

State Theatre  
Artist-in-Residence

State TheatreNJ.org  
Keynotes

# glenis redmond

performance poet



name every  
law. Call them out  
every crevice of the  
with the power named  
e will flower silver into a  
of compassionate witnesses,  
voice. In the brightness my  
voice, your voice becomes  
other our voices form a tight  
of hope, a calligraphy  
in stars.



The State Theatre is delighted to present our 2009 Artist-in-Residence, performance poet Glenis Redmond. During the three-week residency, Glenis travels throughout the community, sharing her poetry, her personal story, and her gifts as a teacher with a wide range of audiences.

These *Keynotes* are designed to provide context and background on Glenis and the world of spoken-word poetry. We hope this guide will help you find connections between Glenis' work and your own personal experience, and inspire you to explore your own poetic voice!

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Keynotes

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*The State Theatre, a premier nonprofit venue for the performing arts and entertainment.*

# meet glenis redmond

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Glenis Redmond is poet, educator, performer, and counselor rolled into one passionate soul. She presents her poetry in performances that cause the printed word to spring from the page and dance, sing, weep, and laugh. Glenis tells stories with poetry—tales from her life, her family, her African-American heritage, and her sensitive observations of the world around her—inspiring audiences of all ages. Though steeped in Afro-Carolinian roots, she speaks a universal tongue of love, loss, celebration, sorrow and hope. Her verse uplifts family, culture, and community.

Glenis' love of words has carried her across the country for over thirteen years. This Road Warrior Poet logs over 35,000 miles each year as she performs throughout the United States, England, and Italy. She shares her poetry in performances, residencies and workshops with audiences as varied as schools, juvenile detention centers, universities, coffeehouses, performing arts centers, and educational television. Glenis also inspires others to pick up their pen, find their voice, and travel their own poetic road.

Glenis began writing poetry at the age of 12. She worked for seven years as a family counselor. While enrolled in a doctoral program in psychology, she rediscovered her love for poetry. Pregnancy with twins and a serious illness helped her find the strength to follow her heart and dedicate her life to poetry.

Glenis has been published most recently in *Meridians*, *African Voices*, *EMRYS*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *2006 Kakalak: A Journal of Carolina Poets*, *Appalachian Heritage*, and the *Appalachian Journal*. Her newest full-length book of poetry, *Under The Sun*, was released in 2008 by Main Street Press. Glenis has also published a full-length book of poetry, *Backbone*, and several chapbooks of original poetry, including one for children, *Word Power*. Glenis' first CD, *Glenis On Poetry*, explores her philosophy of poetry and education. Her second CD, *Monumental*, features her performance of original poetry written in tribute to those who lift us up: mothers and grandmothers, sisters and brothers, and those in the world who dare to write, to speak, to dance, to sing for us all. Glenis is the subject of an award-winning DVD, *Mama's Magic*. Her work has aired on National Public Radio.

Glenis has won numerous awards including the North Carolina Literary Award and a Denny C. Plattner Award for Outstanding Poetry, awarded by the *Appalachian Heritage Journal*. She is a national workshop leader with the Kennedy Center's Partners in Education Program in Washington, D.C. She is a past winner of the Southern Fried Poetry Slam and a top-ten finalist in the National Poetry Slam.

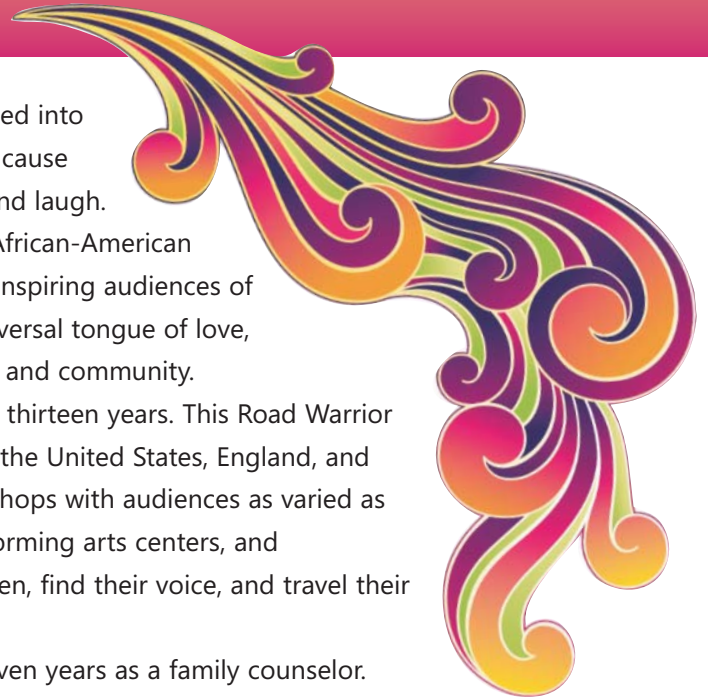


photo: Daniel Perales © 2008

Watch a video of Glenis performing and speaking about her poetry:

[www.statetheatretnj.org/education/artistresidencies.asp](http://www.statetheatretnj.org/education/artistresidencies.asp)



My mama is Magic!  
Always was and always will be.  
There is one phrase that constantly bubbled  
from the lips of her five children,  
"My momma can do it."  
We thought my mama knew everything.  
Believed she did, as if she were born full grown  
from the Encyclopedia of Britannica.

