



DONALD CORREN & JUDY KAYE/PHOTO BY CAROL ROSEGG

When I Met My Muse

I glanced at her and took my glasses off – they were still singing. They buzzed like a locust on the coffee table and then ceased. Her voice belled forth, and the sunlight bent. I felt the ceiling arch and knew that nails up there took a new grip on whatever they touched. “I am your own way of looking at things,” she said. “When you allow me to live with you, every glance at the world around you will be a sort of salvation.” And I took her hand. – William Stafford

Souvenir

(A Fantasia on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins)

Souvenir – generally defined as an object one brings back from a trip – in French means literally: the act of remembering. That action is at the heart of Stephen Temperley’s play of the same name, wherein a struggling composer Cosme McMoon attempts to make peace with a lifetime of memories spent as accompanist to Florence Foster Jenkins – a wealthy socialite who despite all evidence to the contrary believed herself to be a truly extraordinary coloratura soprano. Based on real life events, Temperley tells a story that is at once funny and stirring. By filtering the events through McMoon’s narration, Temperley takes an insightful look at a musical career, which could easily have been perceived as nothing more than a joke and elevates it – making it universal. In his hands, Florence becomes a symbol for the childlike enthusiasm within all of us to play unabashedly at the very things we love, regardless of our ability. In this way, Temperley’s play speaks to everyone who harbors in his or her heart an unacknowledged untried artist.

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INSIDER'S INSIGHT

Written by Debra Baron, Director of Education
and Gabriel Davis, Education Associate

Available for download at westportplayhouse.org/souvenir.htm

Souvenir

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Florence represents the pure joy of creating and a spirit that transcends the crippling doubts which many would-be artists do unsuccessfully battle with. Temperley's rendition of Foster is in a sense, a slightly more contemporary Don Quixote; a resilient dream warrior living alongside us but in a sublime world not quite our own. Like Quixote, the only thing that can destroy her is the painful knowledge of reality as everyone around her sees it. The character of the Queen of The Night in Mozart's opera *Magic Flute* is also relevant. The Queen is an awesome seductress whose dangerous power can only be overcome by knowledge. Wonderfully apropos then, is Florence's desire throughout the play to sing the Queen of the Night Aria – an aria she is frighteningly ill-equipped for because it contains a high F6 – a note so difficult to perform, few classical operas require singers to reach it.

However, with that guileless sense of play intact, Foster is able to perform even that aria joyfully with the support of McMoon, whom she describes in the play as "a colleague, a collaborator, a soul-mate." In fact it is the delicate dance that develops between these two – in the face of Florence's famously uncertain sense of pitch and key and McMoon's desire both to pay his rent while supporting Florence's dreams and his own love of music – that makes Florence's story accessible and allows us to be touched by her unrelenting passion and pride in each note she sang.

The real McMoon upon which Temperley's character is based was no less an appreciator of Florence. After her death, there were a number of imitators, but they were lacking her unique spirit and failed to captivate audiences the way she did. As McMoon himself explained it:

"Oh, yes. Such a golden shower as the audiences which she was able to attract are certainly a temptation to anyone, and many have tried since to give studiously discordant recitals at Town Hall and different places, or trying to make the music funny that way, but they have no success at all, and they just make a dismal evening, and the reason is that they're not sincere in their efforts, as Mme Jenkins was. She is inimitable, and many have tried also to imitate her, but without success."

– from an interview with Cosme McMoon that aired May 26, 1991 on KALW Weekend Radio, Cleveland OH.

Interview with director Vivian Matalon

What was the genesis of *Souvenir*?

In 1980 I suggested to Steve (*Souvenir* playwright Stephen Temperley) that he write a play about Florence Foster Jenkins. I'd had a singing teacher in the 40s and 50s who told me about her and he used to go to her concerts at the Ritz Carleton and he played me a couple of recordings. And I had a very interesting experience with it. I started laughing when I heard it and then I became absolutely ashamed of myself. You know, because laughing at Florence if that's all you do is like kicking a cripple. And I always thought there was a lot more to the idea of this delusional individual

