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What: Play: Zora! Returns to Harlem

Date: Sunday, April 29, 2007

Time: 6:10pm-7:35

Location: Langston Hughes House, 20 127th Street (5th and Madison)

I saw an announcement for a play about Zora Neale Hurston at the website for One Stop Harlem. The announcement did not list a time for the performance, but it listed a phone number. I tried looking online at the Langston Hughes House website (thehugheshouse.org) but it did not list the play.

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When I called yesterday (Saturday), a man who sounded young answered with "Hello?" I asked if this was the Langston Hughes House, and he said no, it was his personal number, but he somehow conveyed that he was affiliated with the Langston Hughes House. I asked if the play was going on this weekend, and he said yes, tonight and tomorrow. I asked what time it started, and he said the house would open at 5:30 and the play would begin at 6 or 6:30.

I arrived around 6:10 on Sunday. The Langston Hughes House is just around the corner from Boma Café, on 127th St between 5th Ave and Madison. Eckson and I had walked this block before, but we did not notice this house.

A young, light-skinned man with cornrows, who would later introduce himself as Carlos Peña, was sitting on the steps. In the window were black-and-gold sticky letters reading "Hughes House." He was wearing an oversized light blue-and-white striped button-down shirt over jeans and sneakers. I asked if this was the Langston Hughes House and he said yes. I asked if the play was tonight, and he said yes, told me it had already started. I asked for how long, he said maybe 15 or 20 minutes, and I decided to go in anyway. He asked for \$20. (I remember feeling shocked and probably looking shocked, although I should have expected this.) He took me inside and asked me to sign in on a sheet in a blue three-ring binder, on a piece of furniture that was a cross between a desk and a podium. I handed him a twenty dollar bill and he whispered for me to walk down the hallway and go left. I walked past a narrow staircase and down a hall with yellowed pictures hanging in frames. I paused when I reached a kind of sitting room, and he loudly whispered for me to keep going. A young man gave me his seat, and I took it. It was a blue, cushioned folding chair, placed between and in front of two couches, and behind a sound board/mixer [not sure what this is called?] and computer.

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From where I sat I could see into the room in which the play was taking place. The actress, whose name I would later find out is Antonia Badón, stood in front of about 15 people sitting in folding chairs arranged on either side of a narrow aisle. Behind her, a painted backdrop hung [from the ceiling? From a stand? Don't remember], and a coatrack draped with clothing served as prop and as changing station. To her left, a small shelf (or table?) held a wine bottle, a glass, and other props. From what I could see, about 15 people in the room sat in folding chairs arranged on either side of a narrow aisle. The performance room had beautiful circular molding on the ceiling.

A cameraman straddled both rooms, with his camera just in the performance room. He wore headphones over a jheri curl, a black button-down shirt and black jeans. There was a young woman sitting on a bar stool in front of the soundboard and computer, wearing a black hoodie sweater, jeans, and sneakers. Her straightened hair was pulled into a ponytail. Throughout the performance, a young man wearing an off-white baseball cap, an oversize jersey-type shirt, and jeans walked throughout the back room and other parts of the house. At times he seemed to be controlling the lights, once he went to get a bottle of beer (Amstel Light), and other times he walked out of the room. The man who I believe gave me his chair stood in the doorway for awhile, watching the play. Later I believe he sat on a couch. Carlos Peña stayed outside of the performance space until the intermission, then walked back and forth between the back room and other areas of the house. There was at least one other young man sitting behind me on one of the felt couches.

To my left was a lighted glass case that held several books by Langston Hughes and CDs. I only glimpsed one name, Marc Cary, that I also later found on the website. On top of the glass case were several gallon jugs of water, Styrofoam cups, and a basket with a sign for drink donations. I assume that the young men drinking beer obtained them from a cooler behind the glass case.

The young woman doing the sound got up and announced a ten minute intermission. A few people walked out of the performance space: a pair of middle-aged women, a well-dressed man, an older man, and a young man. More people stayed seated. I sat by myself for a minute, watching.

A middle-aged white woman came out of the performance space and went behind the glass case. She left the room. Later I walked by her standing at the reception podium/desk. She gave the impression that she was affiliated with the LHHouse.

Eventually I joined the older man in the hallway, where he was looking at the framed pictures. The one I looked at announced a play. Another one was a very yellowed handwritten paper. I asked the man if Langston Hughes actually lived in this house, and he said yes. He didn't seem to want to talk more, so I went outside. The young man was standing in the street. He wore a yellow polo shirt and khakis. Something about him, his posture, his clothing, indicated to me that he was African. The male of the couple was on a cell phone. He wore a black leather jacket over a gold shirt and darker gold pants. He wore his hair in a short afro. One of the women was wearing a thick black sweater with different colors woven into it, and black slacks. The other woman was wearing a silver-and-red sequined top under a thin black sweater, with black slacks. Her shoes were black with silver sequins. She also wore a black hat.

