

Los Angeles Times

CIRCULATION:
4,651 DAILY / 1,502,120 SUNDAY

THURSDAY, MARCH 2, 1995
COPYRIGHT 1995 / THE TIMES MIRROR COMPANY / CC117 108 PAGES

Touching Souls, Awakening Spirits

■ **Self-awareness:** Through her autobiographical performances, Akuyoe Graham tries to make youths realize that 'what's in you is the key, the secret.'

By ERIN J. AUBRY
TIMES STAFF WRITER

LOS ANGELES—It is a gorgeous morning, the sun already hot as it climbs over the San Gabriel Mountains, but Akuyoe Graham shivers and pulls a leather jacket around her as she treads a snow-filled path of her imagination.

In a classroom at a juvenile hall facility, about 30 young men dressed in identical baggy pants and T-shirts watch intently as she performs an excerpt from her autobiographical show, "Spirit Awakening."

Sighing deeply, she stretches out her arms and laments the move her family made from its native Ghana, "where we cooked under the trees," to a cold, ash-gray London as oppressive as anything out of a Dickens novel. The actress deftly becomes a tight-lipped English headmistress, her spirited mother, her own 6-year-old self in cultural rebellion.

Laughs, muted exclamations of sympathy and disbelief from the audience break the silence.

Fifteen minutes later, most of the boys are bent over papers writing out what Akuyoe, 36, hopes is the beginning of their own scripted journeys into their lives and, ultimately, into themselves.

After the session, which Akuyoe stresses is only for those who wish to

participate, she thanks the group and prepares to leave. No one volunteered to share his work, but now several hands clutching papers venture up, perhaps, the boys say, Akuyoe would like to read them to herself. She immediately obliges and circulates around the tables, praising each effort no matter how brief or hastily scrawled. Even though she has a noon audition and time is short, only reluctantly does she finally leave.

"You all were wonderful," she says earnestly. "Believe me, this is only the beginning. I'll be back."

So liberating has this voyage of self-discovery been for Akuyoe, she has spent the last four years not only performing "Spirit Awakening," but also conducting autobiographical workshops for high school students, at-risk and incarcerated youth around the Southland. The workshop program has led to the establishment of a Spirit Awakening Foundation that Akuyoe hopes will spread the gospel of self-awareness through creativity among young people.

Juvenile Hall teacher Pam Larson, whose group includes high-risk offenders in isolation, says Akuyoe's efforts are more than good impulses. The workshops, she

says, are therapy that works for many teen-agers at the facility.

"Akuyoe is real powerful and straight and focused," Larson says. "She's like a laser beam. She cuts through the crap. Her own courage in expressing herself touches the kids; they respond to that. After she left my class one day, a boy said, 'That was cool, what we did.' These kids are looking for anything that will support them making a change. Akuyoe puts them in a very powerful place where they can start searching themselves."

Says Akuyoe, whose full name is Akuyoe Charlotte Katherine Graham, "What I want to share with young people is, 'What's in you is the key, the secret. Don't put that aside because ultimately, that doesn't serve anybody, or any community.'

"That isn't a Pollyanna notion. Joy and fulfillment are powerful."

Deep down inside my life is twisting and turning

My feelings hurt so bad they feel like they're burning

My head inside is so confused I feel like I've been abused.

Fight you ask?

It's just a mask

Life, life, you can't be like this.

—Jeremy



LORI SHEPLER / Los Angeles Times

"The difficulty has been learning to love myself," says Akuyoe Graham.



Playwright Adds Spirit To Life Stories

IT DOESN'T MATTER if you have lived for 10 years or 50 years, writing your autobiography can be uplifting.

Ghanian actress, playwright and poet Akuyoe, 36, has taught thousands of children and adults nationwide to write their life stories and to do it objectively.

Now the storyteller will bring her own life to the stage in her critically acclaimed one-woman play, *Spirit Awakening*, which opens March 4 at the Afro-American Studies Center at UCLA's Freud Playhouse. The event will kick-off Akuyoe's nonprofit Spirit Awakening Foundation, an arts organization aimed at inspiring people to return to storytelling through dramatic, educational and cinematic works.