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than just a kind of campy joke. Steve then wrote the play and it was exactly what one would have feared: a farcical thing about a very vainglorious individual. At the time he was rather diffident about getting people to be interested in what he wrote, he was principally an actor – he still is. And I said to him, why don't you write it as a one woman play, and I said I even have the opening line for you which is "I never knew why they laughed" and he did that and that was no good and I think four years ago I was directing a play called *Quartet* at the Berkshire theatre fest and there was a very kind of beautiful lighting effect at the end where the four actors who are retired former opera stars mime their recording of Verdi's quartet from *Rigoletto*. And Ann Wrightson and I worked out a lighting effect that was very beautiful and kind of had the effect of making you realize how ephemeral talent is. I said to Steve, I wish you would resuscitate the Florence Foster Jenkins play and write it from the point of view of the accompanist and three weeks later substantially we had this play.

I was wondering if you might speak to the research involved in a project like *Souvenir*?

Well, we found in researching Florence Foster Jenkins, you simply do not get two stories that match. For example, there are three different accounts of Cosme McMoon's identity. It's been said she put a screen around one Cosme on the stage so he would not distract from her singing. Another Cosme McMoon was allegedly a famous classic pianist who later taught at a music school in Rochester, New York. Yet another Cosme allegedly ran a male escort service, and there is a photo, which of course is doctored that shows Arnold Schwarzenegger as one of the men in his employ. After the Broadway production, we did manage to track down an individual who seemed more likely to have been the real Cosme McMoon, who I think is buried in New Mexico and he died at quite a late age. But the play itself has never purported to be a factual documentary of Florence Foster Jenkins. Hence the title, "a fantasia on the life of Florence Foster Jenkins."

Judy Kaye has received wonderful critical praise and a Tony nod for her performance in *Souvenir*. Did you always know you wanted her for the role?

The history of that is a little bit skewered. I did a reading with two different people. We talked about Judy. We hoped we might get her. But she, at the time, was in *Mamma Mia* and I was misinformed that she would only do something if it was an offer – Judy is not even slightly like that. The actress who did the reading, and she did very well, I found difficult to work with. That actress then got into a Broadway show, then she was going to get out of it, then she wasn't, then she was again, and finally I said you know, I'm not that keen on her anyway. We then held one day of auditions to which Judy came. I'd met her and liked her very much. We had to know people could sing badly and not hurt their voice. We also had to know they would treat Ms. Jenkins with respect. Nothing Florence Foster Jenkins says in the play is in conflict with what a genuine great artist would say, it's just, what she lacks, is the



Judy Kaye and [unclear] who star in the Play [unclear] seen here in the original production of *Souvenir*. PHOTO



The Life and Times of *Florence Foster Jenkins*

“our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt.” – William Shakespeare

Opera diva Florence Foster Jenkins was a true sensation in

her day. She possessed an incredible, seemingly unshakeable faith in her abilities as a soprano and a genuine love of opera that sustained her throughout her career – a career which thousands followed with interest at the time, and which historians still ponder as a curiosity. At the height of her popularity Florence gave the performance of her lifetime at Carnegie Hall and the audience came out in droves to witness it. The majority came with a single question in their minds: how was it possible that this particular singer exists with such self-possession and confidence? After all, in contrast to other Opera singers, Florence quite simply could not carry a tune: her sense of pitch and rhythm was uncertain at best; her ability to accurately place and sustain a note was questionable. Despite this, Florence never seemed to question herself – or did she? There are those who believe that her final performance at Carnegie Hall opened the floodgates of self-doubt and broke her spirit.

Yet everything in the way Florence lived her life seems to indicate otherwise. She often expressed the belief that her voice compared favorably to Frieda Hempel and Luisa Tetrazzini, popular classical singers of the time. She was not completely unaware of her critics, but saw their attempts to put her down along with the laughter often heard during her shows as just “professional jealousy.”