I could tell you stories  
of how she transformed  
a run down paint peeled shack  
into a home.  
How she heated us with tin tub baths  
from a kettle on the stove.  
Poured it over in there like an elixir.

My mama is protection  
like those quilts her mother used to make.  
She tucked us in with cut out history all around us.  
We found we could walk anywhere in this world  
and not feel alone.  
My mama never whispered the shame of poverty  
in our ears.  
She taught us to dance to our own shadows.  
"Pay no attention to those grand parties  
on the other side of the tracks.

"Make your own music," she'd say  
as she walked,  
she cleaned  
the sagging floorboards of that place.  
"You'll get there."  
"You'll get there."  
Her broom seemed to say with every wisp.  
We were my mama's favorite recipe.  
She whipped us up in a big brown bowl  
supported by her big brown arms.  
We were homemade children.  
Stitched together with homemade love.  
We didn't get everything we ever wanted  
but we lacked for nothing.

We looked at the stars in my mama's eyes  
They told us we owned the world.  
We walked like kings and queens  
even on midnight trips to the outhouse.  
We were under her spell.

My mama didn't study at no  
Harvard or Yale.  
The things she knew  
you couldn't learn in no book!  
Like...

How to make your life sing like  
sweet potato pie sweetness  
out of an open window.  
How to make anybody feel at home.  
How at just the right moment be silent  
and with her eyes say,  
"Everything's gonna be alright, chile,  
everything is gonna be alright."

How she tended to all our sickness.  
How she raised our spirits.  
How she kept flowers  
living on our sagging porch  
in the midst of family chaos.  
My mama raised children like  
it was her business in life.  
Put us on her hip and kept moving,  
keeping that house Pine-Sol clean.

Yeah, my mama is magic.  
Always was and always will be.  
Her magic?  
How to stay steady and sure  
in this fast paced world.  
Now when people look at me  
with my head held high  
my back erect  
and look at me with that..  
"Who does she think she is?"

I just keep on  
walking  
with the  
assurance inside.  
I am Black Magic!  
I am Jeanette  
Redmond's child.





If I ain't African  
someone tell my heart  
to stop beating like a djem'be drum.

If I ain't African  
someone tell my hair  
to stop curling up like the continent  
it is from.

If I ain't African  
someone tell my lips  
to stop singing a Yoruban song.  
Someone speak to my hips  
tell them their sway  
is all wrong.

If I ain't African  
how come I know the way home?  
Along the Ivory Coast  
feel it  
in my breast of bones.

If I ain't African  
how come my feet do this African dance?  
How come every time  
I'm in New Orleans or Charleston  
I fall into a trance?

If I ain't African how come  
I know things I ain't supposed to know  
about the middle passage-slavery  
feel it deep down  
in my soul?

If I ain't African  
someone tell their Gods  
to stop calling on me,  
Obatala, Ellegba, Elleggua,  
Yemaya, Oshun  
Ogun!  
Tell me why I faint  
every time  
there is a full moon.

If I ain't African  
how come I hear  
Africa Africa Africa  
everywhere I go?  
Hear it in my heartbeat  
hear it high  
hear it low.

If I ain't African  
someone tell my soul  
to lose this violet flame  
someone tell their Gods  
to call another name.  
someone take this drum beat  
out of my heart  
someone give my tongue  
a new mouth  
to part.

If I ain't African  
someone tell my feet  
to speak to my knees  
to send word to my hips  
to press a message on my breast  
to sing a song  
to my lips  
to whisper in my ear

If I ain't African  
If I ain't African  
If I ain't African  
PLEASE  
tell my eyes  
'Cause if I ain't Africa  
I ain't livin'  
and God knows  
I ain't  
ALIVE!

Glenis Redmond is known for writing and performing a style of poetry called the **PRAISE POEM**, a form that has been used in most indigenous cultures for hundreds, if not thousands of years. Praise poetry can celebrate a single person, a family, a people, a hero, a god, or even oneself.

In Africa, praise poetry has served both as a form of oral history and entertainment. Professional poets recite long narratives detailing the history of the people, the great leaders, and their outstanding achievements. These poems often employ special praise names and **epithets** to describe the person being praised. It is not unusual for African praise poetry to be accompanied by music or drumming.

