

The little girl
who lived in
the library

FEEDING THE DRAGON

Written and Performed by
Sharon Washington

Directed by **Maria Mileaf**

Her Story Speaks Volumes

STUDY GUIDE OBJECTIVES

This study guide serves as a classroom tool for teachers and students, and addresses the following standards:

COMMON CORE STANDARDS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Reading Literature: *Key Ideas and Details*

- **Grades 9-10:** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **Grades 9-10:** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

Reading Literature: *Craft and Structure*

- **Grades 9-10:** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful (include Shakespeare as well as other authors).

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS FOR THEATRE

Theatre/Creating

- **TH:Cr1.1.HSII-b.** Investigate the collaborative nature of the actor, director, playwright, and designers and explore their interdependent roles in a drama/theatre work.

Theatre/Responding

- **TH:Re7.1.HSI-a.** Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-a.** Analyze and compare artistic choices developed from personal experiences in multiple drama/theatre works.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-b.** Identify and compare cultural perspectives and contexts that may influence the evaluation of a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-c.** Justify personal aesthetics, preferences, and beliefs through participation in and observation of a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSIII-b.** Use new understandings of cultures and contexts to shape personal responses to drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re9.1.HSI-b.** Consider the aesthetics of the production elements in a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re9.1.HSI-c.** Formulate a deeper understanding and appreciation of a drama/theatre work by considering its specific purpose or intended audience.

Theatre/Connecting

- **TH:Cn10.1.HSI-a.** Investigate how cultural perspectives, community ideas and personal beliefs impact a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Cn11.2.HSI-b.** Use basic theatre research methods to better understand the social and cultural background of a drama/theatre work.

GUIDELINES FOR ATTENDING THE THEATRE

Attending live theatre is a unique experience with many valuable educational and social benefits. To ensure that all audience members are able to enjoy the performance, please take a few minutes to discuss the following audience etiquette topics with your students before you come to Hartford Stage.

- How is attending the theatre similar to and different from going to the movies? What behaviors are and are not appropriate when seeing a play? Why?
 - › Remind students that because the performance is live, the audience affects the performance. No two audiences are exactly the same and no two performances are exactly the same—this is part of what makes theatre so special!
- Theatre should be an enjoyable experience for the audience. Audience members are more than welcome to applaud when appropriate and laugh at the funny moments. Talking and calling out during the performance, however, are not allowed. Why might this be?
 - › Be sure to mention that not only would the people seated around them be able to hear their conversation, but the actors on stage could hear them, too. Theatres are constructed to carry sound efficiently!
- Any noise or light can be a distraction, so please remind students to make sure their cell phones are turned off. Texting, photography, and video recording are prohibited. Food and gum should not be taken into the theatre.
- Students should sit with their group as seated by the Front of House staff and should not leave their seats once the performance has begun.

Sharon Washington: Going Solo

By Krista DeVellis

Solo performances through the years have included lectures, vaudeville acts, stand-up comedians, magicians, and plays. Edgar Allen Poe, Alexander Graham Bell, Charles Dickens, and Mark Twain were all known during their time to give entertaining and enlightening lectures. Today, stand-up comedians such as Sarah Silverman, Aziz Ansari, and Tig Notaro tell their stories and jokes to adoring fans. Most solo performers break the fourth wall, meaning they speak directly to the audience. The performers often tell the audience a story, and may even interact with the audience as they perform.

While it can seem like solo performers have created everything themselves, they may not be the only ones involved in a production. Producers, directors, writers, musicians, and designers can all play a role in the creation of a one-person-show. However, unlike shows with multiple actors, ultimately the solo performer is the driving force. In the article “A ‘Cast of One:’ The History, Art and Nature of the One-Person Show,” Paula T. Alekson, a dramaturg with the McCarter Theatre, states, “Regardless of their mode or form, one-person shows give the solo performer power, control, and complete responsibility over the work in performance.”

In *Feeding the Dragon*, the cast includes only one person: Sharon Washington. Sharon has a unique situation in that she is a professional actor, telling her own story. She plays nearly 20 characters in the play, all people that she remembers from her childhood. Growing up in the library, Sharon developed a love of stories. When she was young, she would act out her own imaginary dramas amongst the stacks of books. “My best friend Esther and I would dream up these elaborate stories that we played out downstairs in the empty library,” she says in the play. She goes on to explain that St. Agnes Library was “the perfect performance space for my very first improv exercises.” She went to Dartmouth College for her BA and received her MFA from the Yale School of Drama.



