MARCH 4 - MARCH 26, 2016

Written by Regina Taylor, adapted from the book by Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry

_Crowns_ is a stage adaptation of the book, _Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats_ by journalist Craig Marberry and photographer Michael Cunningham. Published in 2000, it features interviews of 54 “hat queens,” photographed in their Sunday hats, or crowns. From young women to grandmothers, the women in the book discuss the history, and the “hattitude” that is passed from generation to generation.

Adapted by actress and playwright Regina Taylor, the musical distills the women in the book to five characters. It also introduces a new character, Yolanda, a teenager from Brooklyn who is sent to live with her grandmother in South Carolina after her brother is shot.

Mother Shaw, Yolanda’s grandmother, welcomes her into a circle of women whose beautiful hats are metaphors for their lives; their triumphs and joys, their setbacks and sorrows. These women guide and inspire Yolanda to connect to her history and welcome her into the community.

Unlike a musical with a standard plot, _Crowns_ blends story and song to create a ritual that transcends time and place. Taylor explains, “I envisioned a Gospel music-driven piece, a crazy-quilt of music and movement and storytelling that takes us through the rituals of a Sunday in the South. The characters deliver monologues to the audience that may start in the Sunday church service but shift into memories of experiences in different times and places.”

_Crowns_ is a celebration of a stand-up-and-be-counted African-American tradition that evolved out of a long legacy of pain, pride and survival. It received its world premiere in 2002 at the McCarter Theatre, in Princeton, New Jersey. It is one of the most produced musicals in the country.
REGINA TAYLOR has had a distinguished and prolific career as an actress and playwright. Her work has been seen on Broadway and on stages across the country, in movies and on television.

Taylor was born 1960 in Dallas, Texas, and received a degree in journalism from Southern Methodist University. Her earliest professional acting roles were two made-for-television films while still in college: Nurse (1980) and Crisis at Central High (1981), which earned critical praise for her performance as Minnijean Brown, a member of the Little Rock Nine, the African-American students who faced violence and armed guards to integrate Little Rock Central High School in 1957.

Taylor made her film debut as Mrs. Carter, the drug-addicted mother in the 1989 film Lean on Me. She won a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress in a Television Drama for her role as Lilly Harper in the acclaimed 1990s PBS series I'll Fly Away.

Other notable performances include roles in films such as Losing Isaiah (1995), Spike Lee's Clockers (1995), Spirit Lost (1997) and The Negotiator (1998). She won a Women in Film Gracie Award for her portrayal of Anita Hill in the television film, Strange Justice (1999).

Taylor was the lead in the PBS production of Cora Unashamed (2000), based on a Langston Hughes story and a cast member of the CBS drama The Unit.

Also an accomplished stage actress, Taylor was the first black woman to play Juliet in Romeo and Juliet on Broadway. Other Broadway productions include Macbeth and As You Like It. Ms. Taylor has appeared Off-Broadway in Jar the Floor, Machinal, L'Illusion and A Map of the World.

Taylor's other plays include Oo-Bla-Dee, which details the story of Black female jazz musicians of the 1940s for which she won the American Critics' Association New Play Award, Drowning Crow, (an adaptation of Chekhov's The Seagull), The Dreams of Sarah Breedlove, A Night in Tunisia, Escape from Paradise, Watermelon Rinds and Inside the Belly of the Beast.

She conceived and appeared in the 2001 one-woman play Millennium Mambo, which included selections of works from various African-American female writers.

She is an esteemed member and Artistic Associate of the Goodman Theater in Chicago, where many of her plays, including Crowns, have been produced. 

Sources include http://crownsthegospel-musical.com/
MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM is a commercial photographer who became interested in photography as a young boy growing up in his home town of Landover, Maryland. His work has been featured in the New York Times and Ebony, among many other publications.

His personal projects are all done in black and white which he says “reaches deep inside of the viewer; making them study the photograph for what it is outside of pretty colors.”

Cunningham is the Executive Director of Urban Shutterbugs, a nonprofit organization that teaches the fine art of photography to inner-city youth. He is a member of the American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP).

CRAIG MARBERRY a Chicago native, is a graduate of Morehouse College. He studied in Scotland and Jamaica before attending Columbia University, where he received a master’s degree in journalism. He has written articles for The Washington Post and Essence Magazine, and worked as a television reporter before launching an award-winning video production company with clients including American Express and Nabisco.