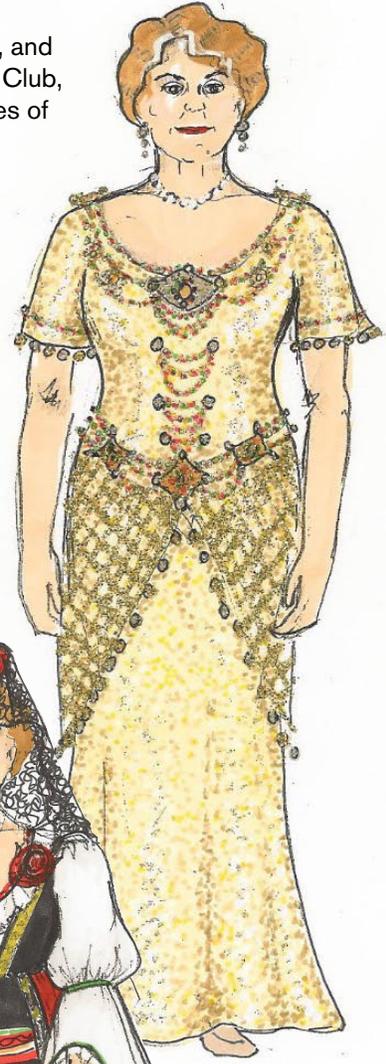
Even in her youth growing up in Wilkes-Barre, PA Florence harbored strong dreams of going abroad to study music and refused to heed active discouragement by her father, who possessed significant wealth but refused to support her musical ambitions. Despite this she pursued her dreams in the limited ways she could, eventually learning enough to become a music teacher and pianist. And in 1902, after divorcing her first husband, a Philadelphia doctor Frank Thornton Jenkins, she used these hard won skills to support herself.

When her father passed away, Florence was left with an inheritance, which allowed her to embark on the singing career she had dreamed of as a child.

She moved to New York City, met and began a relationship with English actor St Clair Bayfield, and with some of her inheritance founded the Verdi Club, an ambitious endeavor that sponsored musicales of the composer’s work.

Florence’s repertoire was a mixture of operatic standards by Mozart, Verdi and Strauss and Lieder. Songs by herself and her accompanist Cosme McMoon were also often included in an evening’s recital. Her performances were flamboyant and over the top– especially when wearing a pair of gigantic gossamer angel wings strapped to her back. As word spread of her unusual act across the city, crowds of 800 would pack salons to hear her sing. Her signature song was the “Queen of the Night” aria from Mozart’s *Magic Flute*. As one critic notes: “Mme. Jenkins gave her interpretative abilities full and untrammelled sway...”

At the height of her popularity in the 1940s Lady Florence – as she liked to be called and invariably signed her publicity stills – was compared to that Bobby-Sox sensation Frank Sinatra for the contagious effect she had on audiences. High society attended in droves in full evening attire, jewels and furs, paying top dollar to hear her. Cole Porter composed a song for her. Beatrice Lillie was an ardent fan. Sir Thomas Beecham played her albums – his favorite recordings – on British radio. Fashion gasped at the extraordinary gowns she designed for herself and wore at the invitation-only soirees she gave in the grand ballroom of the Ritz Carlton, St Regis or the Sherry-Netherlands



Costume Renderings for Florence Foster Jenkins in *Souvenir*

Courtesy of
Costume Designer
Tracy Christiansen

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talent. It was essential that the actress playing her did not overtly comment on or mock the character. We always did the opening scene at the auditions. So far as I was concerned I was ready to cast Judy on the spot. She has been an angel to work with, very talented, very easy, just wonderful. We had to replace the first actor who'd played Cosme as well, and when Donald came along, it was also one of the things where I felt almost immediately he would be wonderful.

Looking at the overwhelmingly positive reception *Souvenir* has had, was this something you anticipated early on in rehearsal?

Interesting you should ask that. I once said to Jessica Tandy, when I was rehearsing a play with her, "What was it like rehearsing *Streetcar* for the first time? Did you know you were embarking on something that would have a historic significance and effect on the theatre?" She looked at me and she said, "You know we came to work everyday, we rehearsed, we came home, we studied the script, we went to work the next day. It's just like working on this." You go on a day-to-day thing, from scene to scene, you just do your work.

What do you hope the audience will take away with them?

That this was a woman who had not only tremendous vanity but also tremendous courage. That we all practice a fair amount of self-deception. I think that most of the people who have seen it – who of course laugh themselves stupid at the play – have also been very moved by it – and they come away questioning their own ability, examining their own biases because the play does rebuke them for laughing and makes them ask the questions: How delusional am I? What does constitute art? Who made up the rules? It's like McMoon says "why is it if one note follows another we call it a tune, but a different note makes us wince?" And in that same speech he says he even came to prefer the way Florence Foster Jenkins sings.