Sharon Washington in City Theatre's 2016 production of *Feeding the Dragon*. Photo by Kristi Jan Hoover.

She has since performed on many stages across the country, including playing opposite Denzel Washington in *Richard III* and Christopher Walken in *Coriolanus* in the New York Shakespeare Festival. You might also spot Sharon on television. She has a reoccurring role as a judge on *Law & Order: SVU*, and has guest starred on shows such as *Blue Bloods*, *The Blacklist*, *Gotham*, *Golden Boy*, *White Collar*, and *Royal Pains*. Her film credits include roles in *Wiener Dog*, *The Bourne Legacy*, *Michael Clayton*, *The School of Rock*, *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, *Malcolm X*, and *Die Hard with a Vengeance*.

In between her film and television performances, Sharon chose to write her own solo show in order to tell her family's story. Sharon explained that she wanted to “keep the story alive” through her writing: “I want to preserve the history for me and everyone else” (Hanes). She is also in the process of turning her story into a children's book, which along with her play, will keep her family's story on library shelves for years to come.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How many different characters do you think you could play in one story? What would you use or do to differentiate between roles?
2. Why do you think Sharon Washington chose to play all of the roles herself rather than with multiple actors?
3. What would be the hardest thing about performing solo? What would be the easiest?
4. How would this play be different if another actress performed it?



The Carnegie Libraries

By Krista DeVellis

Andrew Carnegie was an immigrant from Scotland who earned his fortune by expanding the steel industry. He donated most of his money to various causes, including the funds for nearly 3,000 libraries built throughout the world at the turn of the 20th century. Even Connecticut had eleven libraries built with Carnegie's funding, some of which are still in use. When he was a young man, Carnegie frequented the library of Colonel James Anderson, where he was allowed to read and study from Anderson's private collection. This opportunity inspired Carnegie to provide a similar service to future generations.

In New York City alone, Carnegie donated \$5,200,000 to build 39 branches of the New York Public Library system. With the technology of the time, these buildings were all made with a coal furnace heating system. This meant that there needed to be a custodian available at all times to keep the furnace lit. To house these custodians and their families, the Carnegie Libraries were all constructed with an apartment in the upper levels. Through the years, the heating systems have been updated, and the apartments have been vacated one by one as the custodians retire. Most apartments have been removed and updated into more functional library space. Today only thirteen are left, with peeling paint and a few vague reminders that someone once lived there.

ST. AGNES LIBRARY

St. Agnes Library started as a parish library at St. Agnes Chapel on West 91st Street in 1893 and opened its doors to the public in 1894. There were a few temporary locations of the St. Agnes Free Library until it became a part of The New York Public Library system as one of the Carnegie libraries. In 1906, the St. Agnes branch officially opened its doors at 444 Amsterdam Avenue, where it continues to provide library services for the community to this day.

The building was constructed with three floors of library space, a basement that housed the coal furnace, and the custodial apartment on the top floor for the library's caretaker. The building was one of six Carnegie Libraries designed by the architectural firm Babb, Cook and Willard. In 2010, the St. Agnes branch was renovated to enhance the original architecture's beauty and to update the space's technology. To improve the aesthetics of the library, the marble staircases, wood floors, arched windows, and wooden bookcases were all replaced or restored to their former glory. To bring the library into the modern age, 40 computers, free Wi-Fi and an elevator were installed. The space that was formerly the custodial apartment is now used to support mechanical operations. The air conditioning and heating systems were also upgraded, and there is now a space in the basement dedicated to selling books, rather than to feeding the furnace.

1901

Andrew Carnegie offers \$5.2 million in funds to create branch libraries across the five boroughs of New York City.

1906

The St. Agnes branch of the New York Public Library opens to the public at the 444 Amsterdam Avenue location.

1964

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs The Civil Rights Act of 1964, thus ending segregation and employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Prior to this legislation, African-Americans were not permitted to use the same public spaces as whites, including local libraries.

1965

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited racial discrimination in regards to voting. Before this act, there were many legal barriers at the state and local levels that barred African-Americans from voting in elections, even though the 15th Amendment of the Constitution gave them the right to vote.

1968

Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, TN.