In the introduction of Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats, Marberry writes: ”When the Apostle Paul wrote that a woman must cover her head when at worship...he could not have imagined the flamboyance with which African-American women would comply, wearing platter hats, lampshade hats, why’d-you-have-to-sit-in-front-of-me hats, often with ornaments that runneth over. Church hats are a peculiar convergence of faith and fashion that keeps the Sabbath both holy and glamorous.”

CROWNS QUOTES:

“Sundays are a precious gift to hardworking women who have labored unceasingly through the workweek...If the woman is African-American, she has some fancy hatboxes on a shelf in her closet... She dresses in the finest Sunday church clothes she owns, and then she puts on THE HAT. And then, she joins the company of her mothers and aunts and sisters and nieces and daughters at church. They too had waited longingly for the gift of a Sunday morning.”

MAYA ANGELOU from the foreword of the book

“We just know inside that we’re queens. And these are the crowns we wear.”

FELECIA McMILLAN, JOURNALIST

“You can flirt with a fan in your hand. You can flirt holding a cigarette, too. But a woman can really flirt with a hat.”

DOLORES FOSTER, REAL ESTATE AGENT

“Hattitude: Something you possess in order to wear a hat well.”

Velma in Crowns

2015-2016 / SKYLIGHT MUSIC THEATRE
SEVEN CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF A HAT

When Regina Taylor was given the opportunity to create a musical play from the Cunningham and Marberry book, she didn’t hesitate for a moment. “When I first looked at the photographs and read the stories,” she recalls in an article by Janice Paran of the McCarter Theatre, “I felt a deep sense of recognition, a sense of where I came from, of the women who helped raise me, the community that was provided by aunts and neighbors and by the women who worshipped in the church I grew up in. There was a feeling of knowing all of these women at different points in my life. That was very exciting to me.

When I first starting working on the play, I was at my mother’s house telling her about my research, and she took me to her closet to show me her hats. Each hat had a story: a wedding, a funeral, a baptism, each was a marker in her life.

Then she walked me back through them again and each hat had another story. I learned so much about my mother that day; all these memories cupped under the brim. That’s what my mother passed down to me…she gave me the story of her hats and that helped me to create Crowns.”

Mother Shaw is Yolanda’s grandmother and the matriarch in this world. She remembers the days before the civil rights movement and the stores with signs proclaiming “Whites Only.” She is recognized for her power to “usher in the Spirit.”

“We had cardboard and newspaper on the walls. But my mother taught me how to read from those newspapers.”

Wanda’s stories focus on propriety and decorum. The choice of the appropriate hat is very important to Wanda. She disapproves of too many baubles on a hat, especially sequins in church.

“When I get dressed to go to church, I’m going to meet the King, so I must look my best.”

Yolanda is a teenager who rebels against the traditions that the others hold dear.

“Don’t want to be boxed in by some dead or dying traditions, And I don’t know how to be one of them.”

“From High School created my own way of clothes, matching gangster brim, cap or a derby on, I’m a Brooklynite homey, hanging with the boys. Commanding respect, don’t make no noise- It was a lot of fun being buck wild, running the streets and doing it in style.”

Audience Guide / Crowns

Costume designs by Barry Link, Skylight’s Costume Shop Manager
Mabel is a minister’s wife who proudly owns about 200 hats. Mabel believes in setting an example of dress and behavior for younger girls, exercising her influence with a sharp and sassy tell-it-like-it-is attitude.

"Listen, never touch my hat. Admire it from a distance, honey."

Jeanette is flirtatious, fun loving and full of the joy of spirituality. Her hat stories include a memorable gift from a white acquaintance and a memory of her father’s favorite hat.

"I’d lend my children before I’d lend my hats. My children know their way home, but my hats might not."

Velma refers to herself as a hat queen and introduces the phrase, “hattitude,” meaning the flair a woman needs to carry herself in a hat. Velma is a funeral director and observes how “hattitude” figures into the death ritual.

“Sometimes under those hats, there’s a lot of pain and a lot of sorrow.”

The Man plays many different roles throughout the play. He serves the stories that the women tell, bringing to life the fathers, brothers, husbands and preachers who have touched the lives of the other characters.

“You don’t need another hat. You don’t have but one head.”

