Performance work in the academy subverts the mind/body split even while it appears to exist on the physical end of that inappropriate binary, because performance is at once physical and intellectual, visceral and cerebral.

(Jones, 1997, p. 58)

Introduction

Joni Lee Jones is a distinguished writer, performance ethnographer, performer, videographer, and theatre director. Many consider Jones, a doctor of educational theatre, to be one of the most outstanding contributors to the practice of performance ethnography of the decade. Her performance and production efforts address several significant social issues, including racism
and sexism in the academy and the “wounds that exist between African-American men and women” (Jones, 1993, p. 236). Because of her cathartic approach to African and African American theatre, Jones's work is widely recognized in several disciplines: theatre, dance, Africana studies, and communication.

As the preceding quote suggests, in addition to the therapeutic potential that Jones's work offers, Jones also provides a means to view performance as scholarship. In 2002, Jones was awarded the National Communication Association's Leslie Irene Coger Award for Distinguished Performance. One member of the award-nominating committee wrote that her work “seemingly merges with other forms of scholarship to become argument, critique, conversation, embodied theory and ceremony” (NCA Distinguished Scholar Award Recipients, 2002). In her efforts to advance the development of a distinctively African American dramaturgy, Jones has taught many in the academy about the value of “living the life of one's work” and of the “interconnectedness of scholarship, performance and production” (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004).

Jones, who is associate director of the Center for African American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, has received numerous awards, including a Fulbright for performance studies in Nigeria. Moreover, Jones taught at Obafemi Awolowo University and contributed “Theatre for Social Change” workshops for the Forum on Governance and Democracy in Ile-Ife, Osun State in Nigeria. She has also directed multiple theatrical productions in Washington, D.C., Texas, and Massachusetts. Jones is an accomplished performing artist and scholar who is perhaps most noted in the theatre community for two critical works: *sista-docta* and *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*. Her work has appeared in several prestigious and noted publication outlets such as *The Drama Review, Theatre Insight, Text and Performance Quarterly*, and *Black Theatre News*.

**Biographical Information**

Born on the south side of Chicago in 1955, Joni L. Jones was influenced by the changing political and social climate of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as have most of the pioneers in this volume. Her mother, Dorothy Mae Brown Jones, and father, William Edward Jones, were natives of Louisiana and Texas, respectively. Jones grew up in a family structure that she described as “aware of itself as a Black middle class family” (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004). She had three older sisters: Regina Elaine Patrick, A. LaVerne Love, and Willetta Doreen Wordlaw. Although governmental politics was not a primary topic of conversation in her family, Jones recalled feeling a real sense of the transformative power of the civil rights movement across state borders, cultural ideologies, and religious factions, all happening primarily through actively engaged Black voices being heard and Black bodies being seen protesting for social justice. Jones learned at an early age how the political struggles of these years shaped the everyday realities of her family life. The postsegregationist social milieu defined her adolescence. Jones suggested that the “swirl of energy” that accompanied the civil rights movement was awe-inspiring” (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004). Her sisters were also quite conscious of the importance of the movement. In fact, LaVerne was a founding member of the Chicago branch of the National Black Feminist Organization. Although Jones was significantly younger than her sister, she recalled that LaVerne’s activism was empowering for her and others in the surrounding Chicago communities.

Jones's family left metropolitan Chicago and moved to Markham, Illinois, a predominately Black suburban subdivision, when Jones was 5 years old. In Markham, Black families resided
on one side of the main thoroughfare, whereas White families lived on the other. However, Jones attended integrated schools with the other Black, White, and Latino children of the community. Jones was proud to have that educational opportunity, although she was aware of the presence of racism still dormant in the minds of her White peers and their families.

During her youth, Jones's father worked as a machinist and was very active in the Urban League and the automobile manufacturers’ union. Later in his life, he worked for the Social Security Administration until his death. Jones vividly recalled how the transition from blue-collar to white-collar work seemed to “make his spirit happier” (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004). Jones's father died in 1968, when she was 13 years old. The loss of her father changed both the structure of Jones's family and the way in which she envisioned female strength, power, and perseverance.

