Metamorphic Rainbows:  
The Journey of Shange’s *for colored girls* From Poetry to Television and Beyond

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“When ‘for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf’ first came to me, that was all there was, a phrase. Over months of poetry readings...certain poems attached themselves to this title. By the time I’d driven cross-country, the southern route, to New York, there was a play...Now, there is yet another metamorphosis, from the Broadway stage to television...Magic.”


Between 1974 and 1982, Ntozake Shange’s “for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf” (FCG) transformed from a loosely connected group of poems and improvised dances performed in small Northern California venues, to a stage production that ran on Broadway for two years, to a telefilm \(^1\) broadcast nationally on PBS’ American Playhouse. FCG is most often praised for the vitality of its language, and for its introduction of a new form (the choreopoem) to the American theater. In light of its several successful metamorphoses, the piece’s greatest strength, like that of the women it depicts, is its ability to adapt and endure. This adaptability stems from its origins as a hybrid work comprised of poetry, dance and music, as well as from Shange’s impressive capacity to collaborate, improvise and allow FCG to morph as necessary for shifting audiences and mediums. An examination of FCG’s three major versions: group of poems, choreopoem and telefilm, is utilized as a basis to critique the latter both as an autonomous work of art, and in relation to the versions that came before it. Though some of her original feminist vision was diminished, the drastic changes Shange made to FCG—most notably the addition of male characters—yielded a version viable for television and thus accessible to an infinitely larger audience. Many of the changes also function as an artistic response to the accusations that FCG vilified black men, which saturated the press during the Broadway run and
have since remained a major preoccupation of the critical literature. More than thirty years later, with both a Broadway revival starring India Arie and a feature film by Tyler Perry currently in development, FCG continues to change and grow. Analysis of the telefilm, which has yet to be thoroughly discussed by literary critics or theater historians, provides insights useful for future incarnations of this groundbreaking, oft-produced work of feminist theater.

Origins: “seven years of improvised poetry readings”

Though she is now best known for her plays, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Shange was a poet and dancer developing her art(s) through performance, practice and collaboration with a nurturing community of Bay Area feminists and artists. FCG evolved organically as Shange identified and cultivated common themes running through her poems. She and other female dancers, including close friend and choreographer Paula Moss, experimented with embodying the stories of the seven ladies who began to emerge from the poems. Though some of the dances that developed were pre-rehearsed, many were improvised; often Shange would not see a piece until she and the dancer were on stage performing together. She recalls sometimes “do[ing] improvs in the middle of poems” in response to dancers’ performances (qtd. in Bryer 207), so that the dances, inspired by the poetry, generated further poems. The poems and dances performed changed “dependent upon our audience & our mood” (Shange xiii). Shange also collaborated with musicians, many of whom were men, including a horn trio and a blues-reggae band who created music to accompany the other art forms. This collection of dances and music set to poems, with the title “Natural Disasters and Other Festive Occasions,” was performed in a variety of intimate venues, including women’s bars, counterculture cafes, poetry centers and Women’s Studies Departments, culminating in 1974 with a well-attended, well-received twelve-show run at Minnie’s Can-Do Club in San Francisco (Ribowsky 48).
These details ground FCG’s production history in the significant but less-discussed pre-New York period while demonstrating Shange’s ability to collaborate and adapt her art based on the needs and interests of participating artists and audiences, skills as unusual for a poet as they are vital to the life (or, lives) of this piece. This early history also illuminates the cavernous distance between FCG’s original audience and later audiences, a major contributor to the accusations of black male bashing that surfaced in New York. In Shange’s words, “I felt women have to explore these experiences with one another…I really didn’t expect [men] to come” (qtd. in Trescott B5). Her primary intended audience was black women, but like her collaborators her original audience also included allies – diverse, politically progressive artists, feminists and activists, male and female. Through seven women’s stories of joy and struggle, Shange’s intended message was a positive one, in her words “an affirmation of the black woman’s possibilities…[T]hat to survive in the face of the double burden she faces gives her a unique feeling of victory” (qtd. in Ribowsky 45). Recognized now as an articulation of nascent intersectionality theory, FCG celebrates black women’s ability to survive and thrive in the face of overlapping systems of racism and sexism. Though the seven ladies of FCG, like the “colored girls” to whom Shange dedicates the piece, may have considered suicide, they have found ways of “movin to the ends of their own rainbows” (64). Shange’s expression of intersectionality is centered on women’s agency, and particularly on the acquisition of agency through self-expression, spirituality and community building.