**EPITHET** - a descriptive word or phrase used in place of the name of an actual person or thing (such as "Lion-Heart" for King Richard I)

## "Song for Urien Rheged"

Urien of the cultivated plain,  
The most generous man of baptism,  
Abundance has been given  
To the men of earth.  
As it has been gathered,  
It has been scattered.  
Joyful the bards of baptism  
Whilst thy life continues.  
There is greater joy  
For the high-famed, and liberal of praise.  
It is greater glory,  
That Urien and his children should exist.  
—Book of Taliesin (Wales)

## "The Praises of Mzilikazi, the Son of Matshobana"

Bayethe! Ndebele Nation!  
You are the knobkerrie that menaced Tshaka.  
You are the big one who is as big as his father Matshobana.  
You are the string of Mntinti and Simangele  
Simangele son of Ndaba.  
You are the string of Mntitni and Ndaba  
The string they made until they wet tears  
You are the sun that rose from the ear of the elephant,  
It rose whereupon the birds announced to each other.  
—Ndebele praise poem (Zimbabwe)

## "A Poem for Magic"

take it to the hoop, "magic" johnson,  
take the ball dazzling down the open lane  
herk & jerk & raise your six-feet, nine-inch frame  
into the air sweating screams of your neon name  
"magic" johnson, nicknamed "windex" way back  
in high school  
cause you wiped glass backboards  
so clean, where you first juke and shook  
wiled your way to glory  
a new-style fusion of shake-&-bake  
energy, using everything possible, you created your own  
space to fly through—any moment now  
we expect your wings to spread feathers for that spooky takeoff  
of yours—then, shake & glide & ride up in space  
till you hammer home a clothes-lining deuce off glass  
now, come back down with a reverse hoodoo gem  
off the spin & stick in sweet, popping nets clean  
from twenty feet, right side

—Quincy Troupe (USA)

## "Song of Solomon"

How beautiful are your feet in sandals,  
O prince's daughter!  
The curves of your hips are like jewels,  
The work of the hands of an artist.  
Your navel is like a round goblet  
That never lacks mixed wine;  
Your belly is like a heap of wheat  
Fenced about with lilies.

—The Bible

## "Strong Bone"

Look at that girl, she's so skinny.  
Look at that girl, she's so small.  
I can't help that I am a size zero and I really don't care.  
I have that small person's attitude problem people tell me.  
You know that strong bone in the shy girl sitting in the corner  
that takes all the cracks you put on her.  
Well, I got that bone running through my whole body.  
So, you better watch out  
for the hand on the hip,  
the flip of the neck,  
the flame in the eye.  
So, don't say it unless you can face the consequences  
because you're about to get whiplash from what I am about.

—Amber Sherer, age 13 (USA)

# what is performance poetry?

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Quite simply, performance poetry is poetry that is written to be performed rather than read. Humans were performing poetry aloud long before they had a written language to record their words. Epic stories such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* originated in the imaginations of oral poets and were passed down through repeated performance. These ancient performers recited from memory; rhyme, alliteration, repetition, and other literary devices helped them remember these long tales. Though they were expected to remain faithful to the traditional version of the story, oral poets were allowed some creative freedom in bringing their own words and flavor to the performance.

With the invention of the printing press, poets gradually shifted from the role of performer to writer, creating texts that were meant to be read but rarely performed aloud. It was not until the 20th century that poets such as Basil Bunting, Cid Corman, and Allen Ginsberg began to return to the idea of poetry as performance rather than literature. By the 1970s, there were many poets creating works specifically for performance. There were no specific rules. Some poets composed their texts in advance, some improvised during the performance, and some included music. The New Jersey-born poet Hedwig Gorski is credited with inventing the term 'performance poetry' in 1981.

A poetry performance is not the same as a poetry reading. Performance poets memorize their texts and create a theatrical experience using vocal inflection, facial expression, physical movement, and occasionally music.

## The Elements of Performance Poetry

★ **RHYTHM** - Though spoken-word poetry is written in **free verse**, it does use rhythm. The rhythm is irregular, following the shape of the verse, and helps propel the poem forward.

**FREE VERSE** - poetry that does not use rhyme or a regular rhythm pattern

★ **REPETITION** - A lot of performance poetry uses repetition of words or phrases to reinforce important ideas with the audience.

★ **RHYME** - While performance poetry does not use strict rhyme schemes, it occasionally uses rhyme to emphasize a particular idea or theme.