Definition: “Eshe o Baba eshe” is the Yoruba phrase for “Thank you Father, thank you.” The Yoruba are a West African people living in southwest Nigeria.
The contributions of African-Americans to the history of music in the United States began with the arrival of the first Africans in 1619. Although they were sold into slavery, torn from their homes and families, clamped into irons, and crowded into foul ships to make the passage from Africa to America, they held tight to their memories of their rich music and dance traditions. Their influences became deeply embedded in American musical history and continue to be heard today.

Listen for their sounds in Crowns:

FIELD HOLLER:
Originating in the early days of American slavery, the field holler was a work song that made use of call and response as a form of communication among plantation slaves in the South.

RING SHOUT:
Enslaved Africans rarely had their own church buildings, so they usually had to meet in homes or outdoors. Singing and moving the body were an integral part of worship and it is directly linked to the counter-clockwise circle dances of African Spiritual expression and ancestor worship.

The seeming chaos and abandon of the ring shout was frightening to owners who wanted complete control over the slaves. The ring shout was a combination of emotional release and controlled community behavior.

SPRITUALS:
Most spirituals are based on Bible stories as the slaves often thought of themselves as modern children of Israel, seeking freedom from bondage.

Regina Taylor says, “Spirituals are African tunes that were married to the poetry of the Bible, making them uniquely African-American.”

BLUES:
Developed in America from the various musical expressions of African-Americans, the exact origin of the blues is uncertain. The style may have developed after the Civil War from the short solo calls of field hollers. Many blues lyrics reflect loneliness or sorrow, but others present a humorous or defiant reaction to life’s troubles.

JAZZ:
Jazz music has often been called the only art form to originate in the United States. The history of jazz began in the late 1800s when a new form of music grew from a combination of influences, including African-American music, African rhythms, American band traditions and instruments and European harmonies and forms.

The earliest jazz was performed by African-Americans who had little or no training in Western music. During its history, jazz has absorbed influences from the folk and classical music of Africa, Asia, and other parts of the world.

RAP:
“Rap,” an acronym for Rhythm And Poetry, is also deeply rooted in African oral tradition, in particular the Griots and Griottes of West Africa, who are storytellers, poets, praise singers and keepers of community history.

Rap is generally spoken or chanted rather than sung. It is performed over musical accompaniment that emphasizes rhythm rather than melody. The accompaniment sometimes consists of short segments of earlier recorded music combined in new patterns.

Rap music first developed in the mid 1970s in New York City, and soon spread to other urban areas, primarily among African-American teenagers. At its earliest stages, the inspiration for rap came from disc jockeys in Jamaica who would talk, or toast, over recorded music they played in clubs.

Crowns begins with Yolanda telling her story in rap: “With Teddy my brother, We be like twins. He got my back, Whatever mess I get in. Myself I see when I look into his eyes, No need to worry, No need to disguise. Teddy my brother got shot one day, After his funeral, Ma sent me away, Down South, To open the door, To let the light in on a brand-new day, To Grandma’s house To consider my sins, To open my eyes to how I fit in.”

Hamilton, a rap-infused musical written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, is currently the biggest hit on Broadway.
The more I study Africa, the more I see that African-Americans do very African things without even knowing it. Adorning the head is one of those things...whether it's the intricate braids or the distinct hairstyles or the beautiful hats we wear on Sundays. We just know inside that we're queens. And these are the crowns we wear.”

Yolanda in Crowns

**Definition:**
In the opening group number, Jeanette sings “Gimme tahn dah zoe.” This is Gullah for, “Give me the strength of the wearer of the mask.” Gullah are an African-American people living in the coastal region of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

**Birth:**
Baptism marks a person’s entrance into the community. Baptism in a pond or river symbolizes a watery grave, and when the individual emerges from their brief submersion, they are born into a new life, no matter how old they may be. In this new life, they will be members of a community that will accompany them in times of both celebration and sorrow.

**Marriage:**
African weddings are often loud, lively and joyous with bells, drums and horns as part of the celebration. “Jumping the broom” emerged as a wedding tradition during times of slavery, when it was illegal for slaves to marry. When a bride and groom jump the broom, it symbolizes sweeping away past problems and welcoming a new life.