In its original form, then, FCG was far from a play, much less a made-for-TV-movie. In mapping its metamorphoses, understanding public response to its various incarnations, and measuring the success of the telefilm adaptation, it is important to keep in mind that FCG, at its core, is a piece of feminist art: 1) rooted in poetry and a conversation between poetry and other
art forms; 2) in-tune with, adaptable and responsive to its audience; 3) whose goal is to affirm the strength and resiliency of black women.

**Birth of the Choreopoem: Greenwich Village to Broadway**

Fueled by their Bay Area success, Shange and Moss drove to New York, where they performed FCG at a variety of small Greenwich Village venues, collaborating with local dancers and musicians while maintaining their flexible, improvisational format (Shange xiii). Impressed by a performance at Demonte’s Bar, director Oz Scott volunteered to work with Shange and Moss to turn FCG into a theater piece (Ribowsky 48). Initially excited by the opportunity, Shange’s feelings were mixed as they began the process, which included setting choreography, creating blocking, and solidifying the order of the poems. She recalls, “I just thought it was so horrible that they wanted me to do the same poems in the same order every night…What in the world would you do that for? …I was upset…that the order was made static” (qtd in Bryer 207). This recollection makes Shange’s initial discomfort with the theater clear. She was a poet, not a playwright, and the poems and dances she had created were never meant to be a play. In order to “get on board” with the significant changes FCG would need to undergo in order to function as a theater piece, Shange redefined the work for herself. She “came to understand these twenty-odd poems as a single statement, a choreopoem” (Shange xiv).

The choreopoem, often cited as Shange’s most significant contribution to theater, “is a theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance, and music— those elements that, according to Shange, outline a distinctly African American heritage— to arouse an emotional response in an audience” (Lester 3). Though the form is most often discussed in relation to Shange’s interest in developing distinctly African-American modes of expression, its invention is also rooted in Shange’s identification as a poet, and in FCG’s poetic origins. The invention of
this new form allowed Shange to stay true to her original vision of the piece as a conversation between poetry and other art forms. Labeling it a “play” would have erased FCG’s history, its roots in poetry, music and dance. And indeed, “play” would have also linked FCG to the very “Eurocentric and patriarchal artificiality of linear structurings” (14) the piece resists through its celebration of the complexities of black womanhood. Reframing the work with a name she created allowed Shange to “let go” of FCG enough to trust Scott’s adaptations. Through what may have felt like a sacrifice of the flexibility and improvisational spontaneity of the original version, Shange freed FCG to move in new directions.

During the spring and summer of 1976, FCG, now solidified into a choreopoem, had two brief but highly successful, sold-out runs at the Henry Street and Public Theaters. With only minor changes to the staging and set, FCG moved to Broadway’s Booth Theater in September 1976 (Lester 21). The most significant change to FCG during this period was also the most controversial: the change in audience. Shange described downtown New York audiences, with their “propensity for the avant-garde or the unusual” as still “very familiar with the kind of things we [had been] talking about [in the Bay Area]…Then when we went to Broadway, we were talking to people who didn’t even know we existed…I don’t know what they intended to see; I don’t have any idea” (qtd. in Bryer 208). With the new audience, which now included upper middle-class whites and black nationalists wary of feminism, Shange’s intimate celebration of black women was now often interpreted as a sweeping condemnation of black men. Nearly every piece reviewed for this article from the Broadway period, even when praising FCG as a whole, validates these accusations. Much of the mainstream press coverage framed the piece as a “battle of the sexes” and an example of feminist male-bashing, while black critics often accused Shange of “promot[ing] racist stereotypes of Black males as innately violent and
uncontrollably licentious… characteriz[ing]… Shange’s feminist views as racially treasonous” (Alexander-Floyd 127). The title of Mark Ribowsky’s 1976 article in *Sepia* magazine exemplifies this. In enormous block print it reads, “A poetess scores a hit with play on ‘what’s wrong with black men’” (46). An anonymous theater reviewer in the NY Amsterdam News wrote that he had overheard black men in Harlem discussing their opinion that “the CIA was behind that girl’s play” (D7). The controversy became the “spin” critics used to frame discussions of the show. This technique likely drew in some of the audience, but misrepresented Shange’s groundbreaking critique of the intersecting systems of oppression black women encounter in their intimate relationships and in the larger political system.