In the play, Akuyoe assumes multiple roles representing different perspectives in her life decisions with poetry, monologues and music.

"Writing your story gives you a chance to take a breather and look at the big picture," Akuyoe says. "You're able to glean things that when you haven't written it down, you can't see."

Through the foundation, Akuyoe conducts three different writing workshops to help people respond to life situations through "inner guidance" instead of succumbing to social pressures. The life stories serve as a guide to healing and build self-esteem, Akuyoe says. Many of Akuyoe's students have produced "extraordinary" work. Some of the stories will be included in her book, *Innocent at Heart*, which she expects to publish later this year.

"By writing and performing my own story, I was able to give my life the interpretation that helps me,"

Akuyoe says. "An interpretation that

gives me grace and beauty and all those wonderful things which if I left to someone else perhaps I wouldn't receive."

Akuyoe teaches others to bring their lives into focus.

Los Angeles Times

CRITICS CHOICE

A Journey Into Selfhood in Solo 'Spirit Awakening'

By RAY LOYND
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Uprooted from her homeland, African princess and Ghana-born Akuyoe immigrates to England and feels like "a speck of pepper in a sea of salt." But that's only a warm-up to what awaits her in Harlem where a tough, African-American street girl sneers, "Yo, yo, yo! Where's your spear?"

With a startling array of inflections and idioms, and a mercurial ability to play myriad characters (male and female), writer-actress Akuyoe dramatizes an archetypal journey into selfhood in her solo show, "Spirit Awakening," at the Gallery Theater in Barnsdall Park.

The production employs poetry, monologue, movement and drums (from percussionist Art Ture Oliva) to tell a story both personal and mythical. Toward the end of the journey, as the tall and slender Akuyoe peels away her fashionable hair and long, lacy white dress, we see a woman whose quest is heroic.

She not only unmaskes lifelong affectations earmarked by an upper-crust British accent and trendy socializing in Manhattan (where she disdains ethnic restaurants for her beloved Russian Tea Room), but she finds an inner voice that reminds her: "You are an ancient warrior who knows the strength of each tight curl upon her head."

Her newfound tight curls notwithstanding, she buries even her ethnic roots and embraces her "spirit awakening," her totality and epiphany. It's easy to see how inspirational she must be in her other life—conducting personal storytelling workshops for at-risk youth in the inner city.



SEGUN OYEKUNLE

Akuyoe in "Spirit Awakening":
Exceptionally accomplished.

In its flavor, economy, humor and cultural sweep, the show is exceptionally accomplished. It strongly suggests two other works of personal search: Alex Haley's "Roots" and, closer to home, the current one-woman show about growing up an African-American child in America, Charlayne Woodard's "Pretty Fire" at the Fountainhead Theater in Hollywood.

■ "Spirit Awakening," Gallery Theatre, Barnsdall Park, 4800 Hollywood Blvd., Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, 8 p.m. Moves Nov. 14 to the Harman Avenue Theatre, 522 N. La Brea Ave., Saturdays and Mondays, 8 p.m., Sundays, 4 p.m., indefinitely. \$15. (213) 660-8587. Running time: 1 hour, 15 minutes.

Gazing Inward

Akuyoe Graham's new one-woman show is inspired by a personal need for self-awareness.
by Marisela Santana

When it comes to discovering herself, Akuyoe Graham, founder of the Spirit Awakening Foundation, couldn't bear to stop at producing an autobiographical play to show others that she loves the woman she's become.

After having toured the country with her one-woman show, *Spirit Awakening*, a play about self-discovery and loving and accepting oneself for who one is, Graham's passion for writing and self-discovery turned into writing programs that would reawaken the innate spiritual nature and basically inspire self-respect among children and adults.

What was it that inspired Graham to form such a foundation? Well, it wasn't her ultimate findings. Mostly, Graham said from her home in Los Angeles, what inspired her to produce the workshops were her travails, figuring that if she had gone through so much, imagine if there were others.

Graham soon discovered that she wasn't the only one in the world who felt out of place.

Her favorite adage — "In a world where perfection has only one face, what do you do when your face isn't the one?" — resonates in her play and in her writing programs, Graham said, to show others that at one point or another, one has to come to a place in oneself and accept who one is.



