



CULTURE

Playwright Anne-Marie Woods explains how she combines storytelling with a social mission

The multidisciplinary Canadian artist talks utilizing theatre to destabilize history's unequal power dynamics and rewrite existing narratives.



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Sisters are doing it for themselves. As per *The Status of Women In The Canadian Arts and Cultural Industries* report by the Ontario Arts Council, women in artistic and creative outputs receive significantly less exposure than men. Women are clearly still caught in a web of gender-based disadvantages in the arts and cultural industries in the 21st century. Can you imagine? In the last few years, social activism by and for women has been thrust into the forefront with various movements and initiatives like #MeToo and TimesUp receiving collective support. Yet, despite entering the long-overdue era of shifting power dynamics, opportunities for women as writers in the arts and culture industries are not as plentiful as you may think. And because of this, we are usually left to our own devices to create our own narrative and spaces to thrive. As we've been told time and again, if you want something done right, do it yourself.

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Amani) did. Over the course of her 25 plus year career, her work has become an educational and cultural outlet to interrogate and heal from the ever-changing dynamic of women’s social issues that are often pushed aside. Never letting hardships or adversity stand in her way, she is a force to be reckoned with who—pun intended—plays by her own rules. “I believe in pushing the boundaries of storytelling to be inclusive of the African diaspora and telling stories through voices that represent the Caribbean, Africa, and African-Nova Scotians,” says Woods over the phone.

[Born in East Hackney in England](#), Woods moved with her family to Nova Scotia as a young child. She always found that life was a juggling act between personal and social interference. Woods grew up in an abusive environment and was unceremoniously kicked out of the house in high school. While pursuing a theatre degree at Dalhousie University she often wondered where her next meal would come from. But as we know, nothing stops a woman on a mission and these hurdles failed to deter her.

In the late 90s, Woods wrote and performed two performed two critically-acclaimed one-woman shows: *I’m Just Sitting at the Derby*, about a day in the life of a Nova Scotian woman’s quest for love when her selection is limited to

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Festival.

Around the same time and after graduating from university, noticing a void in cultural representation in the Nova Scotia theatre scene, she founded Imani Enterprises, named after the Kwanzaa principle of faith. In the two decades since Imani's inception, Woods has developed a long-running speaker series, arts education workshops, started an in-house theatre company. She has performed in hundreds of shows nationally and internationally, while producing, directing and writing her own shows.

For Woods, her yearning for cultural knowledge fuelled the fire to write plays and tell stories of the Black community with an Afrocentric focus. "Being able to tell stories of the diaspora is an essential part of my work because I can help

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history.”

While most recently Woods’ has steered her attention at creating immersive learning experiences for various Ontario school boards, and opening for an esteemed group of individuals like the late Dr. Maya Angelou, jazz legend Roy Ayers and most recently activist and scholar, Angela Davis, her art remains rooted in utilizing language and performance as a catalyst for social change. ”I’m here to speak for the voices of women, men and youth whether in history or modern times. It is my duty to challenge stereotypes and preconceived ideas about my culture.”

“ I have no confines or rules when it comes to my writing. My process and storylines often come from life experiences or cultural needs and fuse fiction, history and reality.

Canada’s female playwrights are few and far between, and the household names that we do know are minuscule. We need to see and hear from more of the ladies bringing their

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that can't be forgotten.

Where some of us would think that Woods' non-conventional approaches are what draws attendees to her workshops and performances, it's actually the opposite. "I have no confines or rules when it comes to my writing. My process and storylines often come from life experiences or cultural needs and fuse fiction, history and reality." Perhaps it's her intimate form of storytelling and sharing of a common awareness of intersectionality that moves the crowd. "I often remove the fourth wall in my plays and have my characters break out of the scenes and interact with the audience. I started my performance career doing one-woman shows. And also because I believe in the 'griot' or the African storyteller, so my characters often go from characters in a play to storytellers speaking to an audience."

However, the road to achieving her audience hasn't always been easy. During Woods' time at the Fringe Festival in 1997, she was her own promotional machine at a time when social media was non-existent. Using the fax machine, she created her own flyers for her play *I'm just Sittin At The Derby Waitin For My Ship To Come In* and passed them out all over the streets of Halifax. Her efforts didn't go unnoticed and her subsequent shows quickly sold out. But a

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see” plays even though I was selling out. I was also the only Black play in the festival. So, I had to demand that they put my play up on the board.” Her male competition fared much better than she did. “There was a play called *Freaks* by a guy in New York whose play was also selling out. We were neck-in-neck. But, having to go to them and demand that my play also be on the board and promoted as a must-see is something that I am tired of doing.”

Putting down her pen for a brief stint to work in corporate full-time meant a reduction in quality time and focus usually spent on her art. However, it remains imperative for Woods to find favourable opportunities to create. In February, her play *The Three Friends*, a historical narrative with the theme of human rights and female empowerment which tackles race relations and African-Canadian history, hit the stage. “It was important for me to include all of the things that I learned as a youth that absolutely blew my mind.”

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history: Jean Augustine, the woman responsible for Black History Month in Canada; Chloe Cooley, an enslaved woman with a fighting spirit whose story resulted in the first anti-slavery legislation in Canada in 1793; and Viola Desmond, the first African-Canadian woman to grace Canada's \$10 bill. "The Viola Desmond story is one that many Canadians are learning about now because she's the first African-Canadian on our currency," Woods explains of the significance.

"But I knew about Viola since the '80s and have taught young people about her in schools since 1988. In *The Three Friends*, I recreated her story of refusing to sit in the theatre through to her posthumous pardon by the Nova Scotia government. To do this I decided to create an acapella song with several calls, responses and refrains that will help young people remember her story rhythmically."

"Griot; a term used in West Africa describing travelling poets, musicians and storytellers who used the power of storytelling to pass on oral traditions. I am a modern-day griot using the medium of theatre to pass on the culture that is not covered in the mainstream or quote-unquote through 'traditional theatre.'" The self-proclaimed shy extrovert has dressed through adversity. worked through mental anguish

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push forward in a field where black women's stories are finally being greenlit to the forefront. "I believe that my journey as a writer is bigger than me; a predetermined destiny to find creative ways to pass on stories that young people or adults might never experience."

For an African-Canadian playwright, having several plays in production is an amazing achievement in itself. And best believe that she's nowhere close to being done. She already has future plans to create a children's cultural book series, bring another one of her plays *Why Black Women Whisper* to the stage, and finish her first poetry manuscript. Woods smiles and says, "Writing is how I breathe, how I emote, how I deal. If you cut me then my arms would bleed the brightest and blackest ink and this ink would spill all over the page and create stories yet untold." Whether she's known as an educator, performer or a formidable playwright who continues to share her perspective of black history to educate the community, it would be apropos to say Anne-Marie Woods is here to stand her ground and get the job done.

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