Although both of Jones's parents worked, her mother's role shifted significantly after Jones's father’s death. As the primary wage earner of the now all-female family, Jones's mother struggled to meet the challenges of everyday family life. She worked several jobs during Jones's adolescent years. Jones recalled the enormous sense of empowerment and pride she felt in seeing her mother successfully maintain the family home and still be able to send Jones and her sister, Willetta, to college. It was the goal of both parents that all their children receive a college education. Although Jones's mother never attended college, she had various forms of professional training and experience, including work as a cashier at E. J. Korvetts and Spiegel department stores, as an employee of the U.S. Postal Service, and as a mental health technician by the time of her retirement.

Jones described her relationship with her older sisters as “crucial” to her development into womanhood, her artistry, and her scholarship. She recalled that her relationships with them helped her to understand what to expect from her life. Observing her sisters’ lives unfolded taught her a great deal about “relationships with men, what sisterhood might mean and what the role of education was” (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004). It was in seeing such strength and perseverance from her mother and sisters that Jones was motivated to pursue a line of scholarship in which the importance of lived experience and deconstructed everyday realities was paramount.

**Academic Background and Experience**

Education was valued highly in Joni L. Jones’s family. Her father attended Prairie View A&M University, and her mother graduated from du Sable High School in Chicago. She recalled having the impression that “school was just something you did and you did well; it just wasn't even an option to do anything else” (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004). So, attending college was an expectation for Jones and her sisters instead of a choice. She recalled an early childhood ritual of delivering her report card to her parents for their review. Jones specifically remembered the “moment of holding my breath” while awaiting her father's approval of her academic performance. Naturally, she was always relieved when he did approve, and this was one of the motivating factors toward succeeding in each of her lifelong educational endeavors.

Jones recalled having a “deep and abiding relationship” with some of her teachers. She speaks of them fondly in stating that she “really cared about them, and truly believed that they cared about me.” As previously noted, Jones's early educational years took place during a time of racially charged social politics. Thus, she recalls the tension of trying to navigate through and understand the nature of her relationships with teachers during this time of social
One of her most vivid memories during this time occurred during a heavy snow day in Chicago. Students of her school district were released from school early due to the inclement weather, but she and other students in her class were asked to clean the snow off their teachers' cars before they left for home. At first thought, Jones recalled perceiving this activity as fun until she reinterpreted the image of her teacher looking through one of the school windows at the group of Black students cleaning her car. She described the image as one that was especially striking because she also recalled feeling somewhat unequal in this experience because the group of students cleaning the cars walked home from school that day (as they did every day) in the snow, whereas the teachers who were having their cars cleaned drove home without offering rides to the students. She described this experience, this microinequity, as an “instance of quiet racism,” and believed it to be one of the defining moments of her youth. Microinequities are, as one organization puts it, “those small slights which in themselves are not important and often seem funny in retrospect, but have the cumulative impact of drops of water on a rock” (Joint Math Meetings, 1994). The experience taught Jones that being Black in America meant having less power and privilege than Whites had. The direct message of this experience was that she could clean her White teachers’ car, but could not ride in it (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004).

Reflecting on her relationships with former teachers, Jones now interprets the concern they showed for her development as almost “paternalistic” and “condescending.” Yet, she also acknowledged how significant these relationships were for her self-esteem and confidence—realizing the importance of teacher immediacy and attention on student development. Despite the complexity of these relationships, she stated, “I had some teachers who made me feel exceptional.” Jones believes that these teachers made a tremendous difference in her life (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004).