Shange’s painful and necessary response again involved “letting go” of FCG. Though it ran on Broadway for two years, Shange, who had previously always performed, only participated for the first three weeks. She removed herself from what she described as the “venomous environment” the man-hating accusations had created, isolating herself and focusing on new writing. Shange acknowledges the opportunities the Broadway production afforded her, both in terms of financial independence to further her art, and access to “an audience I would never be able to reach otherwise” (qtd. in Bryer 209). Like her characters, Shange rose above the abuse, refusing to let it spoil her belief in FCG’s feminist vision and value. Doing so allowed FCG to thrive despite its detractors, and it has since become one of the most beloved and widely-produced feminist theater pieces of all time. It also allowed Shange to further broaden the audience for her message of hope and resistance by translating the piece into yet another form a few years later.
From Choreopoem to Telefilm: Broadway to PBS

Having successfully molded a group of poems into a surprising Broadway-smash, and with a few years away from the piece to heal the Broadway wounds, the task of turning the choreopoem into a telefilm must have come as an exciting opportunity. In February of 1982, when it aired nationally on PBS’ American Playhouse, Shange described the telefilm as “yet another metamorphosis” of FCG. Shange again collaborated with director Oz Scott, and the two worked together for over a year on the adaptation before filming began (TVG 14). This version is a much more drastic departure than the choreopoem was in relation to the original. As reported in Essence at the time, “The teleplay differs from the stage version in a number of ways, not the least of which is the fact that men appear in it” (Smith 12). Though it was nominated for an Emmy, response to the telefilm was mixed. In his New York Times review John O’Connor panned the production while praising the acting. Examining the use of frames and flashbacks, the reassignment of poems to create autonomous female characters, and the functions of new male characters in the piece will illuminate the telefilm’s successes and failures as an autonomous work, an embodiment of Shange’s original vision for the piece, and in relation to the definitive Broadway version, particularly as a response to accusations of black male bashing.

The telefilm opens and closes with Shange in a bedroom addressing an infant girl. Though Shange plays herself, she also functions as the seventh character from the theatrical version. Her monologues are a mixture of new text and lines from the lady in brown. Shange’s scenes operate as a frame attempting to ground and link FCG’s vignettes— the six women’s stories make up a larger narrative that Shange types and tells to the infant. O’Connor criticizes this framing as a “fragile” and “labored” attempt to tie together “loosely related scenes” (C14). However, the women’s stories are much less disparate than either O’Connor or this frame would
make them seem. In translating poetry to television, a concern for audience understanding is clearly justified, and a contextualizing frame, in this case, useful and necessary. In the FCG telefilm, however, which operates mainly through flashback, frames abound, making Shange’s frame not only unnecessary, but at times confusing. For example, the second scene, the poem “Graduation Night,” opens at a slumber party. The party is an effective frame, providing Lynn Whitfield’s character a location from which to reminisce to her five friends about the night she lost her virginity. Shange’s preceding frame muddles things. Is Shange telling the infant girl the story of the night six women had a slumber party, and one woman told the others about losing her virginity? If, indeed, Shange does wish to tell an infant the teenager’s story, the slumber party detail seems extraneous. In what appears to be an overzealous attempt to handhold the audience and ground FCG in realism, the opening/closing frame scenes backfire. Though generally ineffective within the telefilm, these scenes are somewhat redeemable as a nod to FCG’s roots. FCG’s many voices originate with Shange herself—the poet alone at her typewriter, the infant representing all the “little colored girls” her art represents and affirms.

Shange performed all the poems in FCG’s earliest incarnations. Developing them into a unified choreopoem, “Shange alleges she arbitrarily divided [the monologues] into seven character parts” (Lester 6). The characters in the Broadway choreopoem version are nameless, “all metaphorically everywoman,” Shange explains (TVG 14). In the move from Broadway to telefilm, however, Shange did not simply replace each dress color with a proper name. Instead, the ladies underwent significant changes as Shange and Scott combined, rearranged, and re-assigned sections of poems to create, for the first time, six autonomous, fully-formed characters. From a feminist standpoint, one particularly interesting result of this process relates to the
aforementioned “Graduation Night,” delivered in the theatrical version by lady in yellow, and in the telefilm by Lynn Whitfield.