Donald Corren, house production, are al Broadway production PHOTO BY CAROL ROSEGG

The Life and Times of Florence Foster Jenkins

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Hotels. Caruso was a friend but other opera stars were in awe of her fame. Even her most ardent critics were at a loss for words in describing her unparalleled appeal.

So in 1944 it came as little surprise to her fans that Lady Florence – who claimed to be in her 60s but was actually 76 – should attempt to ascend to the highest height. As the old joke goes, how do you get to Carnegie Hall? Well, Lady Florence rented the space. The event was sold out for weeks in advance and grossed \$6000. Following her performance at Carnegie Hall, Florence endured an unusually harsh reaction. Previously, in smaller performance venues, she'd always been able to overlook the giggles, blaming the rudeness of some of the audience on hoodlums planted by her professional rivals. This time, with 3000 in attendance, the derisive giggles threatened to drown out her voice. As Chris Alexander, photographer of the Patrick Dennis classics *Little Me* and *First Lady*, describes the performance:

"She was really divine. Heavenly. It was one of the funniest nights in the theatre. For one number she came out with a large salad bowl filled with rose petals that she scattered on the floor. After the song was over she got down on her honkers, scooped them all up and did the entire number again. It was one of the highlights of my entire theatrical life. Right up there with Loretta Taylor in Glass Menagerie."

The music critics were not shy with their opinions either. Earl Wilson ridiculed her, complaining of 'dizziness, a headache and a ringing in the ears.' A few weeks later Lady Florence suffered a heart attack and never recovered. She died on November 26, 1944, a month to the day after her final concert.

So, did Lady Florence die of a broken heart? For a woman so incredibly resilient throughout her life, this seems as unlikely a story as the other claim often made by her detractors: that her 32 year career was an elaborate joke at the public's expense. Rather, it seems more likely that what the public was so captivated by, was the incredible level of faith Florence had in her abilities. It was impossible not to admire the passion she had for Opera and performance, which she conveyed every moment she was onstage; Carnegie Hall being no exception. As Robert Bagar wrote in the New York World-Telegram "she was exceedingly happy in her work. It is a pity so few artists are. And the happiness was communicated as if by magic to her hearers." And as Florence herself put it: "People may say I can't sing, but no one can ever say I didn't sing."

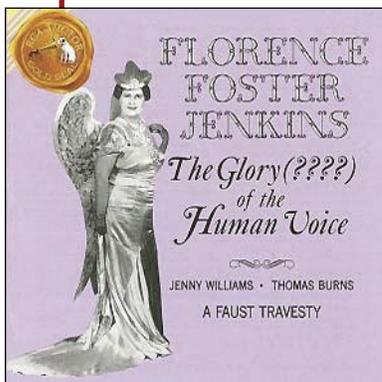
Recordings

"If it is impossible to predict where the lightning of genius is going to strike, how much less predictable is the urge to artistic endeavor."

– from the liner notes of Florence's final recording The Glory (???) of the Human Voice.

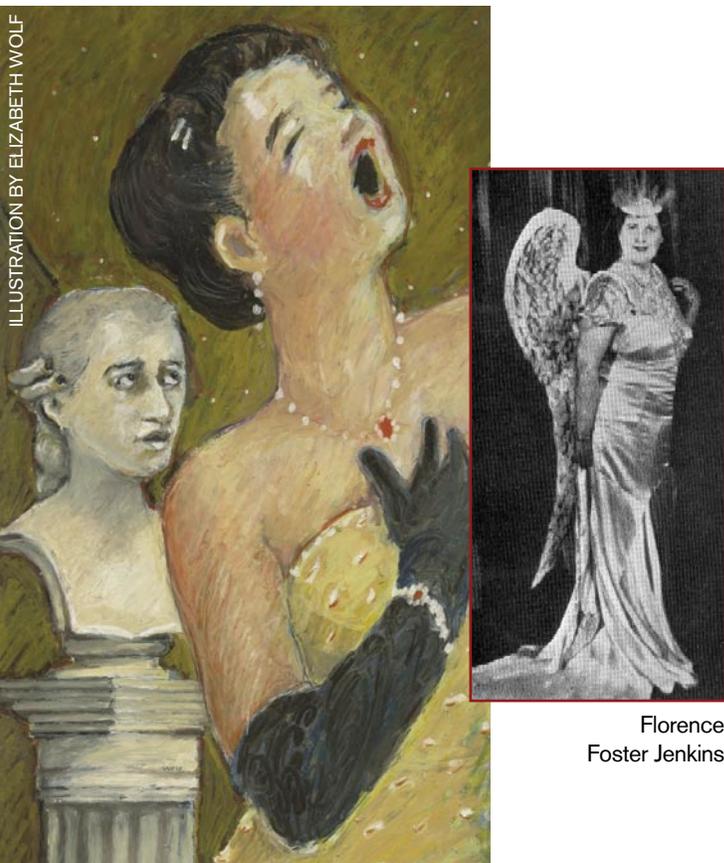
The Glory (???) of the Human Voice, released after her death is a collector's item. Its liner notes recount her life's story as "the first lady of the sliding scale." Florence appears on the cover in a costume of her own design entitled "Angel of Inspiration."

