



THREE TALES BY ZORA NEALE HURSTON

ADAPTED BY GEORGE C. WOLFE

**Directed by Seret Scott**

**September 8 – October 9, 2011**

**at Court Theatre**

## CHARACTERS

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- **Blues Speak Woman:** Narrator
- **Guitar Man:** Narrator
- **The Folk:** various characters in “Sweat,” “Story in Harlem Slang,” and “The Gilded Six-Bits”

## STORY

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*Spunk* is an adaptation of three short stories by Zora Neale Hurston: “Sweat,” “Story in Harlem Slang,” and “The Gilded Six-Bits.” Although all three were written around the time of the Harlem Renaissance (see pp. 4-5), Hurston’s writing largely focused on the lives of blacks in the rural South.

“Sweat” follows Delia, a housewife who washes clothes for a living and suffers at the hands of her abusive husband, Sykes. When Delia decides she no longer wishes to endure her husband’s abuse, Sykes tries to systematically break her spirit by parading his mistress in front of her in public and playing on her fear of snakes. He even goes so far as to leave a rattlesnake in her bathtub in order to drive her out of her home; however, his plan eventually backfires, leaving him to deal with the consequences of his actions.

In “Story in Harlem Slang,” narrator Blues Speak Woman is joined by Slang Talk Man, who adds a new dimension to the musical narrative of *Spunk*. The two use scat to bring to life Harlem’s Lenox Avenue, home to two smooth-talking pimps, Jelly and Sweet Back. Jelly, the younger of the two men, survives on the streets by “sugar-curing the ladies’ feelings” in order to secure a free meal, but Sweet Back’s arrival threatens Jelly’s hard-won territory. Although Jelly and Sweet Back appear to be old friends, they challenge one another’s egos repeatedly, and their rivalry takes a turn for the worse when they both identify the same young woman as their latest target.

“The Gilded Six-Bits” showcases a loving couple, Missie May and Joe, who appear to be happy despite their poverty. However, the arrival of a wealthy man in town causes Missie May to begin to question her happiness, ultimately causing her to be unfaithful to Joe and put her relationship and her future in jeopardy. Joe decides not leave his wife after the incident, but instead rarely speaks to her



and carries with him a coin left behind after the adulterous affair as a symbol of Missie May's infidelity. When Missie May realizes she is pregnant, Joe questions whether or not the baby is actually his, but is ultimately convinced to love the child as his own, regardless of the truth. After the baby is born, Joe trades in his coin for a gift for his wife, reconciling with her when he returns home that evening.

## ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S HOMETOWN: EATONVILLE, FL

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama on January 7, 1891 to John Hurston, a carpenter and Baptist preacher, and Lucy Potts Hurston, a former schoolteacher. Despite her birthplace, Hurston always referred Eatonville, Florida, where her family moved shortly after her birth, as her hometown. According to Hurston's biographer, Valerie Boyd: **"Essentially, everything that Zora Hurston would grow up to write, and to believe, had its genesis in Eatonville. The setting of her earliest childhood memories and the site of her coming of age, Eatonville was where Hurston received her first lessons in individualism and her first immersion in community."** (Boyd 25)

Located in central Florida, just outside Orlando, it was one of the first all-Black towns to be incorporated in 1887 (by some accounts, it was the first.) Many of the men and women in Eatonville were employed in the citrus industry. Like Delia in "Sweat," some of the women also worked as domestics, traveling outside of Eatonville to work for white families in nearby Maitland, Florida. In addition to writing a memoir of her early years in Eatonville called *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston also used the town as the setting for many of her short stories. She wrote the folklore collection *Mules and Men* based on the anthropological fieldwork she performed in Eatonville and also used the town as the setting for what is perhaps her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Hurston's own accounts of life in Eatonville are filled with descriptions of men and women sharing all kinds of stories: tall tales, folk tales, religious parables, gossip, etc. Men would sometimes sit on the porch of the general store and brag about beating their wives, but their stories were usually more colorful and edifying than that; according to Boyd, **"to many of Eatonville's children, this proliferation of stories—or 'lies,' as some folks called them—might have seemed ordinary, or even tiring. But these tales of God, the Devil, the animals, and the elements fueled Zora's own inventiveness."**



Migrant workers outside a "jook joint" in Eatonville, FL



## THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement that spanned the 1920s and 1930s. At the time, it was known as the "New Negro Movement", named after the 1925 anthology by Alain Locke. Though it was centered in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, many French-speaking black writers living in Paris (but originally from African and Caribbean colonies) were also influenced by the Harlem Renaissance.