Jones graduated from high school in 1973. She described herself in high school as a “good student,” and recalled studying very hard and being well-liked during this time in her academic life. She grew very fond of literature, language, and the practice of studying texts. After high school, Jones attended MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Illinois, a small private institution affiliated with the United Methodist Church. The choice to attend MacMurray was a valuable one because the transition from high school to college was relatively smooth. In 1977, Jones graduated summa cum laude with a bachelor’s degree in speech and theatre. She recalled that the most difficult task at college was navigating her way through a predominately White academic institution. Jones has fond memories of her undergraduate education: “I got the best education ever at MacMurray (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004).

Jones's transition to graduate school was more challenging. Upon the advice and encouragement of her undergraduate mentor, Dr. Phillip Decker, Jones attended Northwestern University for her graduate program in performance studies. She entered graduate school with a strong interest in Black aesthetics and sought to explore the landscape of Black artistic production and its implications for politics and the spirit. Jones described her experiences with instructors during this time as “sharply different from what I had experienced ever before.” She said that her relationships with them were “distant” and “critical.” Her most profound memory of the year she spent there is of the perception of superiority others had toward her. After graduating in 1978, Jones recalled leaving Northwestern feeling confused and disheartened from the experience. She remembered the experience vividly and suggested, “My master's program did a lot to undermine my feelings of
Reflecting on Northwestern, Jones concluded that her time there was difficult primarily because "the style of thinking, which had served me very well in the past" was not valued in the new educational environment. She noted, "I didn't ask the same kinds of questions, didn't approach literature in the same way—I just didn't seem to feel like I belonged there" (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004). Jones struggled externally in relationships with others and internally in terms of self-doubt. She often felt that her self-perception of intellectual inferiority placed her outside of the norm in academia. She also felt isolated and alone when outside of the academic environment.

Jones overcame the emotional impact of her early graduate school experiences by seeking mentorship from other African American scholars in the field. She recalled desperately needing understanding people with whom she could share her experiences and feelings. She acknowledged Marsha Houston, D. Soyinyi Madison, and Dwight Conquergood as key people in her intellectual and professional development. Houston served as Jones's informal mentor and was always willing to listen and advise her during difficult times as an assistant professor. Madison and Conquergood's work motivated Jones to continue blending activism with scholarship. She described them as people who "live the life of their work, they don't merely report on it from a distance" (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004). The support she received from them and others helped Jones push forward with her life and career.

Jones took an appointment at the University of Maryland in 1978. She taught courses in oral interpretation, group discussion, interpersonal communication, and several others. After four years in College Park, Maryland, she accepted a position at the College of William & Mary, where she successfully established and developed the Black Thespian Society. Jones remained in this appointment until 1983, when she accepted an appointment at Howard University to teach courses in oral interpretation, speech and debate, and persuasion. She also began working on her doctoral degree while teaching at Howard. In fact, she described the Howard campus environment as "extremely important" in prompting her to continue her studies because she was on a campus where discussions of Africa and the African Diaspora were "just a natural part of everyday talk" (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004). Howard functioned to validate and confirm Jones's interests in a way that she had never known. The collective intellectual environment and acceptance of Afrocentric ideas helped her shape a career path that was central to her identity and academic interests. Describing the environment at Howard, she said, "What's in the air; what is permissible in the environment goes a long way towards shaping what our intellectual pursuits are" (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004). The atmosphere there provided the motivation and support Jones needed to complete her degree in educational theatre at New York University in 1993. Jones is currently an associate professor of performance studies at the University of Texas (UT) at Austin. She also serves as associate director for the Center for African and African American Studies. Much of her work with the center is designed to create a venue for the UT and Austin communities to explore African and African Diasporic philosophies and engage in scholarship that "deepens our understanding of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nationhood" (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004).

Jones's appointment at the University of Texas at Austin began as a joint position in the departments of theatre and dance and communication studies. As an assistant professor, Jones found it very difficult to establish her performance work and teaching in theatre history as suitable for tenure in both departments. At the same time, the communication department
became more empirically oriented. This was a particularly challenging time for Jones because she struggled to establish herself as an artist-scholar in a department that no longer recognized the value of her work, so her position was subsequently changed to a full-time appointment in theatre and dance. Yet through it all, Jones refused to be invalidated by the academy—she continued to perform and create. She argued that all of life is performance, and that the performance of identity was a necessary and critical area of significant study (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004).