To hear Florence Foster Jenkins herself go to www.rhapsody.com/florencefosterjenkins.



"You're only given a little spark of madness. You mustn't lose it."

– Robin Williams



Florence
Foster Jenkins

The Voice in Lady Florence's Head (and in yours, too)

Lady Florence heard sublime melody when she sang, yet everyone else heard something quite different. For our purposes, let's call this "the shower effect" because so many are familiar with it. For those of us not blessed with perfect pitch, the "shower effect" is that all too common phenomena where our own singing sounds great in the shower, but when we hear it on tape or friends hear it at a karaoke bar – well, the sound is something quite different from the one in our head. What makes for such a glaring contrast?

The science of it is actually quite simple. When other people hear us speak their delicate seashell-shaped ears are picking up vibrations in the air generated by our own voice and passing through those delicate ears, a bunch of little bones in the head and their cochlea – a coiled tapered tube in the inner ear that is the primary sensory organ of hearing. The sound is then transmitted to the hearing department of the brain and translated into meaningful words and phrases.

However, when we hear our own voice what we are picking up is not so much the air vibrations that our voices create and others receive, but the vibrations our vocal chords send to our ear through our head bones and muscles and sinuses. All that changes the sound significantly. So when we hear ourselves speak – or sing – more or less what we are hearing is the voice inside our head: a private, personal voice whose specific beauty is ours and ours alone to know and appreciate.

"What matters most is the music you hear in your head"

– *Souvenir's* Florence Foster Jenkins

Opera

*O singer, if thou canst not dream,
Leave this song unsung*

– Originally from "Die Mainacht" by Brahms:
notation on Florence Foster Jenkins 1934 program

In exploring the passion of Florence Foster Jenkins, *Souvenir* examines the incredible power of Opera – a form which can be traced back as far as ancient Greece, where dramas often included an occasional song from the choir which served to further the plot. In the 1500s, one of the most popular forms of music in Europe was a madrigal, a song with a minimum of three distinct voices singing different words at different times. As the story in the music became more valued, audiences found the multiple voices of the madrigal muddling the narrative, making it hard if not impossible to follow. To solve the problem, recitatives were invented – a technique in which the accompaniment holds a note while one singer sings the musical line.

In 1594 Italian composer Jacopo Peri used recitatives in composing the very first opera, *Dafne*. Later, Peri wrote a piece of music, which was performed between acts in the comedy *La Pellegrina*, and so the intermezzo – the musical interlude – was born. When Peri composed his second opera, *L'Euridice* he utilized both recitative and intermezzo. By combining the styles of recitatives, intermezzo and that sacred music-drama style of oratorio, Claudio Monteverdi created opera's first masterpiece, *L'Orfeo*, which premiered in Mantua, Italy in 1607 and is still performed regularly today.

And while opera may be among the oldest art forms to endure through the ages in many ways unchanged, it still speaks to even the younger generations today. Just look at the popularity of singers like Andrea Bocelli, Josh Groban and Charolette Church – with the latter two incorporating opera into many of their albums as well. Among the fastest growing audiences at the opera are Generation X-ers, whose attendance increased nearly twenty percent in recent years. And overall, opera is among the fastest growing of the performing arts – with more than 20 million people of all ages attending every year.