Historians disagree as to when the Harlem Renaissance began and ended. The Harlem Renaissance is unofficially recognized to have spanned from about 1919 until the early or mid-1930s, but many of its ideas lived on much longer. The zenith of this "flowering of Negro literature," as James Weldon Johnson preferred to call the Harlem Renaissance, was placed between 1924 (the year that *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* hosted a party for black writers where many white publishers were in attendance) and 1929 (the year of the stock market crash and the beginning of the Great Depression).

The first stage of the Harlem Renaissance started in the late 1910s. 1917 saw the premiere of *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre*. These plays, written by white playwright Ridgely Torrence, featured Negro actors conveying complex human emotions and yearnings. They rejected the stereotypes of the blackface and minstrel show traditions.

James Weldon Johnson in 1917 called the premieres of these plays "the most important single event in the entire history of the Negro in the American Theater." Another landmark came in 1919, when Claude McKay published his militant sonnet "If We Must Die". Although the poem never alluded to race, to African-American readers, it sounded a note of defiance in the face of racism and nation-wide race riots. By the end of WWI, the fiction of James Weldon Johnson and the poetry of Claude McKay were viewed as giving voice to the reality of contemporary Negro life in America.



"Cocktails," Archibald Motley, Jr. (c. 1926)

## The Impact of the Harlem Renaissance

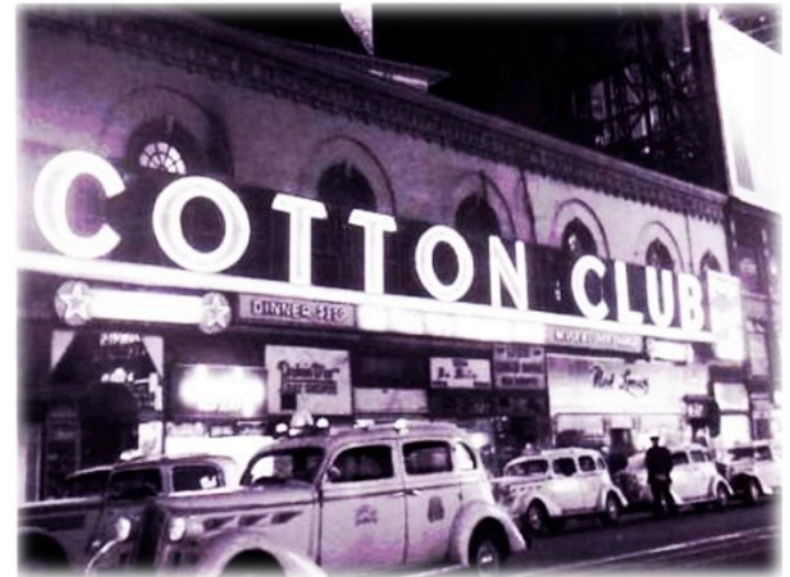
The Harlem Renaissance brought the Black experience to the forefront of American cultural history. Both in terms of culture and sociology, the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance is how dramatically it redefined the world's view of the African-American population. This new identity led to a greater social consciousness, and African-Americans became players on the world stage.

The urban setting of a rapidly-developing Harlem provided a venue for African-Americans of all backgrounds to appreciate the variety of Black life and culture. Ultimately, the sharing of cultural experiences made possible by the Harlem Renaissance helped form a united racial identity among African-Americans not only in Harlem, but also around the country.

The Harlem Renaissance helped lay the foundation for the post-World War II phase of the Civil Rights Movement. The Harlem Renaissance led to more opportunities for blacks to be published by mainstream houses; many authors, including Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Eric D. Walrond, and Langston Hughes, began to publish novels, magazines and newspapers during this time, inspiring many black artists who rose to creative maturity later in the 20th century.