Jones described her pedagogical approach as “emergent pedagogy” in that she seeks to shape her teaching style to the content of the classes she teaches. She enjoys the collaborative and reflexive qualities of this approach and its potential to increase student learning opportunities. Jones’ commitment to new ways of thinking about scholarship, learning, activism, and instruction influences her performance work in innovative and thought-provoking ways. For Jones, life experiences are far too valuable to underestimate their influence on personal, professional, and social life. This belief greatly influences her approach to all things.

Contributions to Communication Research

Joni Lee Jones has conceived, directed, and performed more than 20 creative works over her career. These works include *Searching for Osun* (2000), *sista-docta* (1994), *Broken Circles: A Journey through Africa and the Self* (1994), and *Wild Women and Rolling Stones* (1992). Jones’s stellar performance work has been honored by the National Communication Association, U.S. Department of Education, Austin Chronicle of Theatre Critics, Outstanding Young Women of America, and Washington Theatre Festival. Her passion for performance and African-based theatre has also resulted in numerous guest performer invitations. In 1997, Jones received a prestigious Fulbright Fellowship to teach and study at Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria, where she conducted Theatre for Social Change workshops for the Forum on Governance and Democracy in Ile-Ife.

Jones's written scholarship has been particularly significant to the growing body of knowledge in performance ethnography. It was Victor Turner, one of Jones's major influences, who maintained that people’s performances reveal their inner selves, sort of tattling on the interpreting artists. Performance ethnography offers remarkable illustrative potential because it is concerned with not only how the artist lives life and interprets individual and collective experiences but also how life itself is culturally constructed and imbued with meanings awaiting interpretation and action. To be clear, however, performance ethnographers place a premium value on “local knowledge;” that is, knowledge that is specific to the individuals living in the context of a local cultural community and behaving in accordance with their own cultural interpretations of everyday social rituals, norms, roles, functions, events, and activities. Of course, a major distinguishing characteristic of performance ethnography versus other types of ethnography is that the observations of the field researcher are then interpreted and performed. One of the heuristic qualities and principal challenges of performance ethnographers is the preservation of that experience through performance. What for some might seem to be a fleeting moment in a string of normal, everyday enacted discourses can be considered by the performance ethnographer to be an important episode deserving of critical attention. This point is probably best explained by Richard Schechner's statement that performance is a “restored” or “twice-behaved behavior” (Schechter, 1990, p. 36). At its best, performance is a redundant activity that captures the subtle authentic nuances of already-lived experience via a performed interpretation. Naturally, the danger in restorative performance is that even if done carefully, it can leave an oppressed community even more
vulnerable by trying to sanitize experience or by disrupting, misinterpreting, or displacing subjectivity and voice. In other words, the performance ethnographer has to be ever mindful of the politics of representation, of not re-creating the self in the process of performative articulation of someone else's lived experience (de Certeau, 2002). This superimposition, which can be dangerous and debilitating, can occur with even the slightest restorative act, which is why the performance ethnographer's role is so critical. She must be self-reflexive, respectful, meticulous, ethical, and observant of cultural intricacies and narrative intertextualities while also being cognizant of her character and relationship to the audience. Jones's pioneering performance and ethnographic communication research strongly embrace Victor Turner's conceptualization of performance as an act of liminality or existing on the borders of a culture's inside/outside (Turner, 1986). Furthermore, her work vividly illustrates a clear understanding that a given culture's inside/outside is not a binary configuration. There is a seamless web of significance between each that represents the fluidity and sometimes contradictory impulses of everyday life.

