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Crowns

Now playing at the Lincoln Theatre
March 27 – April 26, 2009
Written by Regina Taylor
Adapted from the book by
Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry
Directed by Kenneth Lee Roberson

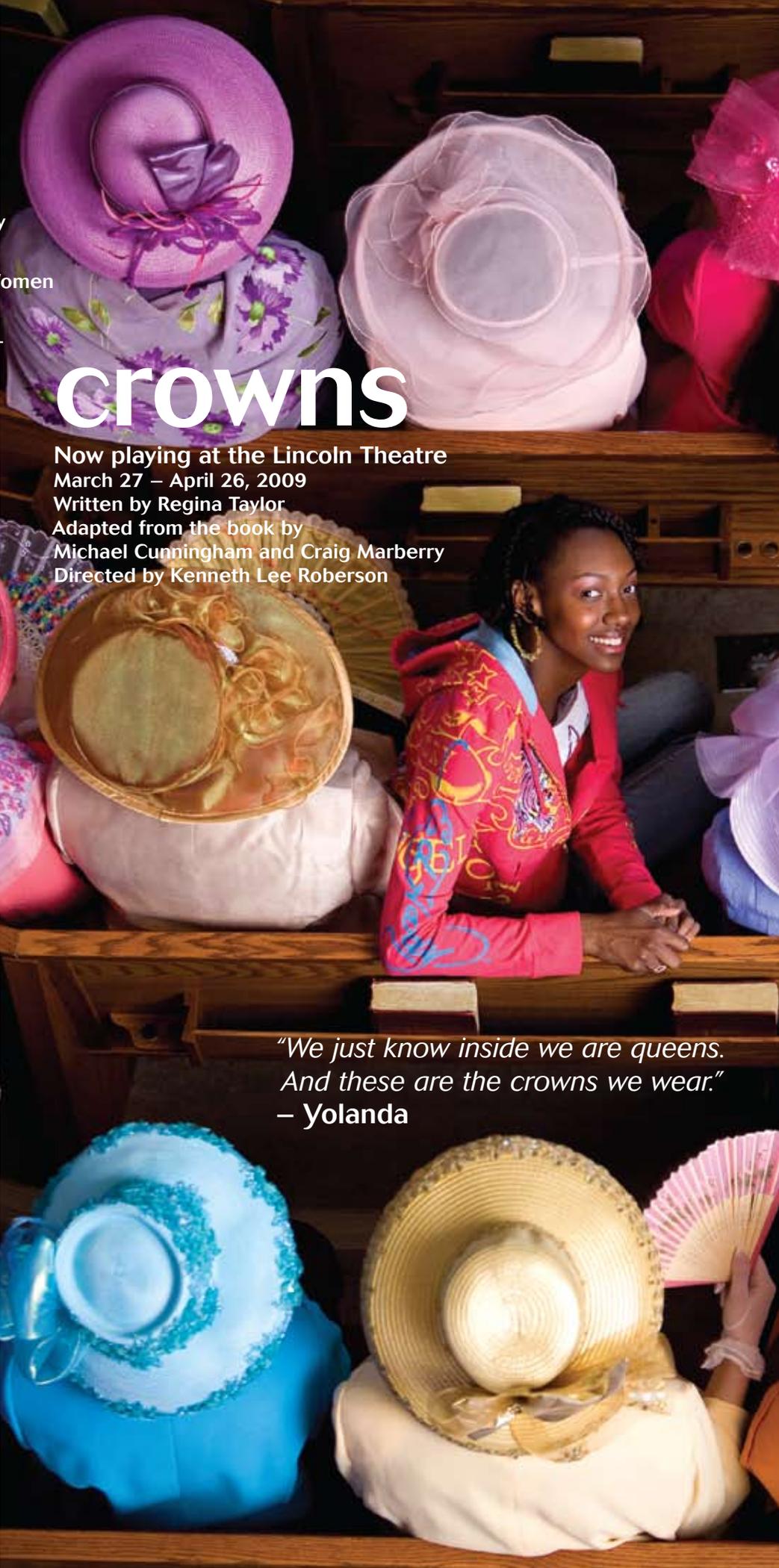
the play

The hats in *Crowns* come in every color, dressed up with feathers and sprinkled with sequins. In all their brilliance, they shout out and whisper stories of the past and present. Adapted from a book of photographs and the stories that accompany them, *Crowns* tells the tales of six African-American women and how their lives are illustrated by the hats they wear.

