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## Power struggle: 'Hear Word!' tells stories of African women, inequality and transformation

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"Hear Word!" is performance art that combines artistry, social commentary and tru-life stories of inequality and transformation. Courtesy Photo/Yetunde Babeko Photography

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"Hear Word!" is performance art that combines artistry, social commentary and tru-life stories of inequality and transformation. Courtesy Photo/Yetunde Babeko Photography



**By Keith Powers/Daily News Correspondent**

Posted Apr. 13, 2016 at 5:50 PM

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The struggle for women's rights takes a much different form in Nigeria.

"The main things that affect women in all cultures have kept Nigerian women in a subservient way," says Ifeoma Fafunwa, whose "Hear Word! Naija woman Talk True," a staged dramatization of women's issues in her homeland that she wrote and directs, will be performed this weekend at the Harvard Dance Center.

"All the things that hint at ownership of women still exist," she says. "But in the '70s, when European and American women came to Africa, they talked about equal pay and work. African women already had work, and a vote. Women were the head of the local market, and if they wanted to shut off food for everyone, they could."

A shift in that power came from colonialism, and its consequences are still being felt.

"You had all these white males coming to Africa - not a woman in sight. Their goal was to take the resources and send them back to Europe. They scattered all manner of power, got rid of the spiritual aspects, and dissolved the farming structures.

"When you start looking at the history of women's rights, it might have been more advanced in Africa."

"Hear Word!" has run for three years in Nigeria

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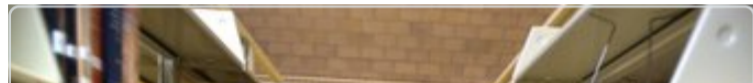
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but makes its American debut in these American Repertory Theater - sponsored productions. The production is presented by the Center for African Studies in association with the ART, Division of Social Sciences, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the Harvard Dance Center, the Harvard University Committee on the Arts, The Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, the Harvard Law School, the Mahindra Humanities Center, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and the Theater, Dance & Media Concentration at Harvard University. It folds real-life stories into 20 dramatic monologues. Almost a dozen actors and musicians interpret the works.

Fafunwa, the daughter of an American expatriate teacher and a Nigerian Ibo native, was born in Lagos. She came to school in America, attending UMass Amherst, and stayed for several decades, practicing architecture at first but becoming increasingly interested in theater.

She returned to Nigeria 14 years ago, and has directed a number of works by Nigerian playwrights, as well as a successful run of the "Vagina Monologues." This American debut production of "Hear Word!" is part of a Radcliffe Institute residency that includes four performances, multiple in-class visits and panel discussions.

"These are discrete stories, based on real interviews," she says. "The first half of the play reveals the issues, and the second half shows people who have overcome these issues. There are many things that affect the rights of women in Nigeria - rape is a problem in our culture.

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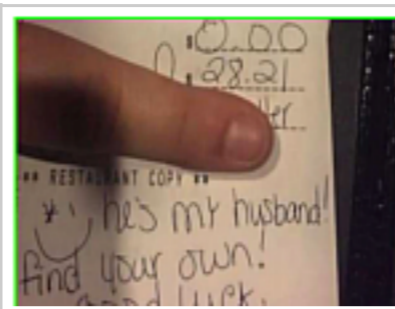
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