For the Kgatla people of southern Africa, it was customary on the day after the wedding for the bride to help the other women in the family to sweep the courtyard clean, symbolizing her willingness and obligation to assist in housework at her in-law’s home until the couple moved to their own home.

**Death:**
Traditionally, African-Americans consider death to be a critical part of the life cycle, not its ending. Funerals, often held at night, reflect a blend of African customs with Western Christian practices. African-American funerals often include a procession in which everyone passes the grave, shouting, chanting and singing.

The tradition of decorating graves with the possessions of the departed continued in the New World. Many Africans and their descendants believed that the spirit would need the person’s belongings after death, a holdover from the African belief in a spiritual life.

The most distinguishing characteristic in African-American funerals is keening, the dramatic expression of sorrow, also seen in Irish and Scottish funerals. At a traditional African-American funeral, it is common for grieving family members and friends to cry and wail at the loss of their loved one. Nurses are sometimes present to aid a mourner who becomes overwhelmed with emotion. In some cases, if family members do not react this way, others assume that the deceased was not loved and his death is not mourned.

**Sources include:**
www.mccarter.org/crowns.cfm; OnStage@GoodmanTheatre.org
Throughout human history, the head has been seen as a locus of power. In the late Stone Age, the skull was often decorated and buried by itself in a place of honor. In ancient Egypt, the dead were given head amulets, to guarantee the functioning of their own heads after death. In Plato’s cosmology, the mind and soul, resident in the head, were considered higher and nobler than the body.

In our time, royalty, pontiffs and other officials still wear the symbols of their rank on their heads. Ceremonial headdresses, a feature of indigenous and organized religions across time, often function to create sacred space around the wearer or transform them into a deity or benevolent spirit.

Hats and headdresses continue to signify leadership or convey religious meanings the world over. Just what those religious meanings are, however, varies from one person to the next and from one religious tradition to another.

In recent years, the hijab worn by many Muslim women and the turbans worn by Sikhs have brought religious headgear into the headlines. Unfortunately, those who wear these markers of religious identity have often been subject to harassment or violence.

Some Muslim women choose to wear the hijab, or headscarf, believing that God requires it as a demonstration of modesty. However, some Muslims feel that in today’s Western society, the hijab brings more attention to women and thus contradicts its original purpose.

The Vatican II reforms of 1965 removed the requirement that Catholic women cover their heads in church. That change, along with the shift toward hatlessness exemplified by President and Mrs. Kennedy, caused many Protestants to follow suit. But there are Christians today who assert that women should still cover their heads because the Bible’s 1 Corinthians 11 declares, “every woman who prays with her head uncovered dishonors her head.”

For Jewish women, but more so for men, wearing the small, round hat called a kippah (or yarmulke), is both a marker of Jewish identity and a distinctive way of showing reverence for God. In Orthodox Judaism, covering the head is considered a matter of piety for a man, but covering the hair is required as a matter of modesty for a married Jewish woman.

Traditionally, for Hindu religious services, both men and women were required to cover their heads. Though no longer true, in the past, married Hindu women covered their heads with the pallu, the end of the sari, a long strip of unstitched cloth, which can be draped in various styles.

For African-Americans, dressing up for church was a way to assert one’s dignity as a citizen and one’s value as a child of God. For a man, wearing a suit and tie and for a woman, wearing a stylish dress and coordinated hat, was an act of resistance to the degradation and humiliation of slavery, segregation and racism, and is a practice that persists today in some places and denominations.

In Eastern Orthodoxy and in the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church, a distinctive cylindrical hat called an epanokamelavkion is worn by both nuns and monks.

In the Church of Jesus Christ and Latter Day Saints (Mormon), women wear a veil as part of ritual temple clothing. This veil, along with the entire temple ritual clothing, is worn only inside the temple.

Perched as they are at the high point of the human body, hats have a unique power to help us express our identity. They will always serve ceremonial purposes, they help us express our spiritual identity, and they invite us to stand tall, our bodies symbolically bridging the gap between heaven and earth.

Turkish Square Hijab Guide

From https://www.mymodefa.com/ “Where modesty meets fashion”

Article by The Rev. Suzelle Lynch, Senior Minister of Unitarian Universalist Church West in Brookfield. A student of millinery history, Lynch has made hats of many kinds for more than 20 years, including “narrative and symbolic hats” that have a religious focus. She also teaches hat-making workshops both serious and silly.