## Jazz and the Harlem Renaissance

A new way of playing the piano called the "Harlem Stride Style" was created during the Harlem Renaissance, and helped blur the lines between poor and socially-elite African-Americans. The traditional jazz band was composed primarily of brass instruments and was considered a symbol of the south, but the piano was considered an instrument of the wealthy. With this instrumental modification to the existing genre, wealthy African-Americans had more access to jazz music, and its popularity soon spread throughout the country. Innovation and liveliness were important characteristics of performers in the beginnings of jazz. Prominent musicians of the time, such as Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, and Willie "The Lion" Smith, are considered as having laid the foundation for the future of their genre.



The Cotton Club, a Harlem jazz club popular during the 1920s and 1930s

## Defining Characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance

Characterizing the Harlem Renaissance was an overt racial pride that came to be represented in the idea of the "New Negro," who through intellect and production of literature, art, and music could challenge stereotypes to promote progressive or socialist politics and racial and social integration. Participants believed that the creation of art and literature would "uplift" the race.

The art that emerged from the Harlem Renaissance did not have one unifying characteristic; rather, it encompassed a wide variety of cultural elements and

styles, including a Pan-Africanist perspective, "high-culture," and "low-culture" or "low-life," from the traditional form of music to the blues and jazz, traditional and new experimental forms in literature such as modernism and the new form of jazz poetry. This duality meant that numerous African-American artists came into conflict with conservatives in the black intelligentsia, who took issue with certain depictions of black life.

Some common themes represented during the Harlem Renaissance were the influence of the experience of slavery and emerging African-American folk traditions on black identity, the effects of institutional racism, the dilemmas inherent in performing and writing for elite white audiences, and the question of how to convey the experience of modern black life in the urban North.

## Prominent Voices of the Harlem Renaissance

### Musicians/Composers

Nora Douglas  
Holt Ray  
Billie Holiday  
Duke Ellington  
Count Basie  
Louis Armstrong  
Lil Armstrong  
Eubie Blake  
Bessie Smith  
George Bueno  
Fats Waller  
James P. Johnson  
Noble Sissle  
Earl "Fatha" Hines

Fletcher Henderson  
Josephine Baker  
Billy Strayhorn  
Mamie Smith  
Ivie Anderson  
Lena Horne  
Roland Hayes  
Ella Fitzgerald  
Lucille Bogan  
Bill Robinson  
The Nicholas Brothers  
Nina Mae McKinney  
The Dandridge Sisters  
Victoria Spivey

Cecil Scott  
Fess Williams  
McKinney's Cotton Pickers  
Charlie Johnson  
The Chocolate Dandies  
Cab Calloway  
The King Cole Trio  
Chick Webb  
Dizzy Gillespie  
Thelonious Monk  
Marian Anderson  
Ethel Waters  
Bert Williams  
Pigmeat Markham

Moms Mabley  
Mantan Moreland  
Ma Rainey  
The Will Mastin Trio  
Lonnie Johnson  
Jelly Roll Morton



# Prominent Voices of the Harlem Renaissance

## LITERATURE

**Arna Bontemps** — *God Sends Sunday* (1931), *Black Thunder* (1936)

**Countee Cullen** — *One Way to Heaven* (1932)

**Jessie Redmon Fauset** — *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1928), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), *Comedy, American Style* (1933)

**Rudolph Fisher** — *The Walls of Jericho* (1928), *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932)

**Langston Hughes** — *Not Without Laughter* (1930)

**Zora Neale Hurston** — *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

**Nella Larsen** — *Quicksand* (1928), *Passing* (1929)

**Claude McKay** — *Home to Harlem* (1927), *Banjo* (1929), *Gingertown* (1931), *Banana Bottom* (1933)

**George Schuyler** — *Black No More* (1931), *Slaves Today* (1931)

**Wallace Thurman** — *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), *Infants of the Spring* (1932), *Interne* (1932)

**Jean Toomer** — *Cane* (1923)

**Walter White** — *The Fire in the Flint* (1924), *Flight* (1926)

## VISUAL ARTISTS

Jacob Lawrence  
Charles Alston  
Henry Bannarn  
Augusta Savage  
Aaron Douglas  
Archibald Motley  
Lois Mailou Jones  
Palmer Hayden  
Romare Bearden  
Sargent Johnson  
William H. Johnson  
Beauford Delaney  
Norman Lewis  
Paul Heath  
Prentiss Taylor