And opera continues to inspire and inform other art forms. For instance its impact on musical theatre is unmistakable: Elton John and Tim Rice's *Aida* is based on Verdi's Opera of the same name, *Miss Saigon* is based on *Madame Butterfly*, and *Rent* on

La Boheme. Operatic elements pervade modern cinema as well, for example: *Fatal Attraction*, *A Room with a View*, *Philadelphia*, *Diva*, *Life is Beautiful*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *The Fifth Element* – with this final example featuring a striking blue woman (an extraterrestrial) performing opera aboard an interstellar cruise ship; a projection by the filmmaker that even in two hundred and fifty more years opera will continue to captivate.

"Music was my refuge.

*I could crawl into
the spaces between the
notes and curl my
back to loneliness"*

– Maya Angelou

For modern audiences, accustomed to film and television filled with special effects, the expectation is for entertainment that dazzles the senses with breathtaking sound and spectacle. Opera fulfills that promise. With lush sets and costumes, phenomenal voices, and stories with universal appeal and emotional truths that span time and transcend the fad-oriented popular music of the day – opera is as relevant today as when it was born (in its earliest incarnation) in Ancient Greece.

Suggested Readings

- *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940's* by William Graebner. Publisher: Waveland Press, Inc.
- *The Songs That Fought the War: Popular Music and the Home Front, 1939-1945* by John Bush Jones. Publisher: Brandeis University Press
- *On the growing role of observation, formalization and experimental method in musicology* by Henkjan Honing. Published in: *Empirical Musicology Review*, Volume 1, Number 1.
- *Kojak – 50 seconds of Television Music: Toward the Analysis of Affect in Popular Music* by Philip Tagg. Publisher: The Mass Media Music Scholars' Press, Inc.
- *Hearing Your Voice as a Laryngectomy* by Lisa Zee. On the web at <http://www.larynxlink.com/Library/health/hearing.htm>

Discussion Points

- (1) Florence Foster Jenkins is not the only person of questionable talent that the public has embraced. Discuss the modern phenomenon of American Idol, or individuals such as Paris Hilton or Anna Nicole Smith.
- (2) Investigate the world of musicology: what is music? What are the basic or common elements that all forms of music share? For instance, music theory in the Western tradition focuses on harmony and counterpoint, and then uses these to explain large-scale structure and the creation of melody. Play a favorite piece of music and analyze it in light of those elements.
- (3) Look at the evolution of different forms of music in history. What are the ways in which music has helped people survive or cope with hardships? How have different kinds of music developed out of people's instinct to survive (spiritually, emotionally, or literally)? Out of what kind of situations have these different forms arisen?
- (4) In many ways, Florence Foster Jenkins' love of music kept her in a happy, upbeat frame of mind. Investigate the links between music and well-being. What are forms of music therapy? How are these therapies implemented and why do they work?
- (5) What does the power and passion to create mean to you – do you know the secret artist within yourself?

Souvenir: Special Events

Sunday Symposium June 3, 2007, immediately following the 3pm matinee.
Free and open to the public.

Prologue June 8, 2007 at 7pm (30 minutes).
This pre-show, half-hour conversation with Artistic Director Tazewell Thompson provides a glimpse into his creative mind and provides details about the production that you can't find anywhere else.

Thursday TalkBack June 14, 2007, immediately following the 8pm performance.
Free and open to the public. Join the cast members of *Souvenir* to discuss their experience working on the production. *Artist attendance subject to availability.*

Backstage Pass June 13, 2007, immediately following the 2pm matinee.
Get a first hand look behind the curtain! Playhouse production staff shares the tricks of the trade with you and discusses the set design, lights, props, sound, costumes and other special effects involved in our production of *Souvenir*.

The Bookstore is now open! Featuring *Souvenir* and other plays in our 2007 season, including: *The Skin of Our Teeth* (the basis for the musical *All About Us*), *Mary's Wedding*, *Relatively Speaking* and *Turn of the Screw*. *Plays now available for purchase at the box office.*

*...you may write me down
In history
With your bitter
Twisted lies,*

*You may trod me
in the very dirt
But still, like dust,
I'll rise.*

Does my sassiness

Upset you?

*Why are you beset
with gloom?*

*'Cause I walk
Like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my
Living room.*

Just like moons

*And like suns,
With the certainty
of tides,*

*Just like hopes
Springing high*

*Still
I'll rise*

– Maya Angelou