

LAFAYETTE

2017/18 Season  
FAMILY SERIES

Saturday  
March 3, 2018  
2 p.m.

WILLIAMS  
CENTER  
FOR THE ARTS

AUDIENCE GUIDE



# Songs & Stories in the Oral Tradition

## CHARLOTTE BLAKE ALSTON

Dear Audience Member,

Welcome to the Williams Center for the Arts' Family Series! On Saturday, March 3 at 2 p.m., you will attend a performance of Charlotte Blake Alston's *Songs and Stories in the Oral Tradition*.

This Audience Guide is designed to support and enrich your enjoyment of the performance. It contains information about the artist and the performance you will see, and suggestions for discussions. You and your children can actively participate during the performance by:

- **LISTENING AND USING YOUR IMAGINATION** to visualize the characters and places in the stories the artist is performing
- **OBSERVING** the interaction between the artist and the audience
- **THINKING ABOUT** the values the stories communicate

We hope you find this Audience Guide useful. Following the performance, please join us in the lobby for refreshments and a chance to meet the artist. Thank you for coming to the Williams Center for the Arts. We appreciate your patronage!

## ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

Whether she accompanies a story with a thumb piano, mbira, shekere, djembe, or 21-string kora, Charlotte Blake Alston's most powerful instrument is her mesmerizing voice. It is with that primary instrument that she breathes life into ancient and contemporary tales; stories that engage the imagination, underscore human commonalities, and reiterate life lessons gained from centuries of human experience.

The tradition of storytelling on the African continent may be strongest in the West African countries of Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, and Mali where

history was preserved and is still passed down orally through words and music. Stories were the way the beliefs, mythology, cultural identity, history, and community values of a people were taught and preserved. The tradition continued when Africans were brought to America.

Charlotte Blake Alston's programs draw on a rich source of stories, songs, games and rhythmic elements. One type of story is the African "porquoi"

tale. These are folk stories that make you think, "Hmmm..." Offering creative and humorous ideas for natural phenomena and humans' relationship with the universe, these stories provide the listener with food for thought. At the center of many of these tales are such familiar characters as Anansi the Spider from Ghana, or Sungura the

Rabbit from Kenya. Not only may you find yourself asking, "What will Turtle do next?," you may also find yourself asking, "What would I do in that situation?" Hmmm...



## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Charlotte Blake Alston is a world-renowned storyteller, narrator, librettist, instrumentalist, and singer. Her performance career has taken her to festivals, schools, universities, museums, libraries, and performing arts centers throughout the United States, Canada, and abroad. She has also performed on national radio and television; at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts; the Smithsonian Institution; the Women of the World Festival in Cape Town, South Africa; and a refugee camp in northern Senegal.

A featured storyteller at The National Storytelling Festival and The National Festival of Black Storytelling, Charlotte has performed at the Presidential Inaugural Festivities in Washington, DC, and the Pennsylvania Gubernatorial Children's Inaugural Celebrations. In 1991, Charlotte became the first storyteller to perform with the Philadelphia Orchestra on both their Family and Student concert series.

Charlotte Blake Alston was one of four Americans selected to perform and present at the first International Storytelling Field Conference in Ghana and was a featured artist at the Second International Festival in Cape Town, South Africa. She is a recipient of the Zora Neale Hurston Award, the highest award bestowed by the National Association of Black Storytellers.



### Charlotte Blake Alston has a vast repertoire of stories, including:

- The River that Went to the Sky* (Malawi)
- The Lion's Whiskers* (Ethiopia)
- The Story of Anniko* (Senegal)
- Nyangara the Python* (Zimbabwe)
- Thakane and the Nanabolele* (Lesotho)
- Anansi's Children* (Ghana)
- Why the Tides Ebb and Flow* (origin unknown)



## ABOUT STORYTELLING



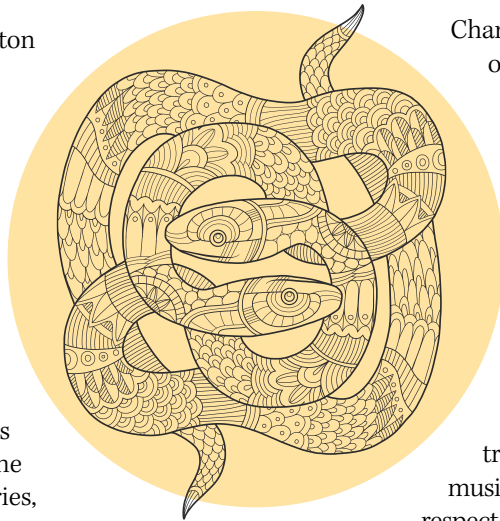
Djembe



No one knows when the first story was actually told. The history of storytelling reveals that there were many types of stories—myths, legends, fairy tales, trickster stories, fables, ghost tales, and hero and epic adventures. Stories were told, retold, and passed down from generation to generation. Before humans learned to write, they had to rely on memory to learn anything. For this, they had to be good listeners. A good storyteller could easily find an audience, eager to devour every exciting bit of information in their stories.