MENTOR: Akuyoe's workshops are designed to help underprivileged youth improve their self-esteem and academic performance.

"The first thing we all do in life is try to fit in," said Graham, who is currently organizing her Spirit Awakening Alumni Christmas Party with actress Regina Hall for Dec. 11. "My Spirit Awakening programs foster better understanding among different racial and cultural groups; reduce negative and destructive attitudes and behavior in order to prepare and support young people in finding more fulfilling and purposeful life choices for themselves and our world."

The programs are also aimed at increasing academic performance by enhancing reading, writing and communicative skills.

Whether it's through her one-woman show or through her writing programs, for Graham, being able to share her knowledge and her spirit awakening tech-

niques with others is a win-win situation.

When she's not on stage, Graham shares her writing programs with hundreds of at-risk youth around the country. Presently she teaches these workshops in various juvenile detention centers in California. Her work, she said, enables youth to express themselves in a creative and empowering way.

The intention of her annual holiday party is to mentor and encourage current program participants, which this year includes girls from the Jordan Downs project in Watts, ages 13 to 16, and girls that were formally in Camp Scott, to join the foundation.

"It took me to deconstruct everything I'd ever learned about myself to find who I am on the inside," Graham said. "It's a universal truth. I've come to realize that my self-discovery is a venue for me to be able to give back. I've always believed that whatever you have, there's always something to give. Self-expression has been such a journey for me, that I know that others can benefit from that."

For instance, Graham said, when she was a teenager, not a day went by that someone else didn't interpret her hair type or her skin color for her.

"I didn't get to do that for myself, not until I was an adult, others would do it for me, so I believed them," Graham said. "I want to be able to share with young girls that they don't have to believe how others describe them. I don't

describe my hair as being nappy, I use the word 'curly.'"

Graham is also currently working with the Prototypes Organization at Jordan Downs, she also works with children there.

"You know they tell us that children don't want to learn, that our children today aren't teachable," Graham said. "Well, we shouldn't believe that either, because they're wrong. If the programs are engaging enough, the children will learn."

Graham's Spirit Awakening writing programs are not your typical writing programs either.

She believes that rich programming equals rich knowledge.

"We often think very small," she said of programs for kids. "Here we are working with kids who live in certain economic levels, so why not offer them something beautiful and extraordinary, something they don't see or hear every day, to let them know that it is a rich world out there full of beauty, but before they can see or experience any of it, they have to find, accept, love and respect themselves first ... that they need to awaken their inner spirit first."

Sponsored by the Dwight Stuart Youth Foundation and Katie Gunther, the Spirit Awakening Foundation's Annual Holiday Party takes place, Dec. 11 at the CentrePoint Club in Playa Vista. For more information, call (310) 745-0818.

Los Angeles Times

From Ghana to L.A.: A 'Spirit Awakening'

By RAY LOYND
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

With apologies to the Ebony magazine look, Akuyoe disdains soft, flowy black hairstyles or "dyed, fried and chemicalized hair" (to quote "The Colored Museum").

As the Ghana-born writer-actress-educator muses aloud in her one-woman stage journey, "Spirit Awakening," opening Thursday at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, Akuyoe knows "the strength of each tight curl on her head."

Her personal transformation from a woman sublimating her black identity in order to move in a white world to finally rediscovering herself in Hollywood, of all places, is at the heart of her critically acclaimed show.

In the production, which she has refined

and deepened since its Equity Waiver premiere in Hollywood last year, she mercurially effects several dialects and idioms, playing characters both male and female, much as Charlayne Woodward did in "Pretty Fire" and Chaz Palminteri in "The Bronx Tale."

It hasn't been easy for a black woman pursuing an acting career to drop the silky coiffeur. "I'm sure my features have cost me work," said Akuyoe, who has appeared in CBS' "Picket Fences," several TV movies and the play "Widows," in 1991, at the Mark Taper Forum. "As an actress, I'm not opposed to wearing wigs, but, off-stage, I am opposed to changing my hair to fit someone's idea of who I am.