1969

Sharon Washington's family moves into the St. Agnes branch of the New York Public Library.

1971

Peak of the Black is Beautiful natural hair movement; black news anchor, Melba Tolliver, is taken off the air for refusing to cover up her afro; race riots take place in East LA, Bridgeport, Chattanooga, Albuquerque, Oxnard, Riverside, and Camden.

1973

The Washington family transfers to the Yorkville Branch of the NYPL on the East Side.

1981

Sharon Washington graduates from Dartmouth College with a Bachelor of Arts.

1988

Sharon Washington graduates from Yale University with a Master of Fine Arts.

2006

The last New York Public Library live-in caretaker retires.

2016

Feeding the Dragon premieres at City Theatre in Pittsburgh, PA.

2018

Feeding the Dragon is produced at Hartford Stage.

THE APARTMENT

The custodial apartment that Sharon and her family lived in from 1969 until 1973 sat above the third floor of the library. The family had keys to the front door of the library, as they would have to pass through the first three floors, up the stately marble steps, to reach the entrance to the apartment. In the play, Sharon describes this: “there was a heavy wooden door with a brass plate marked ‘PRIVATE.’ The door that separated our world from the public world of the library. It was like stepping through a portal.” After passing through that door, one would have to walk up two more flights of stairs to enter the apartment. Inside, one would find three bedrooms, a bathroom, an eat-in kitchen, and a large living room. “Our apartment in the library was big,” Sharon says, “huge by New York City standards.” The family also had access to the library’s roof, which was surrounded by 15-foot-high walls.



The exterior of the St. Agnes Library Branch.

Code-Switching: The Roles We Play Every Day

By Sara Berliner

Pop quiz! You are walking down the street and see someone you know. How do you greet them? The answer to this question depends on a variety of factors. Your greeting to a parent would be different than your greeting to a teacher, a friend, or a neighbor. Each conversation might include words, phrases, and speech patterns that you only use in certain places or with specific people. Each of those patterns can be considered their own language, or “code.” When you change which language you use based on context, you are “code-switching.”

Linguists study the ways in which humans use language, and some specialize in code-switching. They often use the term to describe speakers of multiple languages choosing which to use. For example, Sharon’s father code-switches when he counts during different jobs using Greek and Yiddish (a hybrid of Hebrew and German spoken by Eastern-European Jews). But some code switches are less obvious. The specific language that Sharon and her family use together could be considered its own code, including the phrase “case closed” and references to the “quittin’ time” scene in *Gone with the Wind*. In their article “Recommendations to Public Speaking Instructors,” linguists Deric Greene and Felicia Walker use “code-switching” to refer to “the alternation between two different languages, two tonal registers, or a dialectical shift within the same language.” It is important to note that a dialect is not inherently “lesser, informal, or ungrammatical,” but a valid “variety of language associated with a particular regional or social group” (Coffey). When Sharon’s grandmother uses phrases that are rendered in the script like “in yah cah sid down” or “g’wan on out dere and sit wit’ she,” there is nothing “wrong” with the way she is speaking; it is the dialect of her community.

CODE-SWITCHING:

Alternating between two or more languages or ways of speaking.

DIALECT:

A regional variety of language distinguished by changes in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

So, why do we code-switch? Often, we don’t even realize it is happening. Sharon writes that when the Watermelon Man goes inside to speak with her father, “after a while they started to sound the same—I almost couldn’t understand Daddy anymore. But what I did understand was that he sounded like himself.” George King Washington most likely doesn’t make a conscious decision to start speaking in a different way. He automatically switches to his old community’s code because he feels safe and relaxed, and is with others who understand it.

Code-switching can also be an act of survival. When entering the new world of Dalton, “a world way across town on the Upper East Side, an area known for wealth and luxury and old

money,” Sharon says, “I perfected my code-switching skills on my own. Early. And fast.” A new way of speaking becomes necessary for her to fit in with her new community. It isn’t easy for her; her mother insists that she be polite among peers who “can afford to be rude.” At Dalton, Sharon code-switches so that she stands out less in a crowd of students very different from her and establishes her right to be there. School isn’t the only place in her life where she must do this. On her trip to visit Southern relatives, she encounters a new world of language. One feature of it is a distinctive greeting written in the script as “ehhhh” rather than “hey.” Sharon attempts to imitate it as part of trying to belong in a new, strange situation. At times like these, code-switching is a tool. It can be used to reflect, or conceal, one’s identity and background, and secure social status, reputation, or a feeling of belonging.

