

# THE REST IS SILENCE

Margaret Holloway, known as New Haven's 'Shakespeare Lady,' was one of Connecticut's best-known performers. In May, she died of COVID-19.

BY CHRISTOPHER ARNOTT

**W**hen the removal of the statue of Christopher Columbus in New Haven's tony Wooster Square neighborhood was being actively argued online last month, one helpful commenter suggested that it be replaced with a statue of Margaret Holloway.

Holloway, revered as "The Shakespeare Lady," died May 30 of COVID-19. She was 68. Holloway hadn't performed regularly in years, or been seen at all on her stage of choice, the streets of New Haven, in months. But her legend is secure.

Holloway's passing earned mention in the New York Times and Time magazine. She was generally, throughout her career, characterized as a homeless woman who

performed excerpts from Shakespeare plays for spare change. But it's unfair to brand her as a cultural curiosity, or to draw attention to her poverty rather than her talent. Margaret Holloway could just as easily be identified as one of the best-known actors in Connecticut.

She was a downtown New Haven institution. Her fans were legion. She was invited to perform at open mics and outdoor festivals. A short film was made about her life. She was the subject of photo essays, dozens of newspaper stories and an impressive amount of articles in student publications at Yale and elsewhere.

In her heyday, as part of the arts-saturated landscape of New Haven in the '90s and '00s, Margaret Holloway was unmissable. This was not just because she was a sublime artist but because she could be



JEFF HOLT/AP FILE

Margaret Holloway stands outside the York Square Cinema in New Haven on Dec. 9, 2001, where the Richard Dailey documentary about her life premiered.

incredibly loud. If she knew your name, she could bellow it for blocks. When she got excited reciting an Amiri Baraka poem or a Lesley Gore song lyric, her voice rose to a roar. An extraordinary tremor grew in her throat when she growled in a godly voice for a classical drama. Listening to Margaret project her voice, you could understand how the ancient Greek thespians could be heard in amphitheaters without microphones, or how Shakespeare's troupe could be understood amid the din of the groundlings in the first few rows.

Margaret's act changed over the years. Some of the changes were due to changes in her mental condition and the medications she took to manage them. A survivor of numerous childhood traumas, she also struggled with diagnosed schizophrenia and a host of addictions. She was rarely truly homeless, living in a series of boarding houses and mental health residential living centers. But her personal problems included claustrophobia, which is why she could be found so easily on street corners. She was outgoing and social. She had countless friends who stopped not only to hear her perform but to stay and talk.

Some already knew her. She'd been a student at the Yale School of Drama in the early '80s. She dropped out a few times, due to personal issues as well as some bitter disputes with the school faculty over what she felt was the lack of opportunities granted to minority students at the time. Her time at Yale overlapped with that of Meryl Streep, whom she recalled competing against for ingenue roles.

Her regular haunts included several coffee shops, where she was usually given free coffee and pastries and accepted as a regular. When she was accused of panhandling or disturbing the peace, she had numerous defenders.

She performed casually and openly. There was little preparation, usually just a deep breath. She often stared eerily as she spoke. Payment for her performances

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## Holloway

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wasn't exactly an afterthought, but she didn't make a big deal about it. Her audiences were generally one person at a time, and they could be very generous. Among those who got to see her were the internationally renowned playwrights Athol Fugard and August Wilson, and several successive deans of the Yale School of Drama where she had once studied.

That idea of Margaret Holloway as a homeless woman who recited Shakespeare for spare change is therefore mostly a myth. She wouldn't rush through a bit and ignore you when the next mark came along, the way a genuine panhandler might. She acted, and she was paid for it.

New Haven audiences went to Margaret for the classics: Shakespeare soliloquies from "Hamlet," "Macbeth" and "The Tempest," or Chaucer in the original Middle English, or the 1940s Robinson Jeffers translation of the Ancient Greek tragedy "Medea." Her street repertoire consisted of brief snatches from these scripts, few of which lasted more than a minute or two.

Yet at Yale, and in her undergrad years at Bennington College before that, Holloway's passion was experimental theater. She embraced race-blind and gender-blind casting. She found new styles and rhythms. She bent the classics to her will.

Her New Haven audiences knew Margaret Holloway as an actor and a raconteur. Almost none of them knew her as a writer or director, but that was the direction her career was taking when she graduated from Yale. But years of turmoil took their toll, and when she returned to New Haven it was with an act she hadn't ever considered until she started wandering the streets at night in one of the country's great theater towns. I was one of those people. Margaret said I was one of the first people she ever performed for. Those nighttime shows, done while standing on stone walls or in pocket parks or under Yale archways, are the ones I remember best. I was working at New Haven's Department of Cultural Affairs at the time, and meeting Margaret inspired the department to draft an ordinance that granted permits to street performers, protecting them from some of the more overt harassment from some police officers and local businesses.

I also invited Margaret to share her work with a playreading gang I ran in the back room of Rudy's Bar.

I am in possession of a Margaret Holloway play that few know exists. She never decided what to call it. The title page of the copy I have reads "A Rock Music Fantasy of Philae," and even that is half-crossed out so it says "Music of Philae." It was written in 1985, and is scored with pop hits of that era, ironically and otherwise. Its lead characters are "Osiris, the devil, a Black man," "Satan, a Jewish man," "God, a white priest and medical doctor," "Isis, a priestess and goddess of the underworld, a Black woman," and Tia, "a large Puerto Rican woman, a clairvoyant," who carries "Weap ponger, a Puerto Rican dummy" (a ventriloquist's dummy, that is), around on a pillow. The play opens with Isis floating through the air, holding a lighted ball, to the accompaniment of "Sweet Dreams" by Eurythmics and ending with God doing a "psychodrama improv" scored to snippets of Stevie Ray Vaughn and Hall & Oates, followed "a barbaric ritual dance" set to "Synchronicity" by The Police.

Don't you want to see that play? Or a streetspun monologue that lasted more than a few moments? Or just hear Margaret Holloway's rich, sonorous tones again, that wild delight she brought to Shakespeare, that cackling laugh that often ended a spirited recitation?

A statue in her honor would fall short. Margaret Holloway was one of the liveliest, most theatrical bursts of emotion in New Haven. She deserves her own fantasmagoric theater ritual, of the kind she dreamed about and lived for so long.

*Christopher Arnott can be reached at [carnott@courant.com](mailto:carnott@courant.com).*

