

## UT professor Lisa B. Thompson's work of the soul, on-stage and off

*Kayleigh Hughes, Special to the American-Statesman*

In 1998, an inventive Stanford doctoral student named Lisa B. Thompson had to be talked into doing a reading for an innovative play she had written called “Single Black Female,” a searing and hilarious story of how two middle-class black women navigate the world professionally, culturally and romantically.

“I was working on my exams,” she offers in defense, speaking in late January. Fortunately, she eventually acquiesced and was almost surprised to discover during the reading’s rehearsal, “Oh my god, it’s funny!” The play was picked up the afternoon of the reading and a few months later, it made its world premiere (directed by a then-unknown Colman Domingo) in 1999 at San Francisco’s historic Theater Rhinoceros, which touts itself as the world’s oldest and longest-running queer theater.

Fast-forward two decades and “Single Black Female” has struck a major chord. It has been regularly produced throughout the U.S. and Canada (as well as South Africa, Thompson recently discovered), was nominated for a slew of awards, had a successful off-Broadway run and was published by Samuel French in 2012.

Thompson says she was driven to write the play in large part after “realizing no one had ever talked about black, middle-class women being sexual beings.”

The latest production of “Single Black Female” will open at Austin’s own Ground Floor Theatre on Feb. 13 and run through Feb. 29. Matrex Kilgore will direct, and Michelle Alexander and Valoneecia Tolbert will star.

As “Single Black Female” continued living out what Thompson calls “a life of its own,” the scholar-playwright herself, now a professor in the University of Texas’ African and African Diaspora Studies Department, gained her Ph.D. from Stanford and became widely published in both academic and cultural spheres.

Her book “Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class” was published by University of Illinois Press in 2009. Six of her full-length plays and several more one-act and short plays have been performed across the country (three of which will be published in August by Northwestern University Press in a collection called “Underground, Monroe, & the Mamalogues: Three Plays”). And her articles, op-eds, reviews and other scholarly and creative outputs are too numerous to list.

In person, Thompson is a cyclone of ideas, anecdotes and references from both popular and “high” culture. She cites Michele Wallace’s “Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman,” the black feminist book that inspired a line of dialogue in “Single Black Female,” just as enthusiastically as she expresses her superfan passion for actor Jeffrey Wright (“I think he is the most undersung actor. He’s brilliant!”)

“Her work is really funny and really smart at the same time, which is often difficult to do,” says Dr. Marcus McQuirter, the chair of Austin Community College’s drama department, who has worked with Thompson on theatrical productions of “Single Black Female,” her Afrofuturist one-act play “Mother’s Day” and a reading of her play “The Mamalogues,” which examines what it means to be a middle-class single black mother. “For me,” Thompson says, “it’s interesting to think about these iconic ideas about black womanhood and how to push against them.”

McQuirter calls Thompson “a joy to be around” as both a creative and a teacher, in large part because “she plays.”

“It’s always interesting to get that kind of playfulness out of somebody who is that smart, who is that well-read, who is that versed in theory,” he says.

For Thompson, that balance of intellect and playfulness has been foundational to her career. She’s told stories in one way or another since she was a child, growing up in the 1970s in the San Francisco Bay Area. She remembers rainy weekend days spent writing books and novels.

At bedtime, she and her brother would make up elaborate stories that Thompson likens to soap operas, though “we didn’t know about soap operas at that time.” She ruefully laughs remembering her brother’s blunt approach to plot development: “He’d always get mad and kill the person (in the story). ... I (was) like ‘What are you doing? We’re going camping! What is this?’”

Another powerful memory for Thompson was hearing radio advertisements for the choreopoem “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf.” Though her mother wouldn’t take her to see the performance — “My mom’s like, ‘No! You’re in eighth grade; what are you talking about?’” — she read the book “over and over and over and over again” and recited lines with her friend.

Thompson is fascinated by the forces that drove her family to migrate from Louisiana to the San Francisco Bay Area during the Great Migration of the early- to mid-20th century, in which a large population of black Americans moved northward, eastward and westward from the South. One of her earliest works, “Monroe,” is inspired by that journey, and “the scenes of racism, discrimination and economic pressures that were pushing black folks who were orphaned here (in America) from one of the greatest human atrocities ever done.”

Though she wrote “Monroe” during the only playwriting class she took at Stanford, she tucked it away for years, revising intermittently, and in first readings for the play’s world premiere in 2018, she had a powerful realization: “Oh my God, I brought everybody back. ... At the time I wrote (‘Monroe’), they were all alive. My father was alive, my mother was alive, my grandmother was alive, my aunt was alive. They’re all gone now.”

Thompson is now working on the two plays, “Gold” and “Flood,” that will follow “Monroe” in a trilogy about the Great Migration and its contemporary counterpart, the reverse migration of many black Americans back to the South in the wake of gentrification. Having moved to Austin in 2012, Thompson provides clear-eyed perspective to those having conversations about the damage of gentrification here. “I’ve already seen that movie before in San Francisco, it doesn’t end well for black people. I can tell you now.”

One thing that makes Thompson remarkable is her ability to fruitfully explore stories that matter to her in both academic and creative ways. Indeed, she sees these modes of thinking as complementary and almost necessary to one another. “I have a scholarly version and a creative version of the same kind of questions I’m toying with,” she says.

As a teacher, she encourages students to take creative approaches to their projects. “My job now,” she says, “is to give (my students) license to do the work that they need to do in their souls.”

Playwright Tyler English-Beckwith, one of Thompson’s former students, witnessed this firsthand: “She’s such a curious person,” who is “genuinely interested in who people are and how they’re experiencing the world.”

Thompson is widely inspired by the array of brilliant minds she has encountered throughout her life. Of working with her colleagues in the African and African Diaspora Studies Department, she says, “It’s like watching your bookshelf walk around live around you: people who you like to read, who challenge you and make you better.” And she is deeply inspired by her students, saying, “I see them as collaborators and mentors.”

English-Beckwith confirmed, saying that through her years of knowing Thompson, their relationship has been one of idea exchange and collaboration. “She’s always asking what plays I’ve been seeing, what are new playwrights who she should know about, or what films I’ve been seeing.”

It's not surprising, once you meet Thompson, to understand how she has cultivated a circle of friends and collaborators of all ages. As McQuirter says, "Every time you interact with her, you walk away usually in tears from laughter — but also a little bit smarter. And it's just a good place to be in life."

At this stage in her scholarly career, some of Thompson's main goals continue to be telling the stories of those who aren't as visible as they should be. She's been building a list of African American scholar-artists, both past and present, to undermine the notion that "those who can't do, teach." And she's interested in writing about intergenerational friendships. "I want to make sure that stories are being told about black people who are over 30, over 40, over 50 even, over 60. ... I want to write something that represents something I don't see but actually live, which is intergenerational friendships. Because that's part of my life."

And her life, she says, has been a journey she could never have made without the arts, which she says "are the one thing that sustain us spiritually."

"Without books, plays and other forms of art," she says, "I would've found my journey from birth to where I am right now quite unlivable. They have been my constant companions, my comfort, my rock. The possibility that I contribute to making life more bearable for others? It's a precious honor."