## DRAMA

**Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr.**, playwright – *On the Fields of France*

**Charles Gilpin**, actor

**Angelina Weld Grimke**, playwright – *Rachel*

**Langston Hughes**, playwright – *Mulatto* (produced on Broadway; Hughes also helped to found the Harlem Suitcase Theater)

**Zora Neale Hurston**, playwright – *Color Struck*

**Georgia Douglas Johnson**, playwright – *Plumes, A Tragedy*

**John Matheus**, playwright – *'Cruiter*

**Richard Bruce Nugent**, playwright – *Sahdji, an African Ballet*

**Paul Robeson**, actor

**Eulalie Spence**, playwright – *Undertow*

## A Short History of the Blues

The Blues originated as a combination of African-American work songs and hollers with European-derived harmonic structures and ballads. The structure of blues gained definition as a musical genre in the years before WWI, generally taking a twelve-bar, three-line pattern that reflected the couplet-and-refrain in ballads and the call-and-response nature of work songs and church services. Early blues songs often had certain unifying verses, but were flexible enough to allow individual singers free treatment. **While the themes of ballads were often about heroes or distant events, blues were about the singer himself and the conditions and emotions of his everyday life. Blues was a state of mind, a way of working unhappiness out of one's system through song.**

Frederick Douglass wrote, "Slaves sing to make themselves happy rather than to express their happiness through singing." **The blues do not arise from a mood, but produce one.** The blues were born in Mississippi, but soon migrated and took on different traditions in other states, especially with the advent of WWI and the accompanying black migration. Traveling jug bands like the Mississippi Sheiks were popular with both black and white audiences. Their instruments were often homemade from household items like jugs, bread pans, and washboards. These string outfits performed country dance tunes, popular folk songs, and above all the blues, sung as solos or duets against guitars and fiddle. They played to both whites and blacks in the streets and at tent shows and dance halls. Jug bands are usually associated with rural life, though they did also play in cities, especially river cities, which crawled with gamblers, prostitutes, and dance halls aiming to please the traveling boatmen.

**The themes of the Classic Blues revolve around pathological relationships between men and women, revenge, despair, sex, and the everyday push for survival.** While the blues are associated with misery and oppression, its lyrics are often also exuberantly satirical and raunchy, and the female blues singers demonstrate a strong-willed defiance and courage against the wrongs of their situations and their men. Many black men were forced to leave their hometowns to look for work, or were simply lured away by the freedom of travel, leaving black women at home alone to negotiate the massive changes of post-slavery life. Their songs are often expressions of the depression and courage created by these hardships. The risqué nature of these songs also went against the white dominant narrative of female domesticity of the time period, asserting and reveling in a specifically black female subjectivity immersed in harsh reality rather than romantic ideals.

## **SLANG IN SPUNK**

**"Suck-egg dog"** (Noun): This literally refers to a seriously ugly or mangy mongrel. Metaphorically, it can be applied to a person (almost always male) who is out-and-out riff-raff.

**"Cack"** (Adjective): Awful, inferior, despicable

**"Shag [and stomp]"** (Noun): a fast-jump dance; nervous, earthy hop dance; crude, down-home dance done to type of blues of the same name

**The Female:** Youth slang of the 1920s was female-dominated, while the tone of slang of the 1930s reverted to the male. Within the body of slang was a wide assortment for girls, including a **baby, bag** (unattractive), **beetle, belle, bim** or **bimbo, blimp** (loose), **breigh, broad, buff, butter and egg fly** (popular), **buttermilk** (unattractive), **calico, canary, choice bit of calico** (attractive), **clinging vine** (delicate), **crock** (unattractive), **dame, darb** (popular), **doll, extra** (a girl no one wants to date), **fem, filly, flame, flirt, frail, fuss** (frequent companion), **guinea, hairpin, heiferette** (young), **honey, hot mama, hot sketch, hotsy-totsy, keen number, lemonette** (unpopular), **lolleos** (popular), **Minnie, muddy plow** (unattractive), **muff, peach, petting skirt, piece** (loose), **piece of calico, pig, pot, powder puff** (frivolous), **queen** (attractive), **S.Y.T.** (Sweet Young Thing), **sack** (unattractive), **sardine, sheba, skirt, smelt, snappy piece of work, squab, squaw, stuff, sweet mama, sweet patootie, tot, or wren.**