Storyteller Charlotte Blake Alston follows in the centuries-old footsteps of the African griot (pronounced *GREE-oh*). What is a griot? In many West African cultures, the griot is a storyteller, musician, poet, and historian.

In ancient Africa, at the end of the day, the griot might summon the people of his village with a drum or rattle. As the villagers gathered round, the griot would tell wonderful stories, perhaps with dancing and songs. In some stories, creatures or people would deal with the mysteries of nature. Other stories would tell of everyday life. Still others came from the tribe's history, perhaps describing great wars, thrilling hunts, or the births, marriages, and deaths of the tribe's members.



The griot would tell the stories again and again, keeping a record of his people's history. Griots were important and respected members of the tribe—the people's "library."

When African people were brought to America during the time of slavery, they were stripped of their culture. They weren't allowed to keep many of the traditions of their homeland, such as the griot. But storytelling was such an important part of African life, that slavery could not stop it.

Charlotte Blake Alston explains, "Many of these stories come out of the condition of slavery and our feelings of powerlessness. The stories use animals and people, and deal with the supernatural, the inexplicable. A lot are about underdogs who live by their wits."

Griots still exist today in many parts of West Africa. Some of the most famous pop music stars of Mali, Guinea, and Senegal are griots who have transformed traditional songs into modern music. Charlotte studied with the highly respected Senegalese griot Djimo Kouyate.

Today, stories remain an important part of our culture. The influence of storytelling can be seen in all aspects of our lives—movies, television, books, music, religion, and art. Stories define our values, desires, and dreams. They can inspire, teach, and impart wisdom. In fact, many historians and psychologists believe that storytelling is one of the many things that define and bind our humanity. Humans are perhaps the only animals that create and tell stories.

## THE VALUE OF STORYTELLING FOR CHILDREN

There are many advantages of storytelling for children, especially for preschoolers, kindergarteners, and young children. The stories we hear as children shape our view of the world. Most small children live their lives in a limited environment. Reading stories to children can show them far-flung places, extraordinary people, and eye-opening situations that expand and enrich their world. Storytelling can help make children aware of their own culture and roots, as well.

Children all over the world love listening to stories. They want to know more about their favorite characters and often try to emulate them. By telling your child stories that come with a meaningful message, you can instill qualities like wisdom, courage, honesty, and tolerance from an early age.

Storytelling enhances verbal proficiency and improves listening skills. The benefits children get from having stories read to them are greatly increased when parents talk and ask questions about the story as well. Simply asking them if they can

remember what happened in the story or checking if they know what some of the more complicated words mean can really extend their understanding and vocabulary. More complex "inference" questions like, "why do you think this character did that?" help children think about and understand other people's motivations.

Storytelling is as simple as reading a story from a book. If you don't have that much time, you can always share a story from memory or talk about your own childhood.



## AFTER THE SHOW: THINGS TO TALK ABOUT AND DO

Reflecting on the performance after the show is a valuable way to share the joy of the experience together and helps retain the event in your child's memory. Here are some prompts to help guide the discussion.

# Q's & to-do's

- What does a storyteller need in order to perform? How did Charlotte Blake Alston use her voice to differentiate between characters? Were you able to tell the characters apart?
- As an audience member, why was it important to use your imagination when you listened to the storyteller?
- Can you remember the names of some of the instruments that Charlotte played? How do you think the instruments enhanced the stories?
- What did you learn from the characters and situations in the stories? If you were a character in one of the stories would you have acted the same?
- What is a "porquoi tale"?
- Describe one thing you learned about storytelling by seeing this performance.
- In what ways did you actively participate in the performance?
- Do you like telling stories? Perhaps you might try playing the role of griot for your family, classroom, or school. What kind of tales would you tell?
- What are some of the stories and characters you especially enjoyed?



## AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

### YOUR ROLE AS AN AUDIENCE MEMBER

**P**rior to coming to the show, talk to your children about how a live performance is different from TV and movies.

A good audience member responds appropriately to what's happening on stage. Sometimes, it is important to be quiet, but other times, audience participation, such as laughing, singing, or clapping, is an important part of the show. Listen to the artist, follow directions, and participate, as appropriate.

### GOOD AUDIENCE MEMBERS KNOW THESE KEY IDEAS:

**Be Prepared:** Arrive early. Allow time for travel, parking, picking up your tickets and using the restroom. It's always a good idea to be in your seat at least 15 minutes before the performance begins.

**Respect:** Good audience members bring their best behavior to the theater. This shows respect for the performer as well as for the audience around you.

**Quiet:** The theater is a "live" space, which means that sound carries very well so the voice of the performer can be heard. But it also means that any unnecessary sounds in the audience—whispering, rustling papers, or

talking—can be heard by other audience members and by the performer. Do not make any unnecessary noise that would distract other audience members or the performer.

**Concentration:** If the audience watches and listens in a concentrated way, this supports the performer and she can do her best work.

**Appreciation:** Applause is the audience's way of thanking the performer for doing a good job. When the performer takes a bow after the show, that is her way of thanking the audience. If you really enjoyed the performance, you might even thank the artist with a standing ovation.

### CREDITS

*Charlotte Blake Alston: Songs & Stories in the Oral Tradition*  
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