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Quilting History

Xoregos Presents Story of a Slave, Quilt and Sale

Maryland Poet Laureate gives voice to ex-slave whose quilt is in Smithsonian

NEW YORK CITY -- Some stories are painted, some are sung. But one being presented at Theater for the New City this summer could easily be said to be quilted or stitched into your soul.

After presenting productions based on history ranging from the Harlem Renaissance to Roman emperors, Xoregos Performing Company and TNC are presenting a play based on the life of an African-American woman who produced a quilt hanging in the Smithsonian Institution.

The group is presenting *Quilting The Sun* by playwright and Maryland poet laureate Grace Cavalieri as part of Theater for the New City's Dream Up Festival Aug. 25-Sept. 15.

The show tells the story of the life and work of [Harriet Powers](#), a former slave and artist whose work now hangs in the Smithsonian Institution.

"The play is about finding genius in undiscovered places," Cavalieri says. "Harriet Powers's quilts are closer in appearance to Picasso's work than to the story quilts of the post-Civil War South."

Xoregos, who is directing the show, said she found a strong, untold story and characters in the play that looks at American history and produces dramatic theater.

“It’s called the [Bible Quilt](#),” Xoregos says of Powers’s most famous work. “She started it in 1886. The quilting is so beautiful. It’s applique work. You cut out images and sew them onto fabric. It’s very extraordinary.”

Xoregos in 2002 did a staged reading of the play, which itself originated as a teleplay before Cavalieri rewrote, revised and recreated the story for theater.

“She was originally going to do it for a PBS special. The rights reverted to her. She changed the teleplay into a play,” Xoregos says. “I did readings of it. Now I’m going to finally do it.”

Cavalieri’s play, which blends fact with fiction or at least speculation, follows Powers, who lived from 1837 to 1910, married Armstead Powers and had at least nine children. She stitched stories into the soul with intricate quilts including one that became a major part of her own life.



“She sold her quilt to Jennie Smith, a white schoolteacher from Atlanta, Georgia, for five dollars, half the asking price,” Cavalieri says of what may be her most well-known masterpiece.

Half historian and half playwright, Cavalieri set out to find out what she could about Powers, and to solve the mystery of why she sold this quilt to a teacher at the Lucy Cobb Institute for a relatively paltry sum.

At once researcher, historian, playwright and poet, Cavalieri unpacked mildewed boxes in a courthouse basement, found and visited Powers’s shack and read Jennie Smith’s letters at the University of Georgia Library.

She also worked with Gladys-Marie Fry, who wrote “Stitched from the Soul,” about Powers and her work.

“It was her lifelong project,” Cavalieri says of the Bible Quilt. “Why did she need money at this particular time and need it so badly that she relinquished a ‘spelled quilt,’ one that I imagined God told her to make?”

Cavalieri seeks to answer that question spiritually if not necessarily factually, speculating she needed money to save her child, even if it meant selling her quilt.

In addition to Powers, the play presents her husband Armstead, her son Alonzo, Jennie Smith and Miss Rutherford, the headmistress at the school where Jennie taught.

“The rest I would imagine,” she says, adding she worked in real events, such as the Cotton Fair in Athens in 1886, where Powers showed her quilt.

“The juju man is like a witch doctor and a Christian preacher,” Xoregos adds. “Part of the story is how the African religions and myths morphed into Christianity in America.”

The quilt itself is at once part of the play and a way of telling a story with images rather than language.

“It tells the Bible’s stories, like Jacob climbing the ladder and Judas betraying Jesus and some events from nature like a huge meteor shower, before she was born,” Xoregos says. “She heard about it and put it in her quilt. Each patch of the quilt is a different story.”

The panels include one known as “Night of the Falling Stars,” based on the Leonid meteor showers that occurred in 1833 only four years before she was born.

Smith recognized Powers’s genius, saying in a letter her “style is bold and rather on the impressionist’s order while there is a naiveté of expression that is delicious.”

Cavalieri is a distinguished writer, Maryland poet laureate and was senior program officer for the National Endowment for the Humanities. She also won the Inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award from the Washington Independent Review of Books, the Allen Ginsberg Award for Poetry and The West Virginia Women in Arts Award

“This play is about an extremely famous black woman quilter of the 19th century,” Xoregos says. “Her quilts are hanging in the Smithsonian and Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.”

Powers’s story of a remarkable woman already has motivated others to persist in life and in art, making her a hero for our time and any time.

“I believe that Harriet’s quilting also inspired people to express their feelings,” [one fan wrote](#) on myhero.com, a site about artists’ inspirational lives. “The stories on her quilts showed so much just by looking at them.”

The play had its own crazy quilt journey, originally scheduled for a reading Sept. 12, 2001, which was rescheduled for Nov. 7 that year. After a reading at the New York Public Library, on Fifth Avenue, a staged reading took place on March 15, 2002 at the Wings Theater in Manhattan.

“The audience liked what it saw and heard that day,” Cavalieri says, “and showed its appreciation in a heartwarming way.”

Xoregos in 2003 presented the play as a staged reading at the Smithsonian Institution and it was produced in 2006 by Center Stage in Greenville, S.C., before a production in Beaufort, S.C.

“Like Harriet, I have not ‘lost’ anything, not one moment of my life, writing this,” Cavalieri says. “As Harriet Powers said, ‘God tole me to make this one.’”

This Dream Up Festival production will be the New York premiere of *Quilting the Sun*

Quilting the Sun, by Grace Cavalieri, presented as part of the Dream Up Festival, Aug. 25-Sept 15, Theater for the New City, 155 First Ave., NY, NY. 212-254-1109

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