

Spiritual nudging

AT THE THEATER

Akuyoe's one-woman 'Spirit Awakening' comes to the Pasadena Playhouse

By Anne Louise Bannon

"I just think she's dedicated and has the most optimistic energy for the things she does," said actor CCH Pounder about her colleague and friend Akuyoe Graham.

Then Pounder paused. "I actually sound like I'm gushing," she said, bemused. "That's not a CC Pounder trait."

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On the other hand, even Pounder conceded that it's hard not to when talking about Akuyoe, as she prefers to be known.

That's because Akuyoe is just that positive and warm and friendly and passionate about the work she does, which includes acting in her one-woman show "Spirit Awakening."

She will do a special performance of the show on Monday at the Pasadena Playhouse. The show is being presented by Zonta International Club of Pasadena in association with the Pasadena Playhouse Education and Community Outreach Program as a fundraiser for Akuyoe's Spirit Awakening Foundation and the Pasadena Police Activities League (PAL) Arts Program.

"Spirit Awakening" is the story of Akuyoe's life, from her early childhood in her native Ghana, then to London and later in New York.

"I'm an African American now," she joked.

But the show also led her to her other passion: helping kids, particularly incarcerated kids, find themselves by writing the stories of their own lives and empowering them to redirect their negative lifestyles.

"I've got to teach them to explore their lives as a story," she explained, "then interpret those stories in a way that empowers them."

Akuyoe, 43, was born in Ghana's capital Accra. Her mother, Gladys Lamiokor Boye, the daughter of a village queen, was 19 when she married her husband, becoming the youngest of his more than five wives, polygamy being legal in Ghana at the time. Akuyoe was born before Boye turned 20. But life as a young wife was intolerable to Boye, and the young woman divorced her husband.

"That was pretty extraordinary for that time," Akuyoe said. "My mother remains to this day one of my heroes. She really showed me that we are powerful, and no matter how strong the cultural ties, we don't have to stand for [oppression]."

Boye moved to London, got a job, then sent for her then 6-year-old daughter. When Akuyoe was 13, she and her mother moved to the United States, where Akuyoe attended the High School of Performing Arts. After graduation, Akuyoe studied under Uta Hagen and Sanford Meisner, then started her acting career on the New York stage. She moved to Los Angeles about 12 years ago and got a rather rude awakening.

"It was so different than New York," she said. "In New York we were very proactive about our careers." According to Akuyoe, being an actor in

Los Angeles at the time meant a lot of sitting by the phone waiting for the agent to call. But sitting and waiting didn't do much for her.

"My feeling was I'm an artist. I'm an actor," she said. "I can't sit and wait for someone to give me a job."

So she put together a one-woman show of various classic monologues, but it didn't go over well. One person called it "artsy-fartsy," but it was Stevie Wonder who provided the real clue to what was wrong.

"He didn't say artsy-fartsy," Akuyoe said. "He said, 'We want to know about you.'"

But there was more driving her. "I was bored," she said. "My life had to have more meaning than this. It was too boring an experience." So she began the journey that became "Spirit Awakening."

"The writing saved my life," she said. "It really just brought me back to the center. The writing made me remember who I am. It was a very spiritual experience."

And it was also in the performance that Akuyoe began working with jailed gang kids, first joining a L.A. Theatreworks program before forming her own foundation.

"It's heartbreaking," she said. "I saw one young child with shackles on his feet and hands. As a black woman, it was horrifying to me. I knew I wanted to lead [the kids] out of that victimhood."

She said that she's grown as an actor performing her show, but she's also grown as a woman. Playing her mother has given her new insights into why Boye did some of the things that she did.

Pounder, who has seen the show from its earliest stages, said that the show has expanded and grown, as well.

"Just the maturity in the writing," Pounder said about the show. "And humor now, looking

back on your foibles."

Monday's event came about when one of Akuyoe's friends, Lynn Kitchen, a local money manager, convinced Akuyoe to do a presentation for Kitchen's fellow members of Zonta International. Kitchen is one of the group's board members.

"It was two years ago," Kitchen said. "And the ladies were so impressed with the quality that they wanted to do something to help the foundation."

It took a while, but the Playhouse got involved and the event was planned. In addition to the performance, the Spirit Awakening Foundation will recognize Congressman Adam Schiff, D-Pasadena, and L.A. County Supervisor Michael Antonovich for their work in supporting arts education in schools. On Tuesday, Akuyoe will do a student matinee for local high school students.

The Monday performance and event starts at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$50 and \$35, and are available through the foundation, (800) 582-7330. The Playhouse is at 39 S. El Molino Avenue.

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