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Photo: Malaika Aminata Clements

It All Comes Out in the Wash

By Lisa Bardarson

The Clothesline Muse, an evening-length work, is not just about family lineage and the impact that previous generations bring to bear upon its fledgling members but is also a testament to the creative talents inherent within the Welsh/Freelon/Asante family. Kariamuwelsh conceived the multi-media work with written collaboration by Maya Freelon Asante (Welsh's daughter-in-law) and Nnenna Freelon (Freelon Asante's mother). Additionally, Welsh supplied the choreography, Freelon the music and musical direction, and Freelon Asante the set and projection design.

The tight direction by Serena Ehardt gives consistent momentum to *The Clothesline Muse's* narrative. The two central characters are a teenager; Mary Mack Douglass, performed with exuberance by Baset Sat-Ra, and her grandmother, Grandma Blu/The Clothesline Muse, inspiringly played by Nnenna Freelon. In this story, Mary Mack Douglass has just received a letter from her college-of-choice and is now tasked with the dubious challenge of writing an essay to convince the school that she should receive much-needed financial aid. Grandma Blu, a laundress by trade and griot by rights, gives Mary Mack pithy grist for her essay (and for life) by leading her on a journey of self-discovery via storytelling and family lore.

In this fable, the clothesline is not just a place where clothes are hung to dry but where the important stuff of life happens. And as we learn through Grandma Blu, laundry isn't just about dirty shirts and socks; it's about coming clean on what we stand for and believe in. *The Clothesline Muse* is a work so densely rich with metaphor, symbolism and reference to the African diaspora that I, a white woman from the suburbs of Seattle, likely missed much of it. But no matter; the universality of the message was crystal clear: we are all connected by the actions of our ancestors, whose humble beginnings can yield rich rewards to future generations.

The set design by Maya Freelon Asante features her signature tissue paper/fabric artwork. The colorful swaths that draped the back wall of the stage created a stunning image that harmonized handily with the laundry theme. Her projection design, in collaboration with Chris Charles, flowed with archival images depicting African Americans and financial ledgers that gave the work historical heft.

Welsh's choreography brought kinetic dimension for a chorus of six white-clad women (Shaness Kemp, Adrienne Abdus-Salaam, Jessica Featherston, Stephanie Padilla, Sakarah Hall-Edge and Leila Anglin) whose movements in one section evoked the fluttering of laundry drying on the line. In another, the chorus employed a lively hand clapping game in a rollicking one-upmanship challenge. Grandma Blu recalled her experiences of lovemaking, which were humorously enacted by Kemp ironing a white shirt. Who knew sex could be described in the details of proper shirt ironing? Steam was in plentiful supply.

Freelon sings the African American spiritual, *There is a Balm in Gilead*. It is a song that asks for healing and grace and Freelon soars with it; her powerful presence anchors the show. In her fantasy talk show, "What's On Your Line?...it all comes out in the wash," Freelon as Blu supports, admonishes and guides her guests to spiritual wholeness by leading them to the righteous path found in good laundry practices. If you put your expensive wool sweater in hot water, then you need to pay closer attention to care instructions. If you stole a designer shirt from your neighbor's hanging laundry, you have most definitely...crossed the line.

Appearing many times throughout the work is a woman who wears a long touring coat (circa 1900?). She carries a bundle atop her head and glides ghost-like through various scenes. Towards the end of the piece, Grandma Blu follows her from the stage in a solemn processional. Mary Mack is left to pick up the symbolic line: which she does with love, clarity and understanding. *The Clothesline Muse* is a fully realized work that I found deeply gratifying. The line, in the end, connected and closed, forming a perfect circle.

The Clothesline Muse, a collaboration between Kariamuw Welsh, Nnenna Freelon and Maya Freelon Asante, The Painted Bride Art Center, March 14-16, 2014.

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