

Lincoln Center - Harlem Week

Davóne Tines introduction

I'm Davóne Tines and I wanted to take a second to introduce myself and what we're contributing to Harlem Week. I like to think of Langston Hughes as the writer of the lyrics that played to the tunes of the Harlem Renaissance. He was such a pervasive figure during that time who brilliantly synthesized and honored so much of black history and culture and enshrined its nuanced glory in his words.

Right now, I'm working with the director Zack Winokur on a podcast for Lincoln Center that dives deep into Langston Hughes' poem "The Black Clown." I wanted to introduce you to this incredible poem and to our podcast's theme song.

First, let me introduce myself.

I grew up in the Virginia countryside living in a hundred year old house with my grandparents. My grandparents grew up in the same area at the end of the Jim Crow era. They were the children of sharecroppers who were the children of house servants, who were the children of slaves.

As a young couple, they left home to travel the world because of my grandfather's career in the navy that began with him as a cook, and ended with him as a Chief Warrant Officer at the Pentagon. My grandmother brought up their three children, including my mom, in a life that catapulted my family, in a single generation, from farmers to college graduates. —Because of this, I had the freedom and the privilege to attend Harvard University and Juilliard, and then pursue a career as an opera singer that has morphed into a life of creating what I hope is socially engaged, and genre-bending artwork.

The most personal and important example of that work so far is the music theater piece called The Black Clown. The show is an adaptation of Langston

Hughes' poem by the same name, which I made with an incredible group of colleagues in 2018.

It premiered at the American Repertory Theater in 2018 and went on to Lincoln Center in the 2019 season of the Mostly Mozart Festival. The process of creating this work cracked open ideas and understanding for me, the cast, and the creative team that made spaces for conversations for unpacking America's legacy of oppression, and sparked, for many of us, the seeing of a path forward.

In writing *The Black Clown*, Langston Hughes gave to the world an unparalleled documentation and embrace of Black history and experience.

For this poem, and four others in a volume titled "The Negro Mother," Hughes invented a unique structure where there are two columns.

One is titled "The Poem" on the right hand side of the page and the other is titled "The Mood," on the left hand side. "The poem" column tells the story of black people in America while "The Mood" column instructs the reader on how the story should be performed. The mood reads almost like stage directions, giving ideas for the kinds of music that should accompany the performance, the posture the performer should take, and clear outlining of the emotional shifts in the story.

Discovering this poem was like being struck by lightning because of how it so directly mapped onto my own life experience, and how I thought it could map onto the experiences of so many others whose stories have yet to be heard.

If there was anything I ever wanted to stand in front of an audience and say, it would be these words.

It's a masterpiece that I want to share with as many people as possible. Soon you'll hear a new recording of the poem which will be played on every episode of the podcast. It's a collaboration between me and the cast members, and brings the poem to life movin' between speaking and singing that reflects the poem's "Mood" column. The music is composed of some mini arrangements from our stage show.

I'd also love for you to enjoy a new recording of the song "Say to All Foeman." It's an ecstatic gospel song that is the musical finale of our stage show, and that we remotely recorded during this pandemic a few weeks back—all spread across the country. After the entire journey of walking through black history; after looking back and marching through the past in order to understand our present, Hughes gives us a glimpse of the ultimate goal: for Black people to be free of playing a clown, to, as Hughes says in the "mood" column of the poem:

Tear off the clown's suit, throw down the hat of a fool and stand forth, straight, and strong in the clothes of a modern man. And to proclaim one's self.

In the poem, Hughes proclaims: "Say to all foemen, you can't keep me down, tear off the garments that make me a clown—rise from the bottom out of the slime—look to the stars out yonder calling thru time."

So looking ahead, every week on the podcast, I will be joined by members of the cast and creative team, as well as a host of special guests whose work intersects with Hughes's words (the playwright Jeremy O. Harris joins me for the first episode!). Every episode we'll take a section of the poem and explore and tell stories on the themes brought up by that excerpt.

To put it bluntly, though, I'm making this in an effort to help end racism.

To be utterly clear, let's define racism. I appreciate Dr. Camara Phyllis Jones's definition. She's a leading American physician, epidemiologist, civil rights activist, and a past-president of the American Public Health Association. She defines racism as:

"a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks."

This poem has shown me that it is critical that people engage each other in the context of their entire history. I deeply believe that one of the only ways that we can end racism and move towards a better society is for people to have an acknowledgement of, and an understanding of, and an appreciation of the ancestral history and the psychological context from which black people come.

Hughes' poem allows us to clearly and deftly see that context and history.

I invite you to witness a process of exposing and unpacking oppression as a means toward ending it.

And now, a reading of the poem followed by the song "Say to All Foeman"...

The Black Clown

by Langston Hughes

A dramatic monologue to be spoken by a pure blooded negro in the white suit and hat of a clown to the music of a piano or an orchestra:

You laugh.
Because I'm poor and black and funny—
Not the same as you—
Because my mind is dull
And dice instead of books will do
For me to play with
When the day is through.

I am the fool of the whole world.
Laugh and push me down.
Only in song and laughter
I rise again—a black clown.

Strike up the music.
Let it be gay.
Only in joy
Can a clown have his day.

Three hundred years
In the cotton and the cane,
Plowing and reaping

With no gain—
Empty handed as I began.