“[G]raduation night” has often and aptly been cited by critics defending against the accusations that FCG is anti-black male. As Lester explains, “The poem celebrates a woman’s conscious decision to act upon her sexual stirrings. She is not raped, coerced, or otherwise unaware of her decisions” (39). In the telefilm, the poem appears at first to operate much as it did on Broadway, as a celebratory tale of first sexual encounter. However, this positive depiction of female sexuality is undercut when Whitfield’s character delivers “abortion cycle #1,” a poem assigned on Broadway to lady in blue. Though it is not made explicit whether the character’s pregnancy is a result of her deflowering by Bobby, this is certainly implied. In terms of “good television drama,” the change is effective. In translating a play to television, Molette explains that a writer must find devices “to capture and hold the television viewer's attention[,] includ[ing] highly intense action and suspense” (Abs.). Linking the story of first sexual encounter to the abortion story creates a new, attention-holding plotline, connecting the incidents by placing them in the life of a single character. The scene is certainly one of the most emotionally intense in the telefilm. Whitfield spends most of the monologue lying on the doctor’s table in tears. The camera zooms in on her face slowly from between her legs, equating the audience with the abortionist, increasing the sense of the vulnerability, isolation and pain the character describes. The audience, like the doctors, is the “eyes crawling up on [her]/ eyes rollin in [her] thighs” (Shange 22).

Though dramatically effective within the telefilm, linking “graduation night” and “abortion cycle #1” destroys much of the subversive feminist power of the former. Originally, and on Broadway, “graduation night” unapologetically celebrated female-controlled sexuality.
The poem “renders a daring and important social break in traditional female behavior for Shange’s colored girls; it boldly announces Shange’s commitment to acknowledging sexuality as a natural dimension of female identity” (Lester 38). Burke concurs that the poem “reclaims sexual experience as a pleasurable and powerful initiatory ritual for the female” (186). When “graduation night” becomes merely another example of the dangers of female sexuality and the pain caused by men and promiscuity, FCG loses a degree of balance and complexity. The decision to link these stories may have also been made in the interest of television’s “theory of least objectionable programming which presumes that when the viewer objects to the content of a program that viewer's attention is lost” (Molette Abs.). It is certainly more “socially acceptable” to show the woman who “brags” about enjoying her sexual encounter later suffering its consequences on the abortionist’s table. Unfortunately, such a depiction goes against the original feminist vision in this piece. It also risks making Bobby, previously a positive (or, at least, neutral) depiction of black manhood, more fodder for the argument that FCG is anti-black male.

Since their long-running Broadway version was by this time the definitive production, what Shange and Scott responded to through the telefilm, more so than other director’s visions, were the reactions to their creation, the most controversial and enduring of which were the accusations of black male vilification. Nearly all the press preceding the telefilm’s debut revisits this issue, including an article in Essence that opens: “[I]n an article in The Black Scholar, sociologist Robert Staples attacked Ntozake…for her ‘vicious assault on Black men.’ In the same issue, other male writers accused her of acting as a subversive tool of the white media” (Smith 12). Shange purportedly laughed when asked whether the inclusion of black men in the telefilm was a concession to the earlier criticism: “I decided to do what I had seen men do when
they make war movies and cowboy movies. They put women around so you know you’re in a real time and space” (qtd. in Smith 12).

Unimpressed with a decision that Shange minimizes here into a tongue-in-cheek feminist gag, O’Connor criticizes the telefilm’s use of men as one of many troublesome examples of the “visual clutter” that results in a “considerable reduction in the work’s emotional impact.” In a description remarkably similar to Shange’s, O’Connor claims that the telefilm is weakened by its men, who “amount to little more than convenient mannequins, striking poses and very rarely getting a line to speak” (C14). Some of the men are indeed extraneous distractions, particularly Melissa’s lover in “one,” the card players at the picnic, and the annoyingly slumped, pouting “Second Man at BBQ” (Roger Hill) to whom Laurie Carlos’ character’s “sorry” is addressed. However, O’Connor’s critique does not hold true for all the men in the telefilm, particularly Toussaint and First Man at BBQ, as will be evidenced shortly.

Both suggestions implied in O’Connor’s critique are problematic. Assigning more lines to round out the cluttered mannequins is not a viable solution in a piece that is by/for/about black women; such a change would stray too far from Shange’s original feminist vision. The opposite extreme, removing black men from the telefilm, would render FCG unviable for television. The combination of women’s poetic language, movement and music made for riveting live theater, but the television audience’s attention would not be held without the “highly intense action and suspense” created by the mimetic dramatization of the women’s stories made possible in large part by the presence of men. Shange and Scott took advantage of the opportunity the telefilm gave them to give “visual form” to stories and characters that were only “suggestions in the theater.” “Magically,” Shange says, “the televising of ‘for colored girls’ let my words happen” (TVG 14). Though the inclusion of men is at times overdone, Shange’s decision to do so allows
her to perform another radical experiment with FCG. The men’s inclusion is by no means a “concession to criticism,” but the men do inevitably function in part as an artistic response by Shange and Scott within the critical conversation. The men are also vital to the telefilm’s ability to successfully translate a language-rooted choreopoem into an attention-holding, action-centered teledrama.