Sharon also faces the consequences of failing to code-switch while in South Carolina. Her mother is “big on manners...on being ‘well-behaved.’” To Mrs. Washington, this means being polite and not calling attention to one’s self. Yet when Sharon arrives in a new environment, her manners are almost immediately criticized. Her aunt says that Sharon’s way of speaking is “a sign of no home training and a sure way to get you a smack across the mouth.” Sharon quickly learns that “there is no such thing as ‘Yeah,’ there’s only ‘Yes Ma’am’ or ‘No Ma’am.’” Her mother raised her to be well-behaved, but politeness now has a different definition that Sharon must learn in order to avoid punishment. The changes in how we speak reflect changes in behavior and world view between distinct settings.

As the little girl who lives in the library, Sharon uses the language of books as reference points while trying to understand her place in the world. She grows up immersed in words and surrounded by adults that both limit her ways of speaking and expand them with new understandings. Some of the codes she switches between are affectionate, like the private jokes of her family, or fun, like the heightened, melodramatic scripts of performances with her best friend Esther. Others represent the conflicts and intersections of Sharon’s identity and family history—the languages of the Upper West Side and the Upper East Side, New York and South Carolina, the wealthy world of Dalton and the family that buys on credit and from thrift stores. In *Feeding the Dragon*, code-switching serves variously as a sign of comfort, a strategy for success, and a tool for survival for Sharon and all the characters she embodies.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When do you code-switch? Are you aware of it when it happens?
2. What are the pros and cons of code-switching?
3. Some reasons listed for code-switching include consciously trying to fit in with a group, or unconsciously returning to a pattern of speech because you feel safe to do so. Why else do people code-switch?
4. Linguists and educators debate the distinction between slang, dialect, and language, and the role each plays in the classroom. Do you agree that students should only learn and use one way of speaking in school? If so, how should we decide which code is correct?

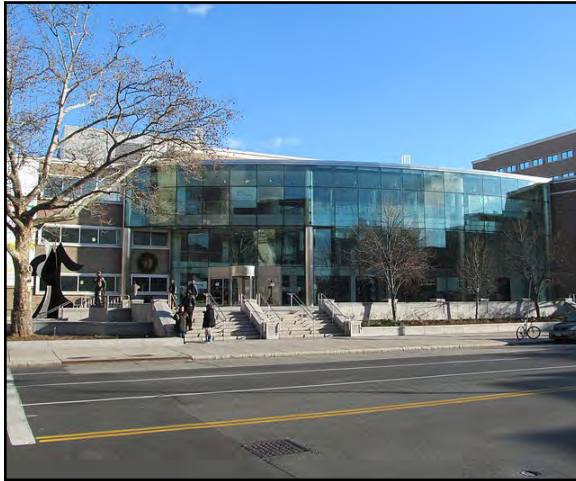
The Evolution of Libraries as Community Spaces

By Julia Paolino

Created to fill the need to store important documents and artifacts, libraries have existed for almost as long as the written word itself. The very first libraries consisted of clay tablets with cuneiform script, some dating back as early as 2600 B.C. (Casson). Yet public libraries have a far more recent history. Before these institutions were funded through taxes and free for all, libraries served and were supported by the elite and educated members of society. Individuals often needed to purchase a membership to a private library and provide evidence of certain professional and scholarly qualifications in order to gain access. The first public library in the United States

opened in 1833 in Peterborough, New Hampshire. The Boston Public Library, which officially opened in 1854, is considered the first large public library, and granted borrowing access to all Massachusetts residents (Brady & Abbott). Between 1881 and 1919, Scottish-American businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie funded the construction of more than 1,700 public libraries in the United States. Carnegie also specifically allotted \$5.2 million to create a system of branch libraries throughout the five boroughs of New York City (Mouyios & Majumdar). This donation led to the establishment of 39 branches, including the St. Agnes branch where *Feeding the Dragon* takes place.