Loosely described as “a cross between journalism, theatre, and anthropology” (Swanson, 1999, p. 1), performance ethnography envisions all humans as actors of public life. It prioritizes the ways in which humans construct and participate in cultural expression to understand the “social dramas” of everyday life. Under this paradigm, the ethnographer seeks to understand how cultural performances (i.e., rituals, festivals, and so on) serve as forms of public address. This understanding is achieved through intense field study, which is later transformed into a performance of the experience that can be shared with others. In The Anthropology of Performance, Victor Turner described the value of studying cultural performance as follows:

[C]ultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting “designs for living.” (Turner, 1986, p. 24)

Turner's critique of textual positivism as a primary means of studying communication resonated with Jones in a way that few others had. The work of scholars such as Dwight Conquergood, Richard Schechner, and D. Soyini Madison offered Jones the validation and intellectual home she searched for throughout her graduate school career.

Although very invested in the scholarly tenets of the performance paradigm, Jones described herself as an “artist-scholar” because the term acknowledges the interconnectedness of scholarship, production, and performance (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004). Her personal philosophy frames her researcher identity; therefore, she does not subscribe to a standard empirical model of research that objectively detaches the researcher and cleanses her interpretations. Instead, her holistic approach acknowledges the intertextuality of life. She also considers herself an activist in the sense that her work often calls for some form of social change and transformation. Jones's article “Improvisation as a Performance Strategy for African-based Theatre” (Jones, 1993) discussed studying the Egungun, Apidan, and Ogunde theatrical performances of the Yoruba to incorporate characteristics of them into two Yoruba-based performances that were enacted by university students. In her observations of the Yoruba, Jones identified several common characteristics of Yoruba performance. Of them, she argued that improvisation offers the most resonance with and transformative potential for African American life, thus she “fashioned a dramaturgical/performance paradigm that relied heavily on improvisation” (Jones, 1993, p.
The performances were geared toward “healing the wounds that exist between African-American men and women” (Jones, 1993, p. 236). The function of healing in these productions was paramount, as Jones noted in the following excerpt:

Performance as healing is an essential feature of the African-based productions with which I have worked: the healing is the way in which such performances achieve efficacy … by offering [participants] an opportunity to actively explore their own solutions to social problems, performance can begin to heal the wounds of a community by allowing all present to physically participate in the examination of those wounds. (Jones, 1993, p. 235)

With the goal of community healing in mind, Jones is optimistic about the power of performance to yield social transformation. Evidence in this case does not follow the conventions of empirical paradigms; instead, she noted:

Even without empirical evidence demonstrating that healing occurred, I am encouraged by the fact that at the end of one performance two police officers on duty stopped to see what was going on in the gym, and they stayed to eat and play drums while everyone danced… The freedom that is at the heart of improvisation gives space for this communal interaction, and it is this interaction that is a step toward healing community wounds. (Jones, 1993, p. 59)

Thus, personal transformation via performance is the hallmark of Jones's contributions to communication research.

Although her study of improvisation has received widespread acknowledgement across academic disciplines, Jones believes that her work *sista-docta* has been most noted throughout her career. *sista-docta* offers a challenging critique of the academy's treatment of diversity, equal opportunity and inclusion. She presented this critique in auto-ethnographic form, allowing herself to use her own experiences as an African American woman professor at predominately White institutions to share the common struggles of African American women professors with her listening audience. The performance, which was recalled and also critiqued by Jones in her essay chronicling the experience of performing *sista-docta* for different audiences (Jones, 1997), resists the ideologies of White male dominance, Black female eroticism, and the invisibility of blackness and whiteness as defining social constructs:

By being oblivious to the politics of their own whiteness and White consciousness, White faculty remain unable to see blackness, to experience black as a sociopolitical identity construct interwoven around and through a White identity construct. *sista-docta* can confront the White-centered assumptions upon which the academy is based, insisting that White faculty acknowledge their contribution to the White sensibility of the academy. (Jones, 1997, p. 60)

Although the tone of the performance is subversive in its intentions to make observers uncomfortable at times, its transformative power comes from Jones's ability to strongly compel members of the audience to reflect on their participation in and perhaps enabling of the oppressive ideologies that characterize academic life. Jones confronts these ideologies through autobiographical performance to promote the kind of healing needed to enhance opportunities and access for more women and scholars of color in the academy. *sista-docta* takes a bold step in her call for social transformation.