“[T]oussaint” and “somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff” are particularly successful sections of the telefilm as embodiments of FCG’s roots as a poetic affirmation of black womanhood, and effective, thoughtful responses to the claims that the Broadway FCG vilified black men. Like Bobby from “graduation night,” Toussaint L’Overture, the Haitian liberator who is lady in brown’s imaginary friend, and Toussaint Jones, the young man who woos her into letting L’Overture go, represent within the original FCG “a black girl’s discovery of and satisfaction with unthreatening male companionship” (Lester 68). In the telefilm both Toussaints, impressively played by Gregory T. Daniel, stay true to this function. Daniel has few lines, but is fully engaged in the scene’s action. As the couple romps happily through the park, Laurie Carlos’ character shares an important story from her childhood. Daniel’s facial expressions show that he is listening intently and empathetically. Daniel’s character, like the earlier versions of Toussaint, represents FCG’s ideal black man, loving and respectful to women, and actively resistant to racial oppression.

With no lines of dialogue, Brent Jennings’ portrayal of the “First Man at BBQ” turns “somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff,” originally a warning of how “a vampire lover can steal [a woman’s] self” (Burke 186), into a tender moment of newfound understanding between a man and woman. Alfre Woodard’s character gives a rousing rendition of the poem, simultaneously addressing her five cheering friends and Jennings’ character, the thieving
“somebody” to whom the poem refers. Jennings’ character tries to ignore Woodard’s, sitting with his back to her, playing cards with a group of men who do not acknowledge her at all. He is magnetized, however, by her poetry, unable to resist her language. He rises and goes to her, gently touching her chin and listening intently. Television viewers are effectively drawn into a moment of intimacy as the couple makes amends. Both acknowledge their mistakes—as in the original and Broadway FCGs, the woman “accepts responsibility for allowing a man—or anyone—so dangerously close to changing her identity” (Lester 60), while the man realizes and shows appreciation for the “stuff” he has previously taken for granted.

In an interview in Sepia at the time of the Broadway production, Shange shared her observation regarding the men who saw FCG: “Rather than being offended, I get the impression they’re being ‘purified’ because for the first time they can see in clear terms how ugly they can be at times—so ugly they can’t even stand it” (qtd. in Ribowsky 44). In the telefilm version of “somebody”, Shange and Scott successfully depict First Man’s purification process, and the resulting happiness of a black couple who have come to better understand one another through honest communication. Both the “toussaint” and “somebody…” scenes end with couples walking towards the camera/viewer, arm-in-arm, forward into a promising future—these are positive, hopeful representations of black men, and of male-female relationships.

A discussion of FCG’s men would be incomplete without addressing “a nite with beau willie brown,” the story of domestic violence and infanticide most often cited to support accusations of black male vilification. As in the original and Broadway FCGs, this section of the telefilm is one of the most riveting and memorable, its vividness increased by the mimetic, “hyper-dramatic” nature of the genre. Crystal (e.g. lady in red) represents “one example of devalued black womanhood” (Anderson 11); she is the least empowered of the seven ladies, the
one most in need of the spiritual support and female community represented by the “layin on of hands” that concludes the piece. As Anderson explains, “Beau Willie and Crystal struggle with each other because they cannot fight the institutionalized racism and sexism that plague their lives” (11). In an interview promoting the telefilm, Shange again “patiently explains that her target is not Black men per se, but the patriarchy in general” (qtd. in Smith 12). Shange’s structural critique of white capitalist patriarchy, however, could be as easily misconstrued from Willie’s story in the telefilm as it was on Broadway. The average viewer’s inability to connect Crystal and Willie’s problems to larger oppressive systems stems from entrenched liberalist ideologies that pathologize poor people of color in order to obscure and maintain the status quo. Building on Shange’s work, contemporary black feminist political theorists such as Alexander-Floyd dissect controlling myths such as “the welfare queen” and “the endangered black male” to explicate this pathologization and its deleterious effects not only on public response to black feminist art, but the development of discriminatory public policies.