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR: ZORA NEALE HURSTON (1891 – 1960)

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Zora Neale Hurston was born January 7th, 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama. She was the fifth of eight children, and the youngest of only two daughters. When she was three, her father moved the family to Eatonville, Florida, one of the first exclusively black neighborhoods run by black citizens in America. There he would become the pastor of two local Baptist churches, as well as the mayor of the town. When Hurston was fifteen, her mother, to whom she was remarkably close, died. Her father, usually distant to Hurston, sent her to a private school in Jacksonville that her sister also attended. John Hurston soon stopped paying for the school, and Hurston was sent away. Back home, Hurston then got into a physical confrontation with her new stepmother and was subsequently forced out of her father's home.

Little is known about the next ten years of Hurston's life. She drifted through Dixieland, living intermittently with her siblings. Finally, at the close of this difficult ten-year stint,

Hurston landed a job in a traveling Gilbert & Sullivan troupe as the lead singer's assistant. This was her first experience in the theater, her first experience traveling North, and her first experience immersed in an all-white community, an experience which she claimed led to her "approach to racial understanding." At the suggestion of the lead singer, Hurston broke away from the troupe and started to attend night school in Baltimore. In order to be accepted into the high-school program, Hurston claimed to be ten years younger. Instead of 26, she claimed to be 16—a lie that would follow her through most of her life. After graduating in 1918, she decided to move to Washington D.C. where she attended Howard University, eventually obtaining an Associate's Degree.

Hurston's first nationally published story, "Drenched in Light," was published in 1924 in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*. Its publication, and her poet friend Georgia Douglas Johnson, inspired her to move to New York City where she soon won two second-place awards for the same magazine's literary contest: one for her play *Color Struck*, another for her short story "Spunk". In New York, she enrolled in Barnard College where she was the only black student and where she worked with anthropologists Margaret Mead and Franz Boas. With Boas, Zora helped measure skull proportions to help disprove eugenic theories.

Being in Harlem in the 1920s, Hurston found herself a key social and artistic player of the Harlem Renaissance. She grew to be good friends with Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Carl Van Vechten. With Hughes, she worked on a short-lived black artist magazine entitled *Fire!!* Before receiving a large research grant from the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History to collect folklore in the South. (She was known to drive around the South in her used car with a pistol wrapped around her waist for protection.) After a few months, she returned to New York to meet Charlotte "Godmother" Mason, an elderly white woman who would fund Zora (and other black writers) both formally and informally for the next many years. This funding allowed her to travel around Florida, Louisiana, and the Bahamas to collect stories for her manuscripts (and secretly for some ethnographies for Franz Boas and his friends). Hurston and Langston Hughes (another writer funded by Mason) attempted to write a play together in 1931 entitled *Mule*

*Bone*, but a tiff about copyright (and their secretary) led to the absolute ending of their friendship. That same year, Hurston divorced her husband of four years, Martin Sheen, whom she had met while at Howard. Never much of a presence in her life, he had steadily worked for a medical degree in Chicago while she moved through New York and the South writing.

In her forties, Zora wrote and produced many musical reviews and published many small essays in New York while working on larger novels. She collaborated with Eatonville natives on a musical show entitled *From Sun to Sun*. It was her hope for much of her adult life to create a Black theater and a conservatory for “Negro expression” (she would create this school at Bethune-Cookman College). In 1934, both *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Mules and Men* were published. Two years later, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published. That same year she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which allowed her to collect ethnographies on voodoo ritual in Jamaica and Haiti. In 1938 she published *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. While writing “Moses,” she also worked for the Federal Writer’s Project—an organization funded by The New Deal—to collect histories about Florida. In 1939, she married a 23-year-old man named Albert Price III; the marriage ended in less than a year. In 1942, Hurston’s autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* was published. She spent much of the following years either on houseboats in Florida, an apartment in New York to aid political campaigns, or in the Honduras to complete her book, *Seraph on the Suwanee*. In 1948, two New York boys falsely accused Hurston of sexually abusing them, though these accusations were eventually dropped. Two years after the scandal, multiple funding opportunities fell through or were cut back, and in order to sustain herself Hurston briefly accepted a job as a maid in a rich Miami neighborhood. Around this time she published some of her more political (and controversial) essays, including “I Saw Negro Votes Peddled” and her condemnation of 1954’s *Brown v. Board of Education*. After moving to Eau Gallie, Florida, she continued to write (mostly stories that would never be formally published) and work in her garden. Her health declined steadily while she worked as both a library technician and a substitute teacher. On January 28th, 1960 Hurston died from “hypertensive heart disease” in a Welfare Home after months of living off of food vouchers, welfare stipends, and unemployment checks. She was buried in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida.

