

Wisteria & *HOPE*

The Poetry of Experience

“The poet’s language is vivid and visceral; his courage and honesty blaze a path in poem after poem. This is the music of survival and transcendence. Indeed, the poetry of Kwame Dawes makes the impossible possible.” —Martin Espada

The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting presents a multimedia performance of two extraordinary works by award-winning poet Kwame Dawes and composer Kevin Simmonds. History and current global challenges become living and moving things through the power of poetry, music and photography.

Dawes’s resonant readings of his work represent some of the most exciting poetry performances of today. We are engaged by a stark truth-telling that is tempered by the alchemy that poetry brings to difficult experience – turning the ordinary into the sublime, into art. This work channels the voices of many unique individuals, inviting us to traverse oceans, borders and the limits of language.



Wisteria is a multimedia performance based on poems by Kwame Dawes published in his 2005 book, *Wisteria*. Composer Kevin Simmonds set these poems to music, exploring the lives of women who lived through the years of Jim Crow segregation. Dawes's poems grew out of interviews he conducted with elderly African American women in Sumter, South Carolina. Here the voices of women who lived through most of the twentieth century - teachers, beauticians, seamstresses, domestic workers and farming folk - unfold with the raw honesty of people who have waited for a long time to finally speak their mind. The poems move with the narrative force of stories long repeated but told with fresh emotion each time, with the lyrical depth of a

blues threnody or a negro spiritual, and with the flame and shock of a prophet forced to speak the hardest truths.

Wisteria features photographs from the Richard Samuel Roberts Collection of the Carolina Library at the University of South Carolina and an exceptional ensemble of musicians and performers, most of them from North and South Carolina, including Valerie Johnson, an instructor of music and the choir director at Bennett College.

This company now comes together to perform yet another collaboration between Dawes and Simmonds: *HOPE*. The Pulitzer Center commissioned Dawes to report on the impact of HIV/AIDS on Jamaica and while there he began writing poems in response to the stories he heard. They are at the heart of *HOPE: Living and Loving with HIV in Jamaica*, a project that encompasses essays for *The Washington Post* and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, two short documentaries for public television, a one-hour radio documentary, and a multimedia web presentation designed by bluecadet interactive that won the 2008 WEBBY People’s Voice Award for best use of art in website design. *Hope’s Hospice*, a collection of poetry from the project with images by Joshua Cogan, has just been published by Peepal Tree Press.

Wisteria

*Circumspect woman,
you carry your memories
tied up in a lip-stick-stained
kerchief in a worn straw basket.
When you undo the knot,
the scent of wisteria,
thick with the nausea of nostalgia
fills the closed-in room.
You lean into the microphone,
smile at the turning tape,
while fingering the fading petals.
You intone your history,
breathing in the muggy
scent of wayward love.
Your anger is always
a whisper, enigmatic,
almost unspoken,
just a steady heat.
I don't like 'em
never did, never could . . .*

Dawes's poems transcend conventional journalism, paring away detail to reveal the truths of character and situation, and finding forms that give expression to – and fulfill -- fleeting, difficult lives. Simmonds set many of these poems to music. The work reflects Simmonds' eclectic musical tastes, grounded in a deep soulfulness and a tender economy of modes that shift effortlessly between the classics, Caribbean-inflected melodies and the sublime possibilities of spirituals. *HOPE* the performance also features the photography of Joshua Cogan, who followed the path of Dawes's journalism and poetry to create his own vivid narrative of the disease.



*How it had me
all I wanted was to do*

*was crawl in a ball
and dead like that*

*but see me here now,
see me here now,*

*man must live, iyah,
man must live.*

-Excerpt from *Live Up*



Kwame Dawes is a Ghanaian-Jamaican writer and poet, the author of over a dozen collections of verse, including the critically acclaimed *Wisteria: Poems from the Swamp Country* and *Hope's Hospice*. He is also the author of *Bob Marley: Lyrical Genius*. Dawes is the Distinguished Poet in Residence and Louis Frye Scudder Professor of Liberal Arts at the University of South Carolina. He also is founder and executive director of the South Carolina Poetry Initiative, director of the University of South Carolina Arts Institute and programming director of the Calabash International Literary Festival, which takes place each May in Jamaica.

Kevin Simmonds, music director and composer, received the Bachelor of Music at Vanderbilt University and a PhD in Music Education at the University of South Carolina. His music has been performed throughout the US, the UK, the Caribbean and Japan. His writings have appeared in journals such as *Kyoto Journal*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Poetry and Salt Hill*, and in the anthologies *Gathering Ground*, *The Ringing Ear*, *War Diaries*, and *To Be Left with the Body*. He has received fellowships from the Atlantic Center for the Arts, the Fulbright Foundation, Jack Straw Writers Program and the San Francisco Arts Commission



The Company includes: Kwame Dawes, poet; Kevin Simmonds, piano; Valetta Brinson, soprano; Billy Coakley, tenor; Curtis Cotton III, percussion; Valerie Johnson, soprano; Jessica McJunkins, violin; Brian McQueen, baritone; James Miller, flute; Christopher Neely, viola; Nicole Neely, viola; Cora Phillips, cello; Herb Stephens, guitar; Celia Teasdel, mezzo soprano.

The National Black Theatre Festival, the nation's premier venue for black theater companies, celebrates its 20th year August 3-8 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. *WISTERIA/HOPE* will be among over 100 performances in a weeklong festival that will also feature workshops, seminars and international colloquia. Information on schedule and tickets at <http://www.nbtf.org/index.html>.

The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting is an innovator in international nonprofit journalism. It goes beyond the headlines and sponsors in-depth independent coverage of underreported issues around the globe. The Pulitzer Center supports the journalists and partners with major media outlets to ensure publication or broadcast. The Center promotes additional dialogue on the issues covered through the use of multiple media platforms and interactive web-based technology. The Pulitzer Center uniquely merges traditional media, new media and educational outreach. To learn more, visit: www.pulitzercenter.org