"But in taking this stand, I'm not trying to be a role model," said the tall, 34-year-old former royal African princess, whose

Please see **AKUYOE, F10**



GARY FRIEDMAN Los Angeles Times

Akuyoe's critically acclaimed show "Spirit Awakening" opens Thursday at LATC.

AKUYOE

Continued from F1

mother uprooted her from Ghana at the age of 6 in an identity-shattering move to the white Western world, where the little girl "felt like a speck of pepper in a sea of salt." "Wearing my hair natural and kinky is all about a spiritual—as opposed to political—awakening," explained Akuyoe as she toyed with a spinach salad during an interview in Larchmont Village.

Akuyoe is also well known as a rehabilitator-storyteller through her "Spirit Awakening" educational workshops in inner-city schools, prisons, juvenile halls and work camps for teen-agers, which she conducts with funding from state and county grants.

"When I go into these places, especially the schools, and see black kids in pain over their kinky hair and their very darkness, I

know exactly what they're feeling. I work with them to express their lives by unmasking what I call their authentic voice," said Akuyoe (which means "blessed woman" in her native tongue).

According to both the County Probation Department and the State Department of Corrections, Akuyoe has been wildly successful in dealing with incarcerated minors. According to Deputy Probation Officer Gregory James of Camp Afflerbaugh, a juvenile detention center in La Verne: "The response of our minors this summer to Akuyoe has been so overwhelming that many began crying due to their deep emotional healing that was taking place. In my four years, I have never experienced anything like it."

In fact, Akuyoe's recent three-week workshop at Camp Afflerbaugh for 16 youths aged 15-18 wound up producing a book of the youths' own work called "Voices of the Soul," with support from the Earth Trust Foundation.

She's also providing free admission to the homeless for "Spirit Awakening," which is being staged in the LATC's more intimate Theatre 4, with organizational help from the nearby L.A. Mission and other shelters. Proceeds from the three-week stand will help support

her workshops.

On the horizon are plans to make a movie from "Spirit Awakening"—"not a one-woman movie, of course, but full of character actors. I have a producer pitching it around"—and a visit to Rome later this year, to see her uncle, Ghana's ambassador to Italy.

Akuyoe's odyssey from "emotionally chilly London" to the street rhythms of New York (at the age of 11) brought her to Hollywood just four years ago, she laughs at the thought of her blizzard of adjustments.

"Moving from the drums of Ghana to Mozart symphonies in Europe with a divorced Ghanaian aristocrat for a mom taught me right away about opposing cultures," she said with a grin. "The English were awfully snooty to me."

Once settled in New York, where she attended the High School for the Performing Arts and later lived what she concedes was "a pretty fast life," Akuyoe studied acting with some of the best teachers—Uta Hagen, Herbert Berghof and, her favorite, Sanford Meisner.

"There are African/European/American presences in me, and right now I'm entering into my African phase again. I can feel it in

the movement in my body, in how I'm enjoying my dance classes."

Other black actresses such as Angela Bassett and Alfre Woodard are friends, but with her performance-workshop priorities, she's driven in a slightly different direction.

"I believe that every child is born with an essential piece of the word-puzzle—and either we assist them or we pay a very high price."

■ "Spirit Awakening," LATC, 514 S. Spring St., Thursday through Saturday, 8 p.m., Sunday, 4 p.m. Ends Aug. 29. \$12. (213) 660-8587. Running time: 1 hour, 10 minutes (no intermission). Akuyoe will also speak in a program for the L.A. Festival at 8 p.m. Aug. 27 at the Vision Complex in Leimert Park.

Born a tribal princess in Africa, raised in London as a child and in America as a young adult, Akuyoe is no stranger to identity crises. She is quick to tell audiences and workshop students alike that as recently as six years ago, she wouldn't have been able to perform a show like "Spirit Awakening," much less school others on the finer points of self-revelation.

"I hated myself," she says in softly accented English. She is direct but unfailingly warm and gracious, given to wearing long, flowing dresses that accentuate a natural elegance. "I was African, but not; had an English accent, but was not English; here, I wasn't American. The difficulty has been learning to love myself. I believe that's a journey everyone has to make."