When Yolanda's brother is shot and killed, she is sent from Brooklyn to the South to stay with her grandmother. There, she opens her eyes to how she fits in her family and heritage.

Through memories, stories and spiritual songs, five women share their life experiences with Yolanda as they get ready for church and attend a morning service, a baptism, a wedding and a funeral. Their stories travel from the cotton fields to the Civil Rights Movement to the southern church communities. The women speak of the importance of strength, integrity and love in their families and community.

Crowns connects the power and spirit of African-American women to the daughters and granddaughters who inherit it, all through the hats placed proudly on their heads. ●



*"We just know inside we are queens.
And these are the crowns we wear."
– Yolanda*

meet the playwright



Regina Taylor

"Hats reveal and they conceal. And ... in the course of this play, we're taking away all these layers, in terms of where these women come from, who their parents were, and also beyond their memories to the subconscious memory that's been passed down, from generation to generation."

— Regina Taylor

Regina Taylor was born and raised in Dallas, Texas. She began her acting career in college and, after receiving her bachelor of arts in journalism from Southern Methodist University, moved to New York City to continue acting.

Taylor was the first Black woman to play Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* on Broadway and has appeared in many other Broadway productions, including *As You Like It* and *Macbeth*. For her role as Lilly Harper, in the critically acclaimed series *I'll Fly Away* on PBS, she received the NAACP Image Award and a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress in a Drama Series.

In addition to *Crowns*, Taylor has also written many other plays, including *Mudtracks*, *Jennine's Diary* and *Oo-Bla-Dee*. She is currently an artistic associate at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago and an active director, writer and actress. ●

What a Hat Has to Say

"Hats are like people. Sometimes they reveal and sometimes they conceal." —Wanda

Look around you: hats are everywhere! Though there are hundreds of hats, there are three main purposes for wearing one. Some hats are worn for protection against weather: fur hats keep out the winter cold and sombreros provide shelter from the sun. Others are worn for decoration: different designs dress up an outfit, adorn a national costume or follow fashion trends.

Hats are also a form of communication and an expression of individuality. Hats communicate occupation, social status, national identity, ethnic background and religion.

For centuries, hats have been essential to the identity of many people. A cowboy hat represents the Wild West; a sailor cap defines a life at sea in all weather; a crown symbolizes royalty; a headscarf denotes religious beliefs; a baseball cap shows team spirit. In African societies, a variety of hats, headdresses and hairstyles illustrate the values and beliefs of tribes and cultural communities. What other hats represent identity for a person or group of people? ●

a! **Activity:** Design your own hat that shows your personality or what you value. Draw your design and share it with a classmate. Then, decorate a ready-made hat or use art materials like felt, newspaper or cardboard to make your hat. Include illustrations or objects that represent people or things that are meaningful to you.



History of Hats

Archaeologists believe that the first hat is depicted in an ancient tomb painting in Thebes, Egypt, drawn in approximately 3000 B.C. Until the 1300s, hats were worn by commoners for protection from the weather and by nobles to display their positions of power. After the 1300s, it became popular for anyone to wear hats as decoration and part of daily dress. The hats that men and women wore started to change with the fashion of the times. The first hat factory opened in 1780 in Danbury, Connecticut. Since then, mass production has made hats an important aspect of fashion. ●

"It took a civil rights movement to get those hats off our heads." –Mabel



Students for Change

Inspired by the sit-in in Greensboro, sit-ins demanding service at lunch counters and integration in society took place in 78 cities across the country in 1960.

Many stories in *Crowns* describe the racial discrimination blacks faced in the United States. Mabel's hat reminds her of being a college student in the early 1960s, when tension between whites and blacks was high. For Mabel and other black students, the years between 1955 and 1965 were important and empowering. Known as the Civil Rights Movement, these years changed the way African-Americans were perceived and treated in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement is famous for its approach to creating change. It focused on a groundbreaking tactic called Non-Violent Direct Action. NVDA was a way to protest the segregation of the South without using guns or physical violence.

Mabel remembers February 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, because it was one time she did not wear her hat. Four black college students decided that they were tired of being able to buy items at the Woolworth's but not being able to eat at the "Whites Only" lunch counter. They decided to protest by sitting at the counter until someone served them. The first day, the lunch counter closed early. The second day, the press arrived and the sit-in became national news. For five months, black

and white students arrived at the Woolworth's counter in the morning and sat until closing. Sometimes people threw tomatoes, flour or other things at them. The students' dedication paid off; Woolworth's integrated their lunch counter in July 1960.

