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Fabu is Madison's newest poet laureate

BY PAMELA GATES

Close to 100 admirers, from the very young to the young at heart, came downtown to the central library on a bitterly cold Packer Sunday to welcome local poet Fabu as Madison's official poet

laureate. Fabu will be in this position for the next three years, doing pretty much what she's been doing already, as Andrea Musher, who was stepping down from the office, said. That is, Fabu will be working to make poetry a part of the everyday life of the city, particularly

among the youth.

"So many people, from so many parts of my life!" Fabu said as she greeted the crowd. "We'll let the drums announce us ... the children will lead us," she said as she invited everyone downstairs to

re-enter the room in procession behind drummer Marshel Beason and young percussionists Eric and Ezra Peters. Fabu is an activist, and she works poetry into her activism whenever she can. Ali Muldrow, a youth poet who read an original poem to honor Fabu at this reception, said she first met her running a poetry-writing workshop for children who had an incarcerated parent.

Enis Ragland, interim director of Madison's Office of Community

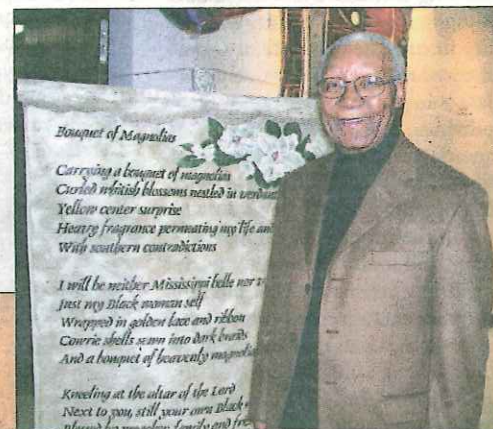
Services, recognized Fabu for all her wonderful contributions to the life of the city, especially to women, children, and communities of color.



Fabu (center) with her Fountain of Life pastors Jackie (left) and Alex Gee



Above: Dr. Daniel Kunene with Fabu's wedding poem, "Bouquet of Magnolias"
Left (l-r): Marshel Beason, Ezra and Eric Peters



Bouquet of Magnolias

*Carrying a bouquet of magnolias
Corded white blossoms nestled in verdant
Yellow center surprise
Heavy fragrance permeating my life and
With southern contradictions*

*I will be neither Mississippian belle nor
Just my black woman self
Wrapped in golden lace and ribbon
Covered shells seem into dark beads
And a bouquet of heavenly magnolias*

*Kneeling at the altar of the Lord
Next to you, still your own black
Alone in a moment, I am and free*

She also is very good at crafting lyric poems, Musher said, mentioning a poem in which Fabu praised trees for cleansing the air we breathe.

"Fabu has celebrated all the communities of Madison," Musher concluded. "She reminds all the rebels, old and young, with a voice of honey and steel."

Local poet Richard Roe, also part of the reception performance, spoke admiringly of the way Fabu handles children. He read a poem he had written for the occasion about a "woman [Fabu] in a red hat ... wide as the shoulders she carries her world on ... She's immersed in other people's lives," he said.

University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor Emeritus Daniel

"She has represented Madison's culture globally as well," Ragland said, as she has given poetry readings in Kenya and South Africa.

"It's the job of poets," said Andrea Musher, "to make the comfortable uncomfortable." She introduced Fabu as a "proud inheritor of the traditions of Africa and America" who has told us tales of horror and racial cruelty and made manifest "the mysterious power of cathartic suffering." "Fabu has a special skill for creating monologues," Musher continued. "She imbues her sufferers with dignity."

Kunene told us that the idea of a poet of the people is not a Western idea alone. "We do it in South Africa, too," he said. One poet, a Xhosa, somehow came to be known as the poet of the nation as a whole.

Kunene said he met Fabu in the 1980s, when she joined his African poetry class. "I formed poetry groups over the years," he said, "especially to encourage African poets. Often we were invited to do public readings, and for many years Fabu was one of those readers.

"What Fabu has done and is doing for the Madison community! How she works with children! As artist in residence at Wright Middle School, she made kids talk on paper. I read some of their writing, and I realized what a wonderful, creative outlet this was for many of these kids."

Kunene also spoke appreciatively of Fabu's efforts to introduce the Kwanzaa holiday to Madison. "And," he added, "she has never missed an opportunity to invite writers who come to Madison to the Harambee Center. Kunene finished by reading a poem he had written "about an hour ago," aptly titled "Embrace the World."

"I urge you to look around at this moment and embrace your soul brothers and sisters," he told us. "... Look at them and embrace them ... I urge you to look beyond these walls ..."

Kunene finished by addressing Fabu directly: "Welcome to the ship's helm," he said.

Ali Muldrow, a poet with Youth Speaks, said she met Fabu several years ago when she was in high school. She, too, had written a poem of tribute: "You are a leader not trying to convert follow-



Above: Andrea Musher (l), Madison's poet laureate for the last three years, and Mazie Jenkins, teacher at Carl Sandburg School
Right: Youth Speaks poet Ali Muldrow

ers ... You are the movement ... You are the sister ... You are the uncharted stars ... You hit harder and you mean more to me than I'll ever want to admit."

"Poetry gives us comfort," said village elder Milele Chikasa Anana. "It has always been a part of our lives," from our earliest years, when our parents recited nursery rhymes to us. ... A poet laureate is somebody special," Anana continued. "We knew we had someone special before this: She was our village poet." Anana spoke of how important faith is in Fabu's life and of her commitment to education. She has been a poet since she was 11 years old and has three degrees, all in literature.

"Fabu does a lot of research before she writes anything," Anana said. "She speaks truth to power. She writes of slavery, of lynching, of rapes. She doesn't want us to forget, because if we forget, we deny, and we'll never heal.

"Fabu has a special heart for the children and the elders," Anana continued. "She teaches kids at their level, because she wants to grow another generation of poets. ...

"If we want to be better, we need to give our artists space. The city of Madison should be congratulated for having a poet laureate."

Anana ended with a poetic tribute of her own:



"Fabu, you are our shining star, you are our shimmering piece of courage ... to write about things that hurt, to write about the heart." "This is a great day for me," Fabu said, smiling at her audience. "All the pieces of my life are present in this room." She thanked Anana for "allowing my poetry to be published in UMO-JA." She spoke of an African

American female sculptor during the Harlem Renaissance who, because she could not get her work acknowledged, destroyed it all. "I will never destroy the things I have built," she said. "I will keep on going."

"Poems are like children," Fabu continued. "You pour [yourself] into them and then send them into the world." A few minutes later, she added, "Children have greatness in them when they are born."

Fabu read two of her poems, both having to do with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., on whose birthday she was assuming the office of poet laureate. One poem was "From a Little Brown Girl" who saw history unfold in Memphis. She spoke of Mr. Eugene Clemens, who left sharecropping in Mississippi to become a garbage man in Memphis. His reason for participating in the garbage workers' strike was to be able to drive a truck, which Blacks were not allowed to do. "What a price," Fabu wrote, "to drive that garbage truck." Her other poem was directly to King: "King in heaven, King on earth ... we need your courage and your strength ... Your voice, Dr. King, was fed by millions of whispers. Your voice, Dr. King, gave sound to every human being shut up and shut down

by oppression. Dr. King, I believe, we believe in love that transcends everything ... We are not deaf, but loud in remembering."

This reception was sponsored by the Madison Arts Commission.