A slave—under the whip,
Beaten and sore.
God! Give me laughter
That I can stand more.

God! Give me the spotted
Garments of a clown
So that the pain and the shame
Will not pull me down.

Freedom!
Abe Lincoln done set me free—
One little moment
To dance with glee.

Then sadness again—
No land, no house, no job,
No place to go.
Black—in a white world
Where cold winds blow.

The long struggle for life:
No schools, no work—
Not wanted here; not needed there—
Black—you can die.
Nobody will care—

Yet clinging to the ladder,
Round by round,
Trying to climb up,
Forever pushed down.

Day after day

White spit in my face—
Worker and clown am I
For the “civilized” race.

Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!
Scorn crushing me down.
Laugh at me! Laugh at me!
Just a black clown!

Laugh at me then,
All the world round—
From Africa to Georgia
I’m only a clown!

But no! Not forever
Like this will I be:
Here are my hands
That can really make me free!

Suffer and struggle.
Work, pray, and fight.
Smash my way through
To Manhood’s true right.

Say to all foemen:
You can’t keep me down!
Tear off the garments
That make me a clown!

Rise from the bottom,
Out of the slime!
Look at the stars yonder
Calling through time!

Cry to the world
That all might understand:

I was once a black clown
But now—
I'm a man!

Say To All Foemen

LAVON FISHER-WILSON

Say to all foemen:
You can't keep me down!

DAVÓNE TINES / THE BLACK CLOWN

Tear off those garments
That make me a clown!

LAVON AND DAVÓNE

Oh, that make me a clown!

CHORUS

Say, say, say to all foemen:
You can't keep me down!
Tear, tear, tear off those garments

DAVÓNE

Tear off those garments

CHORUS

That make me a clown!

DAVÓNE

That make me a clown!

CHORUS

Oh, that make me a clown!

LAVON

Say to all foemen:
You can't keep me down!
Tear down those garments
That make me a clown!

Say to all foemen:
You can't keep me down!
Tear down those garments
That make me a clown!
Say!

CHORUS

Say, say, say to all foemen:
You can't keep me down!

Tear, tear, tear off the garments
That make me a clown!
Oh, that make me a clown!

DAWN BLESS

Say to all foemen:
You can't keep me down!
Tear off the garments
That make me a clown!

Say, say to all foemen:
You can't keep me down!
Tear off the garments
That make me a clown!

CHORUS

Say, say, say to all foemen:
Oh no, no you can't keep me down!

DAVÓNE

You can't keep me down

CHORUS

Can't keep me down!

Can't keep me down!

Can't keep me down!

Tear, tear, tear, tear off the garments

DAVÓNE

That make me a clown!

CHORUS

Oh, that make me a clown!

DAWN

That make me-

CHORUS

That make me-

LAVON

I said that make me-

CHORUS

That make me-

That make me a clown

DAVÓNE

And rise from the bottom

Out of the slime

And rise from the bottom

Out of the slime

And rise!

CHORUS

Rise from the bottom

Out of the slime
Rise from the bottom

DAVÓNE

And rise!

CHORUS

Out of the slime
Rise from the bottom

DAVÓNE

Rise!

CHORUS

Out of the slime

DAVÓNE

And rise!

CHORUS

Rise from the bottom
Out of the slime

DAVÓNE

And rise!

CHORUS

Rise from the bottom

LAVON

From the bottom!

CHORUS

Out of the slime
And rise from the bottom
Out of the slime

DAVÓNE

And rise!

CHORUS

Foemen you can't keep me down

Foemen you can't keep me down

Foemen you can't keep me down

DAVÓNE

Foemen

you can't

keep me

me down

CHORUS

Foemen

you can't

keep me

me down

Foemen

you can't

keep me

me down

Foemen

you can't

keep me

me down

Foemen

you can't

keep me

me down

Rise
From the bottom!
Rise
From the bottom!
Rise out of the slime

Rise
From the bottom!
Rise
From the bottom!
Rise out of the slime
Oh-

DAVÓNE

Look at the stars out yonder

CHORUS

Look at the stars out yonder

DAVÓNE

Look-

CHORUS

Look-

DAVÓNE

at the stars-

CHORUS

at the stars-

DAVÓNE

out yonder

CHORUS

Calling through time!

Calling through time!
Calling through time!

DAVÓNE

Call- calling

CHORUS

Calling, calling
Calling, calling
Calling, calling
Calling through time, time!

DAVÓNE

Calling-

CHORUS

Calling-

DAVÓNE

Calling-

CHORUS

Calling-

CHORUS

Calling through time!

The Black Clown cast
Davóne Tines, Ensemble
Sumayya Ali, Ensemble
Darius Barnes, Ensemble
Dawn Bless, Ensemble
Jonathan Christopher, Ensemble
LaVon Fisher-Wilson, Ensemble
Lindsey Hailes, Ensemble
Evan Tyrone Martin, Ensemble

Jhardon DiShon Martin, Ensemble

Brandon Michael Nase, Ensemble

Jamar Williams, Ensemble

Hailee Kaleem Wright, Ensemble

Jaret Landon, Music Director

Quinton "Q" Robinson, Drummer

Demonterious "DETOXXX" Lawrence, Bass