## Performance Poetry Terms

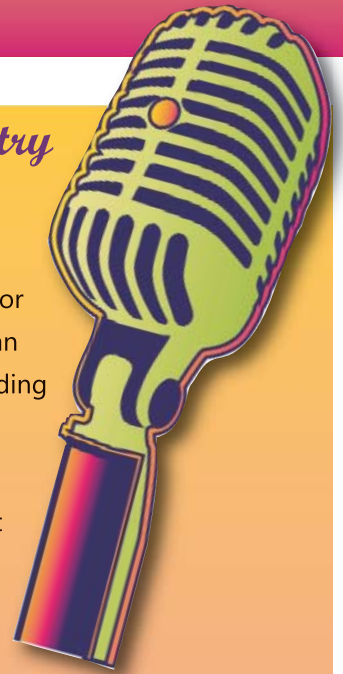
**SPOKEN WORD** - poetry, lyrics, or stories created for performance in front of an audience rather than reading on one's own

**PERFORMANCE POETRY** - a type of spoken word that includes elements of theater and sometimes music

**HIP HOP POETRY** - poetry performed to a rhythmic beat; an element of the larger hip hop culture encompassing specific styles of music, dance, fashion, graffiti art, etc.

**RAP** - the rhythmic spoken delivery of rhymes, wordplay, and poetry, often with a musical accompaniment; part of hip hop culture. There is some debate about whether rap should be considered poetry or music

**SLAM POETRY** - hip hop or rap poetry performed in competition



## Glenis' Poetry Reading List

*Black Out Loud*, edited by Arnold Adoff

*Vice*, by Ai

*Collected Poems*, by Maya Angelou

*Loose Women*, by Sandra Cisneros

*Original Fire*, by Louise Erdrich

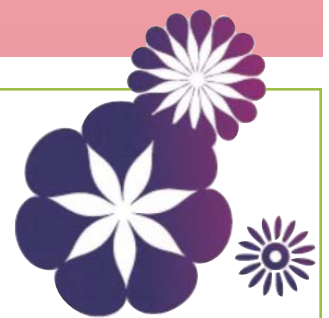
*Rice*, by Nikky Finney

*Conjure Blues*, by Jaki Shelton Green

*Rise and M\*A\*C\*N\*O\*L\*I\*A*, by Van Jordan

*Affralachia*, by Frank X. Walker

*Too Black, Too Strong*, by Benjamin Zephaniah





When Glenis Redmond begins writing a new piece, the poem doesn't just magically appear. She has a process that she uses to work out her ideas and then put them into creative, powerful language. The exercises outlined here were developed by Glenis to help students get their creative juices flowing and begin to think like poets. Here are the basic steps:



photo: Karekin Goekjian

1

## Brainstorm Your Words

Brainstorm answers to the questions below. Each answer should be only one word. Write your answers down to help you create a word list for your poetry. (This can also be done as a group activity, with each person in the group contributing one answer to each question.)

1. What is your favorite animal?
2. What is your favorite gem?
3. What is your favorite bird?
4. What is your favorite item in nature outside of the animal kingdom?
5. What is your favorite flower?

2

## Apply Poetic Techniques

1. Use **texture**—color, imagery, and sounds—to provide depth in poetry.
2. Create **layers** by combining two word choices from your brainstorming exercises that might not normally be used together yet resonate poetically.
3. Use **metaphor** and **simile**, which are both forms of comparison. (Metaphor uses “is,” while simile uses “like” or “as.”)
4. Use a variety of **interesting word choices**: for example, abstract nouns (such as feelings or ideas), concrete nouns (anything you can actually see), verbs, and descriptive words (such as colors). Try to make your word choices as precise as possible.

3

## Keep Revising!

Don't settle for the very first thing you put down on paper. Go back and re-read your poem again and again—aloud, if possible. Don't be afraid to get rid of any words, sentences, or ideas that just don't seem to be working. As you read, ask yourself: Will your poem make sense to the people who are hearing it? Will it captivate their ears and their imaginations? Keep revising your poem until it says exactly what you want it to express.



## Books

*Leaf and Bone: African Praise-Poems*, edited by Judith Gleason. Puffin, 1994.

*The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises From Poets Who Teach*, edited by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell. Collins, 1992.

*The Spoken Word Revolution*, by Mark Eleveld. Sourcebooks MediaFusion, 2005.

*Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*, edited by Alix Olson. Seal Press, 2007

## On the Web

[www.glenisredmondstore.com](http://www.glenisredmondstore.com) - Glenis Redmond's website features information about Glenis, some of her poems, and an online store where you can find her books, CDs, video, posters, and more.

[brickcity.net](http://brickcity.net) - Submit/post your own poetry online.

[www.educationworld.com](http://www.educationworld.com) - Great sites for teaching poetry.

[Everypoet.com](http://Everypoet.com) - "Every resource for every poet."

[www.poetry-portal.com](http://www.poetry-portal.com) - A bird's-eye view of Internet poetry.