## ABOUT THE ADAPTOR: GEORGE C. WOLFE (1954– )

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George C.  
Wolfe

George C. Wolfe was born in Frankfort, Kentucky, the son of Anna, an educator, and Costello, a government clerk. He attended Frankfort High School, where he began to pursue his interest in the theatre arts, and wrote poetry and prose for the school's literary journal. After high school, Wolfe enrolled at the historically black Kentucky State University (his parents' alma mater); following his first year, he transferred to Pomona College in Claremont, California, where he pursued a BA in theater. Wolfe taught for several years in Los Angeles at the Inner City Cultural Center and later in New York. He earned an MFA in dramatic writing and musical theater at New York University in 1983. In 1977, Wolfe gave C. Bernard Jackson, the executive director of the Inner City Cultural Center in the Los Angeles, the first scene of a play he was working on. Rather than suggest that he finish writing it, Jackson lent him money to produce the work. The name of the play was "Tribal Rites, or The Coming of the Great God-bird Nabuku to the Age of Horace Lee Lizer."

Wolfe stated in an article he wrote about Jackson for the *Los Angeles Times* that the production “was perhaps the most crucial to [his] evolution” as an artist. Among Wolfe’s first major offerings—including a musical, *Paradise* (1985), and his well-known play *The Colored Museum* (1986)—were several off-Broadway productions that met with mixed reviews. However, Wolfe won an Obie Award for best off-Broadway director in 1989 for his play *Spunk*, an adaptation of three stories by Zora Neale Hurston. Wolfe gained a national reputation with his 1991 musical *Jelly’s Last Jam*, a musical about the life of jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton; after a Los Angeles opening, the play moved to Broadway, where it received 11 Tony nominations and won the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Book of a Musical. Two years later, Wolfe directed Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, which garnered great critical acclaim as well as a Tony award. Wolfe also directed the world premiere of the second part of *Angels in America*, entitled *Perestroika*, the following year. From 1993 to 2004, Wolfe served as artistic director and producer of the New York Shakespeare Festival/Public Theater, where in 1996 he created the musical *Bring in ‘Da Noise, Bring in ‘Da Funk*, an ensemble of tap and music starring Savion Glover. The show moved to Broadway’s Ambassador Theatre and won Wolfe his second Tony Award for direction. In late 2004, Wolfe announced his intention to leave the theater for film direction, beginning with the well-received HBO film *Lackawanna Blues*. However, Wolfe continues to direct plays (most notably Tony Kushner’s *Caroline, or Change* and Suzan-Lori Parks’ Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Topdog/Underdog*). In the summer of 2006, he directed a new translation of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* starring Meryl Streep at the Delacorte Theatre in New York’s Central Park.

## DISCUSSION & FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

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- Blues music is said to create feelings, not describe them. How does music affect your feelings? Does music ever evoke feelings that you otherwise might not experience? Why or why not?
- Zora Neale Hurston began her career as a sociologist. How does her work as an author and storyteller relate to this early academic background?
- The slang terms used in *Spunk* are different than those used today. What role does slang play in the characters' interactions with one another? Does modern slang serve a similar purpose? Why or why not?
- Discuss the impact of the Harlem Renaissance on modern African-American cultural identity. What seeds were planted during this time, and why did they have such an extraordinary impact?
- What are some characteristics that unite the three stories in *Spunk*? What themes do they have in common, and what do these themes say about society?