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Renaissance House Holds Final Performance of the Season

Three Renaissance House Alumni share their work at the Katharine Cornell Theater
By [Mathea Morais](#) | [Email the author](#) | September 27, 2011

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As a writer living on the Island, one would think I would know about a place in Oak Bluffs where writers from all over the country come to write, perform, inspire one another and be inspired by the Island itself, but I did not.

I did not know a thing about the Renaissance House, a writer's retreat that affords writers the gift of time to pursue their creative endeavors, but thank goodness, I've finally been put on.

The Renaissance House is located in Oak Bluffs and the retreats run from July through September. It is a program of the Helene Johnson and Dorothy West Foundation For Artists In Need. Both Johnson and West were writers of the Harlem Renaissance and Island residents. West was a year round resident who worked at [Harborside](#) until Jacqueline Kennedy spotted her writing in the [Vineyard Gazette](#) and gave her the opportunity to simply, in West's words, "stare at the trees and do nothing." From that evolved "The Wedding," a best selling novel based on the life of Johnson's daughter Abigail McGrath who founded Renaissance House in 2001.



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Residents stay for one or two weeks and enjoy sit down dinners with McGrath and her husband Tony. Joining them often are local artists like Jessica Harris, Elaine Weintraub, Robert Hayden, Marty Nadler, Nat Benjamin, the late Phil Craig and Shirley Craig, and Brooks Robards - as well as "imported" artists like Robert Pinsky, Janet Hill, Elisabeth Benedict and others.

On Fridays, the residents present selected works as a result of their dedicated efforts from the week. This Friday, September 30th, marks the last such reading of the 2011 season and plans are to close it with a bang. The three residents this week: LeVan D. Hawkins, Storme Webber and Dahlia Ross, are all Renaissance House alums and they will be showcasing this week's work at the [Katharine Cornell Theater](#).

LeVan D. Hawkins is a former LA - based solo performer, writer, and poet who now resides in Chicago. For him, being a part of the Renaissance House means, "I get to get out of the doggy dog fast world and be an artist for a second." His first visit to the Renaissance House five years ago was "one of the most pivotal moments of my life. To be around other artists who provided kinship, and served as role models on how to work and how to be more open, when I left, I felt lifted."

According to Hawkins, the Renaissance House also features another plus: Abigail McGrath - who "is the best cook in the world. Not only do we have stimulating conversations, but we have them over wonderful food. Tons of it. That's love, that's not about agenda," he said.

Hawkins poetry and prose has appeared in many publications and he has performed all over the

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Renaissance House Alumni Perform at Katharine Cornell Theatre
September 30, 2011 at 8:00 pm
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country. His most recent performance was as the lone spoken-word artist at the 2011 ALT-Q music festival, a showcase for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender musicians and performers at the Old Town School of Folk Music.

"I'm a performance poet," said Hawkins. "I only write about big things. I talk about love and some race stuff, but keep my humanity all the time too. I like to say I'm the love child of Langston Hughes, James Baldwin and Ernest Hemingway."

Also residing at the Renaissance House this week and performing on Friday is Storme Webber. Webber, who is back for a second time, feels that the Renaissance House's ability to give artists space and time to devote themselves to their work is "a service to the Island and to the larger communities where the residents come from." For Webber, it's also meaningful to be on the Island itself. "As an artist of African-American and Native American descent, to be this close to the history of Dorothy West, who was the last living member of Harlem Renaissance, is very inspiring."

Webber is a spoken word, vocal, and visual artist whose work focuses on marginalized communities. Calling it "Performative literature," Webber said that her emphasis is on theater. "I honed my craft over 30 years," she said. "I've been all over Europe, and in places with language differences, I had to work assiduously to find ways to perform that didn't have to depend on language."

Dahlia Ross is also performing on Friday night after spending the week at the Renaissance House. Ross is a Brooklyn poet and musician whose studies have included poetry, piano, flute, and voice. Ross has known the McGrath's since she was a child doing street theater with them in Manhattan. The last time she was here was when JFK, Jr.'s plane crashed and Ross, who hasn't left Brooklyn in a year, said she feels honored to be here again.

Ross has spent the week "working on my own original material, but I'm also planning on doing one Lou Reed song," she said. As to what to expect from Ross, "I just had the opportunity to practice for five hours in Abigail's garden, so people can expect a lot of inspired gratitude."

Three Alumni from the Renaissance House: Storme Webber, LeVan D. Hawkins and Dahlia Ross, will perform at the Katharine Cornell Theatre on Friday, September 30th, at 8pm. FREE. For more information please call 508-687-9966 or 917-747-0367.

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