Singer and songwriter Nina Simone (1933–2003) was a powerful force in American music and the movement for Black liberation in the mid-twentieth century.

This is the U.S. premiere of a theatrical production about Simone’s life and music by Josette Bushell-Mingo.

Bushell-Mingo is an acclaimed London-born, Sweden-based theatre actor and director.

NINA SIMONE

Nina Simone, the “High Priestess of Soul,” was an icon of twentieth-century music. Her music can be heard on more than 40 albums spanning the years 1959 to 1993.

Nina Simone was born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in North Carolina in 1933. She started playing piano at the age of three and trained in classical piano. Despite her prodigious talent, and because of systemic racism, she was denied entrance to the Curtis Institute of Music. Her dreams of becoming a classical pianist dashed, she became a music teacher and performed in jazz clubs to earn a living. In these settings, she began to sing, and to weave classical, jazz, and blues musical traditions together in highly distinctive piano arrangements of standards.

Her first hit was “I Loves You, Porgy,” in 1959. In the 1960s, Simone offered her music as an instrument to advance the civil rights movement, performing at demonstrations and releasing political songs like “Mississippi Goddam,” “Four Women,” and “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black.”

Simone left the United States in 1973 to get away from American racism. She spent the rest of her life in Barbados, Africa, and Europe.

JOSETTE BUSHELL-MINGO

Josette Bushell-Mingo is an esteemed theatre actor who was nominated for a Laurence Olivier Award for Best Actress for her role as Rafiki in the London production of The Lion King (2000). Other notable credits include Peer Gynt (Solveig) and Antony and Cleopatra (Cleopatra) at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester.

She founded the Black-led arts festival PUSH at the Young Vic and is currently the artistic director for the Swedish National Touring Theatre. She also serves on the board of the Swedish Film Institute.

Bushell-Mingo was born in London in 1965 to Guyanese parents. She is an Officer of the Order of the British Empire.
FROM “FEELING GOOD,”
LYRICS BY NINA SIMONE
Stars when you shine?  
You know how I feel 
Scent of the pine 
You know how I feel 
Oh, freedom is mine 
And I know how I feel 
It’s a new dawn 
It’s a new day 
It’s a new life 
... For me 
And I’m feeling good

FROM “MISSISSIPPI GODDAM” (1964),
LYRICS BY NINA SIMONE
Don’t tell me  
I tell you  
Me and my people just about due  
I’ve been there so I know  
They keep on saying ‘Go slow!’ 
But that’s just the trouble  
‘Do it slow’  
Washing the windows  
‘Do it slow’  
Picking the cotton  
‘Do it slow’  
You’re just plain rotten  
‘Do it slow’  
You’re too damn lazy  
‘Do it slow’  
The thinking’s crazy  
‘Do it slow’  
Where am I going  
What am I doing  
I don’t know  
I don’t know  
Just try to do your very best  
Stand up be counted with all the rest  
For everybody knows about Mississippi goddam  
Picket lines  
School boy cots  
They try to say it’s a communist plot  
All I want is equality  
For my sister my brother my people and me  
Yes you lied to me all these years  
You told me to wash and clean my ears  
And talk real fine just like a lady  
And you’d stop calling me Sister Sadie  
Oh but this whole country is full of lies  
You’re all gonna die and die like flies  
I don’t trust you any more  
You keep on saying ‘Go slow!’

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION
Josette Bushell-Mingo has said this production is about “our relationship to each other, through the prism of blackness.” How do you understand the “prism of blackness”? What did you see through that prism in this performance?
Are there musical artists today that you think are working in the tradition of Nina Simone?
What does music contribute to activism?

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YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK OUT:
Power to the People!  
Herbie Hancock, Gustavo Dudamel, and the LA Phil  
An Experience L.A. Event, March 9, 2020  
bit.ly/VVPowerPeople
The movie What Happened, Miss Simone?  
www.netflix.com/title/70308063
The World Stage  
theworldstage.org
ANDREW JUSTICE of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about this evening’s event. Those with a call number (e.g., books) are physical items which you can find in our campus libraries. Those without a call number (e.g. e-books, journals, and databases) are electronic resources, which you can access through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at libraries.usc.edu.

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