Jones has made remarkable strides in the field of communication. She has been an artist,
director, producer, author, teacher, activist, and mentor. Her work spans continents, disciplines, and perspectives. Even as she espouses transformational politics through her work, she has undergone her own transformation, which is signified by her newly assumed Yoruba name: Iya Omi Osun Olomo. Through her contributions to communication studies, we see her honest and penetrating critiques of debilitating social practices and her interpretive performances restored for the sake of reflection and transformation. These contributions have been and continue to be inspiring to all who know her work.

Conclusion

Joni Lee Jones (aka Iya Omi Osun Olomo) was the 2002 recipient of the National Communication Association's Leslie Irene Coger Award for Distinguished Performance. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, Jones is a dynamic scholar, activist, and promoter of radical progressive social transformation. In addition to challenging systems of racism and sexism in the academy, Jones's work challenges “the academy's predilection for print scholarship” (Jones, 1997, p. 51). Given what she perceives as a “devaluing” of performance scholarship in academic departments, Jones also sees her work as a way to show members of the academy “how the qualitative provides some missing pieces in the research puzzle; pieces that empirical data does not always expose” (J. L. Jones, personal communication, March 24, 2004). Jones argues that performance work has a valuable place in the process of knowledge generation, yet continues to be ill-considered as a form of scholarship because it resists the biases of logical positivism:

Performance is a form of embodied knowledge and theorizing that challenges the academy's print bias. While intellectual rigor has long been measured in terms of linguistic acuity and print productivity that reinforces the dominant culture's deep meanings, performance is suspect because of its ephemeral, emotional, and physical nature. (Jones, 1997, p. 53)

Jones offers a distinct voice for performance scholars who find their intellectual pursuits diminished by “the linguistic and textualist bias of speech communication [that] has blinded many scholars to the preeminently rhetorical nature of cultural performance—ritual, ceremony, celebration, festival, parade, pageant, feast and so forth” (Conquergood, 1991, p. 188). In this way, Jones's work challenges us all to reflect on the ways in which we envision scholarship and to include the efforts of those whose work exists outside of that vision. Her critiques of self, community, and society remind us that scholarship is truly for transformation. This goal remains at the forefront of Jones's efforts, and we expect that her contributions to the academy will continue to influence its future directions.

References


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Further Reading


Joni L. Jones / Iya Omi Osun Olomo
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Born in Chicago, Illinois.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Graduated from high school and attended MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Illinois.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Graduated summa cum laude from MacMurray College with a bachelor's degree in speech and theatre.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Graduated from Northwestern University with a master's degree in performance studies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Became an instructor at the University of Maryland (1978–1982).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Accepted position as instructor at the College of William &amp; Mary.</td>
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<td>1984</td>
<td>Accepted position as instructor at Howard University.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Accepted position as associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Conceived and directed <em>Wild Women and Rolling Stones</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Received doctorate in educational theatre from New York University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Conceived, performed, and directed <em>sista-docta</em>, which offers a challenging critique of the academy's commitment to diversity, equal opportunity, and inclusion (performed numerous times between 1994 and 2002).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Conceived, performed, and directed <em>Broken Circles: A Journey Through Africa and the Self</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Conceived, performed, and directed <em>Searching for Osun</em> (performed in 2001 and 2002).</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>Received Leslie Irene Coger Award for Distinguished Performance.</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>Published “Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity,” in Theatre Topics.</td>
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<td>Published “Improvisation as a Performance Strategy for African-based Theatre.”</td>
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