At their core, public libraries are intended to provide all citizens with access to knowledge and information. People of any age, race, and socio-economic status can utilize the tools and resources



Hartford Public Library's downtown branch. Photo by John Phelan.

available in their local library. Benjamin Franklin saw libraries as the tools to develop politically engaged citizens. He stated that libraries can lead to an “even distribution of intellectual wealth, the establishment of an intellectual democracy” (Barlow). This dedication to the “right to know” has caused libraries throughout history to expand their services in order to provide greater access for their local communities. In 1872, the Worcester Massachusetts Public Library stayed open on Sundays in order to serve those who worked six-day weeks. During the 1930s, librarians in Kentucky filled bags with books and rode horses to deliver them to citizens in the more rural parts of the state (Morris). Throughout the Great Depression, libraries became known as the “bread lines of the spirit” because they continued to provide a place of imagination and escape

during such difficult times. In fact, circulation at the public libraries in many large cities increased by 33% throughout the Depression, while budgets decreased by the same amount (Barlow).

With the development of the internet and other informational technology, many people thought that libraries would soon become obsolete. If any information one could want, including books themselves, can be accessed electronically, what’s the point of having a local library? Yet, today’s public libraries provide far more than books; they are vibrant community centers offering a variety of resources and opportunities. Rather than viewing technology as a threat, librarians embraced it as a new tool to provide equal access for their communities. They acknowledged that the internet was the key to a whole world of knowledge and those who were not privileged to have private access to it would be left behind. Thus, public libraries began to provide free access to computers and the internet in order to address this “digital divide.” Today, 100% of public libraries in the U.S. offer free internet with 90.5% offering Wi-Fi. 64.5% of public libraries state that they are the only provider of free Internet access in their local community (“Community Access and Public Libraries”). Through this internet access, many libraries provide online resources such as databases, homework help, e-books, videos, audio content, and digital reference services.

While expanding resources and technology, libraries have also continued to ensure that they are reaching out to all members of their communities. Many libraries support non-English speakers by providing access to books and other materials in a variety of languages, posting accessible signage, and seeking out staff members who are multilingual. They provide information and support for immigrants looking to connect with their new community, often offering specific classes and programs. In recent years, libraries have proven themselves as strong allies to the LGBTQIA community by providing patrons, especially teenagers, with a safe space to access resources, information, and support. Staying up to date on the latest technology has also helped libraries to provide inclusive support for patrons with disabilities of all kinds. Many libraries develop programs specifically for these groups and some have several staff members who are fluent in American Sign Language (Edwards). Most importantly, everything offered by public libraries is free, which allows all community members access to the same services, regardless of financial status.

Our very own Hartford Public Library is a shining example of how the local library has become an incredible community space. HPL offers an abundance of services and programs for kids, teens, parents, adults, immigrants, job seekers, and nonprofits. Some specific services include: support with the citizenship application, English language instruction, computer skills instruction, voter and election information, resources for formerly incarcerated people, assistance with school choice, college scholarship resources, homework help, and literacy resources. Teens may be especially interested in the YOUMedia Hartford program, a “digital learning and maker space for teens ages 13-19 only.” The program offers access to professional tools and experienced mentors in music production, video and photography, programming, game design, 3D printing, sewing, jewelry making, crafts, and more. Learn more at www.youmedia.hplct.org and check out all the Hartford Public Library has to offer at www.hplct.org.

Public libraries have certainly evolved tremendously with the development of technology, but their core purpose has remained the same: to provide free and equal access to information for all members of the community. Not much in life comes free, but with a local public library, the possibilities are endless.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are some of the ways you think public libraries act as social equalizers?
2. Which programs does your library offer? How is the space an asset to your community?
3. How can libraries continue to grow and expand with developing technology?
4. What community programs would you like to see at your local library?
5. How can you advocate for public libraries in your community and the country at large?

HARTFORD STAGE ANNOUNCES PARTNERSHIP WITH HARTFORD PUBLIC LIBRARY

Starting this year with *Feeding the Dragon*, Hartford Stage will be partnering with Hartford Public Library to provide a Library Pass program for Hartford Public Library card holders to check out and reserve complimentary theatre tickets to all Hartford Stage productions. The passes will be available at each library branch. Two tickets for each public performance will be set aside for each library branch, making approximately 4,000 tickets available to Hartford residents. The multi-tiered partnership also includes a Neighborhood Ambassador Program enabling residents nominated by their library branches to represent their communities at Hartford Stage and discuss how themes of upcoming productions intersect with current civic or social issues in Hartford. The Hartford Stage-Hartford Public Library partnership is made possible, in part, through a generous grant from the Robert and Margaret Patricelli Family Foundation.