I overheard them talking about someplace that sold pillows, oils and incense. The sequined woman asked if they also sold food, and the other woman said yes. I asked if they were talking about Boma, the place around the corner. That's a beautiful place, I said. The sequined woman said somebody told her they sat and sat in the place, as if in contrast to a place that kicked you out if you didn't buy more food. I asked if they also

sell furniture. The non-sequined woman said they sell pillows, oils and incense in the back, and a few pieces. She said she had bought some pillows, some beautiful pillows. She said she asked if you could take off the cover and wash it. She said something like, the pillows without covers have to be dry-cleaned, and it's not worth it. I did not feel welcome in the conversation; this sense was reinforced when the women decided that ten minutes were up and headed back inside. Everyone outside followed.

The performance had not started yet. I mistook the cameraman, now sitting on the couch, for the man who gave up his seat [they look totally different]. I began a conversation by thanking him for giving me his seat. He couldn't hear me, so he came and crouched by my chair. He asked if I knew about Zora before the play, and I said yes, I had read her novels in high school. He said I was lucky, he had only heard of her through working with the actress. I told him I hadn't known she was an anthropologist until later.

I asked about his work, and he told me he films her performances and asked I had had seen the clip on YouTube. I said no, I saw it online. He asked which website and I told him Harlem One Stop. I asked if he had filmed the play before and he named a venue I hadn't heard of [and can't remember]. He said that the sound wasn't so good in places, so he wanted to film again. I asked if he could use the sound from this play and the footage from the other, and he said he could just replace the previous clips. I asked if he had filmed yesterday, and he said no, he was on another job. He asked what I did, and I said I was a researcher, and I teach [I have no idea what this meant to him]. I said something about how I admire people who pursue creative work, but it's not for me, with the uncertainty of not knowing when your next gig is coming. He smiled and said something to the effect that I must also be creative, and touched my arm. He told me that he's lucky, he's got regular work. I mention that also the pace is demanding, working very intensely for a time, then nothing. He said you get vacation.

Around then, Carlos Peña got up to speak, and I turned around. The cameraman touched my arm again, lingering more this time, and said he'd talk with me later.

Carlos announced that he and his crew had bought the Langston Hughes House, to applause. He told the audience that "the floors didn't look like this, the walls didn't look like this, we had to redo the molding." He mentioned other events happening in the house, including a poetry night [not sure if he said open mic] and a Sunday group of young musicians led by Marc Cary. He also plugged the CDs, by Marc Cary and others, the books, and drinks. He invited the audience, particularly teachers, to use the space. Teachers could bring their kids.

Towards the end of the play a woman came in. Carlos told her it was almost over. She stood in the doorway and watched. At the end, the actress thanked her crew and told the audience that crew sounds like a lot of people, but it was really just two: a woman with a head wrap who had assisted her during the intermission, and I believe the cameraman.

After the play was over, I spoke again with Carlos, who was standing behind the glass case. He clarified that his group is leasing the house and hoping to buy. They are waiting

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for funds to do more projects. They want to turn the room we were in into library. He indicated a window looking out of the back of the house and said they planned to make it a doorway, where they'd build a deck. I asked where they were trying to get the funds, and he told me some brand of alcohol. I believe he said \$300,000. I asked if he knew Valerie Kinloch at Teachers College, and he said no. I told him she was doing research on buildings in Harlem, that she might be interested. He looked interested. I then mentioned that she's working with some students, students who grew up in Harlem, and he perked up more. He told me to email them, that I could find the email address on the website.

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I spoke briefly with the white woman, again standing at the lecturn/reception desk. I asked if she worked with the house, and she said yes, and invited me to join the mailing list. I put my name down again, this time with my TC email address (instead of a yahoo address) and my office number. I also went back to the sign-in sheet and changed my yahoo email address to my TC email address. I had to flip back one page since several people had signed in after I had; since I was the second to last to arrive, probably they were asked to sign in as they left. Sure enough, she asked two women leaving if they had joined the mailing list, and they said yes and left.

I went up the stairs, where there was a bathroom. All of the doorways upstairs other than the bathroom were blocked by plywood boards.

I opened the door and almost walked in on a middle-aged white man in a sport coat pissing into the toilet. I apologized and backed out. When he came out he greeted me without any anger or embarrassment. I made sure to lock the door behind me; it was a small deadbolt, the kind that you screw into the door from the outside.

The bathroom had an old bathtub on porcelain feet and a shower curtain. There was a brass-looking toilet paper stand in front of the toilet and extra toilet paper to the side. Paper towels next to the sink.

1. Education on how to restore an old house
 2. Education on how to make a performance space
 - a. Advertising
 - b. Booking
 - c. Technical knowledge for performance: sound, light
 - d. Logistics
 3. Educational exchange: education of work as artist, how I heard of the space as education on publicity
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