

**WHAT HAPPENS? A celebration of Langston Hughes, In Verse and Song.**  
**Compiled and Presented by Tayo Aluko, With Dennis Nelson, Piano, and Everton Bailey, Trumpet**  
**Monroe Lecture Center, Hofstra University, Long Island NY Thursday, Feb. 13, 2020**

Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967) never achieved much commercial success in his lifetime, yet he remains to this day one of the most prolific and highly respected writers in American history. It has been a difficult but hugely enjoyable task selecting a small selection of his work to present to you tonight.

My story with Hughes started in 2014 when I received an email out of the blue from the Artistic Director of a small theatre in England - The Maltings, where I had performed my play *Call Mr. Robeson* a year earlier. He hadn't seen it himself, but had heard good things about it. He said he had always wanted to do something about Langston Hughes, and wondered if I'd be interested. I immersed myself in his autobiographies, a biography, and collections of his work, and the result is *What Happens?* - the opening words of the very first poem of this presentation. The same poem also inspired the title of an award-winning international classic play by Lorraine Hansberry: *A Raisin In The Sun*. *Raisin'* cast a light on the United States of her time as seen through the knowing eyes of a Black family navigating the blatant racism and inequality of 1950s Chicago. Thanks in part to such beautiful, hard-hitting art, and to the activism that inspired it and that it in turn inspired, much progress was made in America subsequently. Over the last few years, months and even days however, the clock seems to have gone into reverse, as is being demonstrated alarmingly in two branches of government.

Art has always been an effective means of holding up a mirror to society, often confronting us with its ugliness. Another one of Hughes's very short poems, *JUSTICE* (also performed tonight), could have been written specifically for today. So too could the wonderful novel *To Kill A Mocking Bird* published by Harper Lee in 1960, and set in Alabama of 1936. Currently a hit Broadway play, it portrayed the shocking racism and injustice of the time, when one by one, the members of an all-white jury condemned a clearly innocent Black man to death, uttering the word "Guilty," twelve times, despite having full evidence that Tom Robinson was innocent. Ironically, only last week, knowing full well that there was evidence that would likely prove the guilt of the president, Republican senators decided to effectively say "Innocent," one after the other. Only one said his conscience instructed otherwise.

About the same time, buried from mainstream news, a certain Chuck Africa was quietly released from jail after 43 years. He was the last member of The MOVE 9 - a group of Black people who had been terrorised by the Philadelphia police, but were themselves jailed, way back in 1978. Still languishing in jail right now is a brilliant Black journalist from that same city – Mumia Abu Jamal – framed for the murder of a police officer, again despite compelling evidence of his innocence. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of similar examples in this, the so-called Land of the Free, in which freedom is seemingly only guaranteed if you are rich and White, regardless of your criminality.

When therefore these few lines were published in 1923:

*That Justice is a blind goddess / Is a thing to which we blacks are wise /  
Her bandage hides / two festering sores / That once perhaps were eyes.*

Langston Hughes couldn't possibly have known how tragically relevant they would remain nearly a whole century later. One can however look forward to the possibility of a powerful, beautiful piece of writing from the 2020s, maybe penned by a current Hofstra student, titled *Two Festering Sores*.

**Tayo Aluko. Writer, Performer.** Tayo was born in Nigeria and now lives in Liverpool, UK. His play, *CALL MR ROBESON* has won numerous awards at festivals in the UK and Canada, and taken him as far afield as the North West Territories of Canada to Australia and New Zealand, including New York's Carnegie Hall. Another play, *JUST AN ORDINARY LAWYER* has also been performed internationally, and both of them here at Hofstra. He has been published in *The Guardian*, *The Morning Star*, *NERVE Magazine*, *Modern Ghana* and *Searchlight Magazine*. He was one of a group of ten "outstanding writers of colour" (including the 2019 Booker Prize joint winner) invited to write and perform responses to artefacts held in Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum in 2019.

**Dennis A. Nelson (Piano)** Keyboardist, songwriter and arranger Dennis studied at the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music and at Hofstra University. He is organist and choir director for Trinity Baptist Church in Brooklyn, and accompanist for the New York City Labor Chorus. He is currently working on his first piano project, to be released later in 2020.

**Everton L. Bailey (Trumpet)** Everton is the founder and director of the Trumpet Academy and the Village of Hempstead Summer Music Academy at Kennedy Park in Hempstead. He has also taught for after school programs at The Eagle Academy for Young Men in the Bronx; the Hempstead Boys and Girls Club and The Empire State Grant Summer Program. He is the founder and director of his own band "ISOP" – The Instrumental Sounds Of Praise – a "gospel/jazz/reggae/funk" big band that also functions as a music mentoring program for youth.

Instrumental  
Harlem  
The Glory of Negro History  
Poem: The Negro Speaks of Rivers  
Song: The Death of An Old Seaman Lyrics: Langston Hughes; Composer, Cecil Cohen  
Envoy to Africa

Four Way Celebration  
Justice  
Song: Miss Otis Regrets: Words and music, Cole Porter

Theme For English B  
The Man of the Year for 1958  
Park Benching  
Song: I Got Plenty of Nothin' Lyrics: DuBose Heyward & Ira Gershwin; Music: George Gershwin

Blues At Dawn  
For Ten Years / The Magazines  
Mother To Son  
Song: Blues in The Night Lyrics: Johnny Mercer;  
Music: Harold Arlen

Instrumental  
Madam's Calling Cards  
Cross  
Sylvester's Dying Bed  
Song: I Guess I'm Just A Lucky So and So Lyrics: Mack David; Music: Duke Ellington

Note on Commercial Theatre  
Freedom Train  
Song: The Way You Look Tonight Lyrics: Dorothy Fields; Music: Jerome Kern

White Man  
Letter to the Academy  
My Adventures As A Social Poet  
Instrumental: Strange Fruit. Music: Abel Meeropol  
Song: That's All Words & Music: Bob Haymes & Alan E Brandt

Comment on War  
Body Here, Leg There  
Some Day  
Song: I Dream A World Lyrics: Langston Hughes;  
Music: William Grant Still

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