“The goal of these programs is to provide access to Hartford Stage productions to all residents of Hartford,” says Michael Stotts, Managing Director of Hartford Stage. “Partnering with the Hartford Public Library branches will ensure fair distribution of tickets across all neighborhoods, and the Ambassador Program will deepen civic engagement with our programs and productions.”

Who Wrote That Quote?

By Sara Berliner

Growing up in a library, Sharon's imagination and understanding of the world was shaped by lines from books. These are a few that she references in the play.

“Fairy tales are more than true—not because they tell us dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten.”

This quote is not said aloud onstage during Sharon Washington's *Feeding the Dragon*, but it is written on the first page of the script, the first piece of information after the title and playwright's name. It is an epigraph—a short quote or saying that comes before a piece of writing and is connected to its themes. This epigraph comes from contemporary author Neil Gaiman. Although he does not mean it as literally as Sharon, Gaiman describes himself as a “feral child raised in libraries.”

“Quittin’ time, quittin’ time...”

The scene that Sharon and her father re-enact together comes from *Gone with the Wind*, a movie that premiered in 1939. It was based on a 1936 novel of the same name by Margaret Mitchell. *Gone with the Wind* tells the story of the physical and economic destruction that happened in the American South during and after the Civil War, when many white Southerners who had owned slaves and plantations found themselves ruined. The title *Gone with the Wind* comes from a poem by English writer Ernest Dowson, where the speaker wistfully recalls past love and loss.

“I loved watching Daddy work. He was like a knight from my *Blue Fairy* book—St. George and the Dragon.”

The *Blue Fairy* book is a collection of fairy tales, including the classic English story of St. George. A young maiden was about to be eaten by a dragon that had been terrorizing her community. George stepped in and saved the day by charging the dragon with his lance. In some versions, he tamed the dragon so that it faithfully obeyed the woman it originally planned to eat. George King Washington mimics this action in Sharon's eyes by taming the snarling, fiery beast of the furnace.

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness.” —W.E.B. Dubois

W.E.B. Dubois was an author, activist, historian, and founding officer of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In his collection of essays called *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dubois describes the concept of double-consciousness as the experience of being “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” It is the painful necessity of looking at one's self through the eyes of others, including their prejudices and stereotypes, which can hurt one's self-image.

***“Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.”
—Langston Hughes***



Sharon Washington in City Theatre's 2016 production of *Feeding the Dragon*. Photo by Kristi Jan Hoover.

Langston Hughes was a writer known for helping to create the style known as “jazz poetry,” inspired by the rhythms and sounds of jazz and blues. In the autobiography he published in 1940, Hughes wrote: “I was unhappy for a long time, and very lonesome...Then it was that books began to happen to me, and I began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world in books—where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did.” Like Sharon, books provided him with a world of dreams that was necessary for survival.

“Zora Neale Hurston wrote...‘I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother’s side was not an Indian chief.’”

Zora Neale Hurston was an author and anthropologist. Although today she is well-known for her novels, she also wrote essays, poems, plays, and folklore collections. This quote comes from *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* (1928), an essay about her relationship with racial identity. Her thoughts differ from W.E.B. Dubois’ notion of double-consciousness. In her essay she writes: “I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong...”

“When I found this book back in 6th grade, it was the first time I’d ever seen or heard of another black man named George Washington.”

This book is *George Washington Carver: The Wizard of Tuskegee*. Carver is most well-known for his research at the Tuskegee Institute, a college originally founded to educate African-American teachers. Seeing that over-reliance on cotton damaged the ecosystem and limited profits, Carver developed hundreds of new uses for peanuts and sweet potatoes so that local farmers could diversify their crops. A wagon that served as a mobile classroom brought his work directly to the people.

**“‘There was a little girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead,
And when she was good she was very very good, but
when she was bad she was horrid.’”**

Sharon Washington takes the curlers out of her hair on her childhood trip to Charleston, and incorporates a quote from a poem inspired by a young girl refusing to have her hair brushed. The poet is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who used his money and poetry to advocate for the abolishment of slavery, in part after being inspired by the social messages of Charles Dickens’ work, such as *A Christmas Carol*.

