is one of those things. Now I have about 60 hats...mostly I wear my geeles. They connect me to the Motherland. They connect me to myself, And in a way they connect me to my brother because they connect me to all ancestors who’ve crossed over.” How did the stories of her family lead her to these revelations about herself? (MO: SS1, SS2, SS3, SS4, SS5, SS6, CA1, CA6, CA7, FA3, FA5 IL: 4, 5, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25, 27)

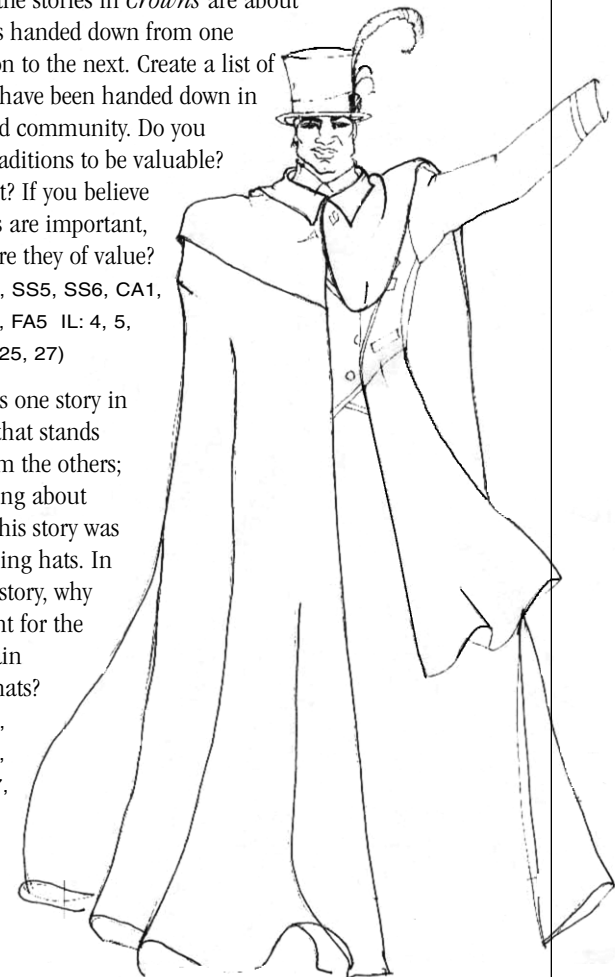
5 If you were writing a play that was a collection of stories—similar to *Crowns*—but one which revolved around African-American men, how would the play be different? Would the central themes of the stories need to change in order to be of value to the central male figure (the male “Yolanda”)? Why or why not? If the themes of the stories would need to be different, what would they be? (MO: SS1, SS2, SS4, SS5, SS6, CA1, CA6, CA7, FA3, FA5 IL: 4, 5, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25, 27)

6 When Yolanda is sent to the South by her mother in order to learn from her grandmother, she is undergoing a rite of passage: an event that allows her to grow as a person, and one that others like her have experienced. What rites of passage have you gone through in life regarding your school, family and

friends? What was challenging about these experiences? Do you view the events differently now than you did when you were experiencing them? Why or why not? (MO: SS2, SS4, SS5, SS6, CA1, CA6, CA7, FA3, FA5 IL: 4, 5, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25, 27)

7 Many of the stories in *Crowns* are about traditions handed down from one generation to the next. Create a list of traditions that have been handed down in your family and community. Do you believe these traditions to be valuable? Why or why not? If you believe these traditions are important, in what ways are they of value? (MO: SS2, SS4, SS5, SS6, CA1, CA6, CA7, FA3, FA5 IL: 4, 5, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25, 27)

8 There was one story in the play that stands apart from the others; rather than being about wearing hats, this story was about not wearing hats. In this particular story, why was it important for the women to refrain from wearing hats? (MO: SS1, SS2, SS4, SS5, SS6, CA1, CA6, CA7, FA3, FA5 IL: 4, 5, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25, 27)



The Rep would like to thank the McCarter Theatre, Guthrie Theatre, Alliance Theatre and Intiman Theatre for allowing us to use their educational materials in the creation of this Study Guide.

Read More About It

We encourage you to examine these topics in-depth by exploring the following books, websites and videos.

Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats by Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry. Doubleday; 2000. This is the bestselling book on which Regina Taylor’s play was based.

This Far by Faith: African-American Spiritual Journeys. This six-part PBS series, available on VHS and DVD (at a discount to educators), explores the long, rich history of African-American faith.

Crowning Achievements: African Arts of Dressing the Head by Mary Jo Arnoldi et al. University of California Los Angeles; 1995. This book investigates the African tradition of adorning the head.

African Religions and Philosophy by John S. Mbiti. Heinemann; 1992. This is a systematic study of the attitudes of mind and belief that have evolved in the many societies of Africa.

To learn more about the history of African-American music, including gospel, blues, jazz, soul and others, visit the website <http://afgen.com/music.html>.

The website <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/wpa/wpahome.html> contains an online anthology of slave narratives. Other interesting African-American historical documents are available at www.ourblackheritage.com.

For additional information about Joseph Campbell and comparative mythology, visit the website of his foundation, www.jcf.org.

www.yoruba.org contains a wealth of information about Yoruba in Africa and throughout the diaspora.

The best mythology site on the Internet is www.pantheon.org. The site contains information on hundreds of myths and mythic gods.

McCarter Theatre, which premiered *Crowns*, has a wealth of information about the production available on their website, www.mccarter.org/crowns.cfm.