Rather than a didactic poetic tirade against “the System,” Shange chooses a far more effective strategy to critique the oppressive institutions that “stack the deck” against poor people of color. She gives inadequacies and inequalities within the American public education and health care systems, and the exploitative military industrial complex a human face, illuminating their real-life consequences through Crystal and Willie’s story. As Alexander-Floyd explains, however, “the production of feminist criticism– in art or in scholarship– comes at a high price. [Black feminists] are consistently ostracized, vilified, and marginalized…The reaction to Black feminism is a testament both to the strength of the sexist politics [being resisted] and to the important political intervention of [this] work (167). FCG’s misinterpretation and Shange’s vilification as a race-traitor/man-hater were both a result of, and an attempt to undermine, her
scathing critique of the complex, interlocking systems of oppression that effect black women’s lives. The challenge for Shange, as for any activist artist, and anyone who adapts FCG, is to continually search for new and more effective ways to teach the critical-thinking skills that enable audiences to question and challenge the deeply entrenched patriarchal systems that lead to tragedies such as Crystal and Beau Willie Brown’s.

Beyond

Though some of Shange’s feminism seems to have been “watered down” for television, the telefilm remains true to FCG’s roots as a celebration of black womanhood embodied through poetry and other arts. Liberalist ideologies notwithstanding, this version puts to rest any remaining misconceptions of the piece as anti-black male, allowing future productions (stage, film, or otherwise) to stay true to Shange’s original intent of celebrating and empowering black women. Current discussions online and elsewhere debate the forthcoming incarnation of FCG, a feature film version to be released in 2010, produced, directed and written by Tyler Perry (Gans). Doubts that any man should be permitted to adapt FCG overlook the importance of male artists to the piece. FCG would not be what it is today without the Bay Area musicians who collaborated with Shange in its early development or director Oz Scott, who helped Shange take the piece from downtown New York to Broadway to PBS. Like Latoya Peterson of Jezebel magazine, my biggest concern regarding this next metamorphosis is the report that Perry will “pen the screen adaptation” (Gans). As Peterson writes, “Directing? Fine. Producing? Cool. But writing and adapting it? From someone who writes flat, two-dimensional woman characters in all of his work?” (Jezebel). Amidst myriad collaborators and reincarnations, Shange and her poetry have remained FCG’s bedrock. One of the most surprising successes of the telefilm is indeed how true it stays to Shange’s original poetry, how few lines are changed or additional
dialogue added. Perry must tread carefully, honoring and maintaining Shange’s poetry wherever possible. Like the men previously involved with FCG, Perry would be wise to act as an ally and collaborator rather than a unilateral leader on this project.

Appearing enthusiastic about the film adaptation, Shange reported to the press in April, 2009 that Halle Berry, Angela Bassett and Jill Scott have signed contracts to participate (Booker). In addition, Oprah Winfrey, Alfre Woodard and Lynn Whitfield are rumored to be involved (IMDB). If even a few of the women reportedly on board with the film are given room to collaborate and contribute to its creation, as would be appropriate in keeping with FCG’s core values and aesthetics, there is great potential for this adaptation to succeed, further disseminating Shange’s still much-needed message of female empowerment and resistance. In a 1977 self-interview in Ms., Shange writes, “[T]here’s an enormous ignorance abt women’s realities in our society. [W]e ourselves suffer from a frightening lack of clarity abt who we are…. [W]e must learn our common symbols, preen them and share them with the world” (70). Through continuing to adapt FCG into new forms accessible to wider audiences, Shange delivers her affirmation not just of black female, but of human, resiliency, a message that continues to be as vital as “fresh water to people stranded in the Mojave desert” (72).

WORKS CITED


---. The term “telefilm” rather than “teleplay” is utilized because the PBS adaptation is a serious departure from the Broadway production, which itself was a choreopoem, not a play. Shange did not want to “simply document the stage version [with] another ‘Live From New York’ videotape” (TVG 14). “Telefilm” seems to better capture the ambitious nature of Shange and Scott’s television adaptation project.
The Whoopi Goldberg-led 2008 Broadway revival was postponed when a key funder backed out (Jones). Now that a feature film version is in the works, it is unclear whether the show will go on (McNary).

For obvious reasons, the telefilm has yet to be examined in detail by literary critics or theater historians. This version is worthy of critical attention for a variety of reasons, perhaps most notably because of its likely influence on subsequent and future productions as the most widely-available and viewed version to date.

Many of the lady in brown’s lines not delivered by Shange make up Patti Labelle’s song, which also frames the telefilm.