“Crossing the bridge into Charleston I thought I about Milo in *The Phantom Tollbooth*. ‘Suddenly he found himself speeding along an unfamiliar country highway, and as he looked back over his shoulder neither the tollbooth nor his room nor even the house was anywhere in sight.’”

In Norton Juster’s novel *The Phantom Tollbooth*, a young boy called Milo travels throughout the conflicted kingdom of Wisdom to rescue two princesses, Rhyme and Reason. Just as Sharon’s trip to the unfamiliar world of Charleston changes how she sees her father, Milo’s unusual journey

RESOURCES FOR ADDICTION RECOVERY

In the play, Sharon brings to light the story of her father’s struggle with alcoholism. If you know someone who needs help, check out these organizations.

CCAR (Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery) 866-205-9770

What? A centralized resource for all things recovery.

Highlight: Provides a peer-to-peer telephone recovery support line.

InterCommunity 860-714-3700

What? A same-day health center providing access to all forms of health care services and counseling, including addiction recovery.

Highlight: The hotline is open 24/7 to hear your story and point you in the right direction.

The Connection 855-435-7955

What? Partners with you and your loved ones to provide helpful programs, promote family wellness, and advocate for positive outcomes.

Highlight: Unique program blends family support services, behavioral health, and community justice services.

fundamentally alters his view of the world. Along the way, he encounters characters and places that bring wordplay to life. When the book was accused of being too difficult for children, Juster responded, “My feeling is that there is no such thing as a difficult word. There are only words you don’t know yet.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Neil Gaiman’s quote is included as an epigraph for the script? What does it say about Sharon Washington or *Feeding the Dragon*?
2. Sharon Washington quotes W.E.B. Dubois’ explanation of “double-consciousness,” which is partly about looking at one’s self through the eyes of others. Have you ever come to believe something about yourself because it is what others see when they look at you?
3. Langston Hughes’ poem encourages us to “hold fast to dreams.” What dreams do you hold on to?
4. Can you think of a time when, like Milo in *The Phantom Tollbooth* or Sharon as a child, you struggled to understand the choices and motivations of the adults around you?
5. Do you have a favorite quote from a book that seems to capture something about your own life or personality?

The Art of Transferring a Show: An Interview with Erin Keller, Properties Manager

Interviewed by Natalie Pertz



Erin Keller, Properties Manager at Hartford Stage, covered in prop snow made for *A Christmas Carol*—*A Ghost Story of Christmas*.

Q: *Feeding the Dragon* was originally performed at City Theatre in Pittsburgh, and is being transferred as an existing production to Hartford Stage. For the production team, what is this process like? How does it differ from mounting an original production?

A: It usually starts by communicating with the staff at the original producing theatre. They send us all the paperwork and photos associated with their production and we talk back and forth about what they’re sending and what we’ll be responsible for. As an example, if there are newspapers in a show, sometimes the other theatre will send enough newspapers to last us through the run and sometimes they’ll send us a file and we’ll print them off ourselves. Then, we coordinate shipping and wait for the truck to arrive. Usually there is a shorter rehearsal process once they’re onsite and most of the time, very few changes are made. It’s a completely different process from when we originate a show. [When we transfer a show] we typically don’t do any of the sourcing or building that comes with

mounting a show, and we usually talk less with the designer and more with the stage management team.

Q: As props master, what is your favorite part of actualizing an existing production? Do you find that your job is more or less challenging with a transfer?

A: I really enjoy the process of unpacking the show. It’s a little like Christmas! It’s also really exciting to see up close what other shops are doing. I’ve learned a few tricks by unpacking a show and seeing how another prop team solved that problem. The challenges are very different with a transfer. You’re doing your best to maintain the original vision of the show and that can be difficult when you need to source a replacement.

Q: Is the transfer of a play more, less, or equal to the transfer of a musical? How are they similar? How are they different?

A: It really depends on the show. Some musicals can be a very small and easy transfer, and some plays can be very large and complicated. Typically, musicals tend to be harder on props because of the dancing and the overall heightened reality of the world. Because of that, musicals tend to come with a lot more backups. Each show is so unique and has its own needs, so there really isn't much comparison.

Q: How does Hartford Stage ensure that all of the original elements of the show remain the same and don't get lost along the way?

A: We rely heavily on the information that the original producing theatre sends. We receive copies of all the lists, plots, set-up, photos, paper props, meeting notes and any other paperwork that was created that is relevant to our departments. We also talk a lot with stage management throughout the process. Usually at least one member of the stage management team will have worked on the original production and can answer any questions that we might have.