Akuyoe studied theater in New York, attending the High School of Performing Arts and later training with such legendary teachers as Uta Hagen and Sanford Meisner. Disappearing into characters and bypassing her own suited her. She could temporarily forget about all the things that made her different from most other Hollywood hopefuls, things she had secretly grown to detest—full lips, coffee-colored skin, short hair curled tight. Although her name means "blessed woman" in the West African language of Ga, Akuyoe often felt anything but.

"I am dark-skinned, and I had this dark-is-bad connection in my mind," she says. "I didn't even realize I felt this way. I had to come to some terms, some meanings that supported this dark woman. 'Spirit Awakening' gives me plenty of opportunities to live certain truths I wasn't living then."

Ironically, "Spirit Awakening" came out of the actress' attempt to cobble together a one-woman show out of monologues by other playwrights.

"Friends saw what I was doing and said, 'That's good, but it's too artsy. Why not do you instead?'" she recalls. "I had no idea that project would take the shape that it did."

As the show took form, at staged readings and poetry gatherings around town, so did Akuyoe's full appreciation of it. She says she does not perform "Spirit Awakening" so much as relive certain segments of her life, though she has done the show nearly 100 times at venues ranging from Barnsdall Park to the Los Angeles Theatre Center.

"Once it was written, then I began the journey of understanding of what it was I had written," she says. "The last line of the show is, 'I am.' I came to my own spirituality through 'Spirit Awakening.' I had to ask, 'What does I am mean to Akuyoe?' One of the most valuable things about this is that I had to give my own life interpretation."

The need to help others face themselves evolved right along with the show, and at points nearly overtook it. She soon initiated workshops, called "Unmasking Your Authentic Voice," following performances at schools and juvenile camps. In that setting the teen-agers, mostly black and Latino, unexpectedly tapped mother lodes of creativity as well as repressed pain, confusion and other emotions for which they had found few outlets.

Providing that outlet quickly became more gratifying than the high she got from acting.

"I'm bridging gaps," she says. She understands that teen-agers often feel invisible. "As a woman with African features, I often feel that way on auditions, like I'm not seen or heard."

Carl Williams, a sophomore at John Muir High School in Pasadena and workshop alumnus, likes the fact that "you get to write about yourself, not about who you think you are, but what you feel inside."

"I had never done this before," Williams says. "I had done essays about what I did over the summer, stuff like that, but this is different. Akuyoe challenges you and helps you learn about yourself. Most adults want you to be like them, but not her. And she's sincere."

Muir sophomore Joanna Moore says writing and performing her piece let her sort through conflicting feelings about her father and distinguish who her real friends are.

Akuyoe compiles the text from many workshops in pamphlet-like books that feature cover graphics and such titles as "The Land of Healing" and "We Speak: From Death to Life." Instructors have long suggested photocopying as a more expedient way to reproduce student work, but Akuyoe is adamant about her method.

"The kids get amazed when they see their work in a book," she says. "They sit up straight and say, 'I did that?' It impresses adults too. They look at them, and kids look at themselves, differently."

My age is 10 now in elementary. My school was four miles away from my house. Every morning I'd wake up to the sound of his voice, yelling at me, telling how I should have never been born, how I meant nothing to nobody. I was locked up in jail. My mother then found out and came to get me. . . . I then was so mad at myself for the pain I put my mother through, I tried to commit suicide. With a broken beer bottle I started carving in my arms. I lost so much blood I passed out.

—Jason

Akuyoe says the purpose of the fledgling Spirit Awakening Foundation is twofold: To train teen-agers in autobiographical workshop techniques, and to fund education in the broadest sense of the word—college, travel, art courses or whatever pursuit will best aid the process of self-discovery.

"This is a 'good faith' fund," she explains. "Not everyone is cut out for school. I've been lucky in my life to have people say 'yes' to some unique requests. I want others to have the same chance."

Darryl Douglas, 17, was ultimately glad to have unearthed the pain of his parents' divorce in his piece, "Who Are You?"

"When you have a sore, you tie it up, and when somebody touches it, you say 'Ow!'" he says. "It was like taking off the bandage, cleansing the wound, and putting the bandage back on. The wound's still there, but it's better."

■ For more information on the Spirit Awakening Foundation, call (213) 913 2656.