Inspired by nonviolent protests, high school and college students organized a group of their own called the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Young adults, aged 15 to 25, became some of the most important participants in the movement. As educated youth, they believed strongly that they could make a difference in the way the United States treated its African-American citizens. They organized non-violent protests and demonstrations to end segregation.

Often, their work was dangerous; some of the students were killed and others were severely beaten. The most important rule to follow as a member of SNCC was to never, ever resort to physical violence. Students believed that change would not come about through more violence. The events of the 1960s proved that through dedication and hard work, students can create change in our country. ●

A Timeline of Black Women in America

The six women in *Crowns* face the obstacles and challenges of their lives with extraordinary spirit and strength. Black women in America have a long history of achieving remarkable feats despite racial and gender discrimination. Here is a short timeline of outstanding first-time accomplishments by African-American women.

- 1853** – Journalist Mary Ann Shadd Cary publishes *The Provincial Freeman*.
- 1864** – Rebecca Lee Crumple graduates from the New England Medical College as a physician.
- 1914** – Madame C.J. Walker becomes a millionaire through her products for black hair.
- 1920** – Jazz singer Mamie Smith sells over 75,000 copies of her album *Crazy Blues* in one month. 
- 1939** – Hattie McDaniel wins the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress.
- 1950** – Poet Gwendolyn Brooks wins the Pulitzer Prize.
- 1955** – Marian Anderson sings in the Metropolitan Opera House. 
- 1955** – Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama.
- 1960** – Six-year-old Ruby Bridges integrates a white elementary school.
- 1968** – Shirley Chisholm is elected to serve in the United States Congress. 
- 1984** – Vanessa Williams wins the Miss America pageant.
- 1993** – Toni Morrison wins the Nobel Prize in Literature. 
- 2003** – Halle Berry wins the Academy Award for Best Actress.

a! **Activity:** In the play, the playwright emphasizes the importance of female relationships, particularly among family members. Interview a woman in your life that you admire to learn more about what made her who she is. Write an essay about what you learn and how this woman has influenced who you are.

From the Director's Notebook



"This show teaches audiences about the values, style and grace of the African-American church community. *Crowns* demonstrates the handing down of culture from one generation to the next and celebrates the refuge, equality and healing that occurs in this place of spirituality." —Kenneth Lee Roberson, director

Church and the African-American South



For the women in *Crowns*, church is a place for friends and family to gather, a place to show off their individuality with their hats, and a place to release their emotions through song. The combination of worship, prayer and song creates a unique community bound by beliefs.

Historically, for southern African-Americans, church has also been an important political and social organization. During slavery it offered a space to gather away from the eyes of white landowners; it was a place where blacks had an individual identity rather than just the title of "slave."

The first major black denomination, African Methodist Episcopal was started in 1816 by Richard Allen. The AME church was responsible for organizing many all-black schools and colleges across the South, publishing writings by African-Americans that discussed the discrimination

they faced in the United States and producing many politically active ministers who became leaders in the fight to end racial discrimination.

Church was also a place for African-American women to gain a voice in the community, even though it was not until the early 1900s that women could become ministers. In the meantime, black women started aid societies, held positions on Sunday school boards, supported job training for other women, advocated for better housing conditions, and protested segregation. Southern churches created a strong support network for African-Americans to fight the racial injustice they faced. As a result, the church and has played an important role in many African-American families. ●



Activity: The women of *Crowns* value their church as a community of their friends and family. Why is it

important to have a place to meet with friends and family? Why are traditions important? Write a detailed description using strong sensory language of a place or tradition, explaining its importance to you.

Additional Resources

Books/Plays:

Crowns by Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry

Cuttin' Up by Craig Marberry

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou

Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African-American Storytelling edited by Marian E. Barnes and Linda Goss

On the Web:

National African-American History Month 2009: www.nps.gov/history/aahistory/

The Official Site of Negro Spirituals: www.negrospirituall.com

Sub/Text

For links and research related to Arena Stage productions, compiled by Arena Stage **dramaturgs**, please visit **Sub/Text: Your Virtual Dramaturg** at www.arenastage.org/season/08-09/sub-text/.

dramaturg— a theater specialist who does research for productions and represents the intentions of the playwright

Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers, and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing, or hum.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

Enjoy the show!



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Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.