Q: What have been the most rewarding and/or challenging parts in transferring this production?

A: One interesting challenge is in the transfer of the books. The set design requires about 1,500 books onstage. For the original production, the books were borrowed from a local library and heavily curated. Many even became important in the show. Those books were returned after the initial production. We are looking into if we can get those back but also exploring what it would mean to have to replace those books on our own.

FOR FURTHER READING

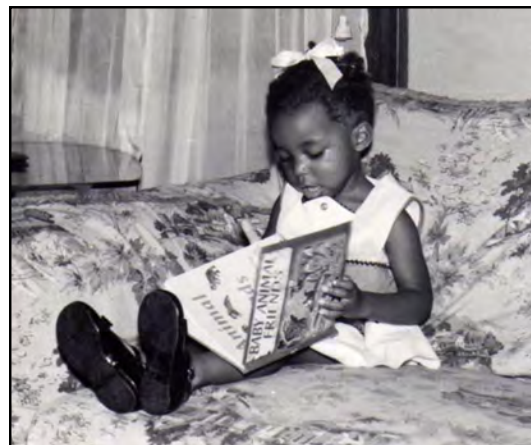
Below are some of Sharon's favorite books that she read as a child and as an adult:

BOOKS FROM CHILDHOOD

The Cat in the Hat, Bartholomew and the Oobleck
and *Put Me in The Zoo* by Dr. Seuss
Curious George by H. A. Rey and Margret Rey
From the Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler
by E. L. Konigsburg
The Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster
Lang Fairy Tale Books Series by Andrew Lang
A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle
Little House on The Prairie series
by Laura Ingalls Wilder
Harriet the Spy by Louise Fitzhugh
James and the Giant Peach by Roald Dahl
Black Like Me by John Howard Griffin

BOOKS FROM ADULTHOOD

Mama Day by Gloria Naylor
Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson
The Alienist by Caleb Carr
Time and Again by Jack Finney
The Shining and *Night Shift*
short story collection by Stephen King
Beloved by Toni Morrison
The King Must Die by Mary Renault



Sharon as a young girl.
Photo permission from Sharon Washington.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

The Missing Scenes

Choosing to tell an autobiographical story presents both challenges and advantages. In some ways, it limits the story Sharon Washington can tell; she only shares things that she witnessed. Because of this, there are some “missing” scenes we don’t get to see. What does Brownie do when she gets loose in the library? What happens to Sharon’s mother and aunt at Dalton’s “Parents’ Night?” What conversations do the parents have while Sharon is away staying with Aunt Sis? Choose one of these “missing scenes” to write, and fill in the gaps using your own imagination.

Children’s Book Illustrations

Sharon Washington is planning to adapt *Feeding the Dragon* into a book for children, inspired by her unique experiences growing up. Create an illustration of a memory or location she describes that might go in this book.

Characters from Real Life

In this play, Sharon Washington plays over twenty different characters. Look at the people in your life—what is unique about how they speak and move? If you were going to present someone you know well as a character, what physical and vocal choices would you make to share what they are like with people who have never met them? Choose a conversation you’ve had with this person to write as a dialogue, and prepare to present it as your very own one-person show.

Family Heirloom Letters

In *Feeding the Dragon*, Sharon’s mother has bought fancy dresses and jewelry. While she never finds an occasion to wear them, she gives items to her daughter and tries to convince Sharon to wear the items out with friends. As an actress, Sharon does find occasions to wear them and carries a piece of her mother’s style with her. Are there any items in your family that have been passed down from generation to generation as heirlooms? Who started that tradition? Was the tradition initially accepted, or did it take time for heirs to mature into the heirlooms? What importance do these items have? Write a letter about a family heirloom to the original owner of the item, or to someone younger who you might pass it on to.

Mapping Memories

According to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, a memory map is “about people and their relationship with place.” Draw a layout of your home, or a home you lived in once. Label the rooms, then in another color label areas of the home that have special memories. For example, “LIVING ROOM—window where the squirrel got into the house and we chased it out of the curtains when the woman from animal control came.” You can expand the memory by writing a story, poem, or dialogue that expresses your relationship to that place. Visit <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/m/memory-maps-about-the-project/> for more ideas about how to connect to places through writing.

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