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York College, CUNY Dramatizes Langston Hughes Poems

By Cindy Hicks, York Journalism Student

In honor of Black History Month, York College's Department of Performing and Fine Arts recently presented a tribute to the poet Langston Hughes through live jazz and his unforgettable words.

Throughout the 55-minute program in the Milton G. Bassin Performing Arts Center, performers read and/or dramatized more than 50 poems from the Hughes canon.

“Langston Hughes in Harlem” a play that took audience members back to a time when Harlem was thriving culturally and artistically. It was the era known as The Harlem Renaissance; and Hughes was an integral part of the movement. The neighborhood drew attention with its unique clothing, art, plays, novels and music, creating a unique black cultural identity and the play effortlessly captured the essence of that era.

The Project was directed by York College Assistant Professor, Thomas Marion, a member of the theatre department. The memorable music was provided by outside composers Neal Kirkwood and Harry Mann. They opened the presentation with a short piano piece from Duke Ellington, reminiscent of the jazz age in Harlem. Music continued to accompany the poetry and set the mood all the way through.

Hughes, born February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri became one of the most famous black writers of his time. He contributed to the Harlem Renaissance with insightful poems, plays and short stories that reflected the changes in African-American culture. With his creation of jazz poetry Hughes brought something new and hip to the art form. He wrote poetry about real life in black communities. Although many African Americans didn't agree with his brutal honesty, his work importantly captured the changes of the time. His themes focused on the dreams of African Americans and brought much-needed attention to previously hidden issues.

One Queens resident found the presentation to be both creative and smart.

“I love the way they put it together,” said Angie Mendez. “It made Hughes' work seem more modern, as if he wrote those poems yesterday.”

The general public joined York students, faculty and staff for the play. For many, this would be the first time hearing poems like “Dream Boogie” “Night Funeral in Harlem” and his famous question, “What happens to a dream deferred?” Poems were grouped together in special categories for the play. They included Hughes' dream series, love, religion and Harlem's night life.

York alumnus Peter Jones, who majored in Black Studies, came to see the play after discovering it on the Performing Arts Center's website. Jones, like other audience members, smiled and laughed throughout the play when Hughes' poems were acted out, but turned serious when touchy subjects like poverty were brought up.

Most of the cast members were highly talented, professional actors and singers. The cast included outside pros like **Danielle Aziza, Adrian Kiser, Noel Boone**; as well as York graduates **Shakeerah Fredericks, Phil John, Russell Jordan, and Solomon Peck**, who also had key roles. Each actor played a specific role, where they recited a poem, danced, or sang. Perhaps one of the best moments of the play was Fredericks belting a Hughes poem, as she sat center stage in a darkened theatre with just a spotlight beaming down on her.

There have been some recent questions about whether Black History Month should still even be celebrated. This project seems to show exactly why these celebrations are necessary. They often bring back forgotten works of crucial Black Americans.



Phil John and Shakeerah Fredericks in a scene from the play

Elizabeth Dennis, a York College Health Education junior attended the play agreed and immediately saw its value.

"Although this is not my first time hearing Hughes poems, this play reminded me why he played such a big part in Black culture," said Dennis. "is sometimes necessary to revisit the past to remind us [of] why this part of Black culture should still be celebrated and appreciated, and I think this is what the presentation did for me."

The play was uplifting, encouraging and seemed truly essential for those who value Black culture and for those who need to know.