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# Spunk: A Powerful Cal Shakes' Production

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There's a disregard, or a deliberate embrace, of politically incorrect characterizations: the downtrodden wife in "Sweat," the philandering males in "Story in Harlem Slang," and the racists—black versus black, decades of white versus black, and black versus candy shopkeeper "white man" — in "The Gilded Six Bits."

The sum of *Spunk's* parts is a powerful 90-minute production. Top caliber set design by Michael Locker features mossy green, fog-filled backdrops interrupted by stage-to-sky chalkboards scored with "Ratonville," "1937" and "Jump at the Sun." Ingenious props, eye-directing costumes by designer Callie Floor and Anthony Michael Peterson's (*Guitar Man*) platform, firmly anchored upstage right, ground the work in what Cal Shakes does best: everything technical, pushed to its expressive limit.

But even this degree of technical mastery could not satisfy with mere bells and whistles, or serve as an artistic springboard, if there weren't talented actors—the bones and gristle of live theater—at hand.

Aldo Billingslea (*Sweet Black, Joe*) is imposing, yet draws both sympathetic tears and belly-rumbling laughter. L. Peter Callender (*Sykes, Slang Talk Man*) is so irretrievably wicked in the first story that only his wizard-worthy transformational skills and stunning, redder-than-red suit allow audiences to forgive him in story number two. Tyee Tilghman (*Jelly, Slemmons*), on the other hand, is likable from the start. Announcing his character's name—"Jelly, 'cause jam don't shake,"—he jiggles up a storm; spots an attractive woman and lunges like a nimble fencing champion. Even his final outing as the ice cream man who

put a freeze on an otherwise beautiful marriage, Tilghman finds the humanity and the innocence in a man's lust.

The women, classically, even stereotypically, are the center of the play's universe, and equally impressive.

Margo Hall (*Delia*) is capable of taking on any role, from a queen to a prison guard, and here carries her worn wife/ensemble roles with dignity, grace and sly humor. Omozé Idehenre (*Missie May*) is saucy, nuanced, and more than any man can handle. Although it's not a featured narrative, the "marriage" between Dawn L. Troupe (*Blues Speak Woman*) and Peterson, who opened the show with an audience warm-up including grunts and egg-shaking (You'll have to go to find out!), is stand-alone fantastic. With a mighty singing voice every woman would like to have and a

physicality to match, Troupe's greatest surprise is her ability to embed herself deeply, then burst to the front lines and command our complete attention. All along, Peterson-the-man falls silent, but his instruments speak louder than words.

*Spunk*, with Hurston's lovely lines — "A harrowing wind rushed across his heart" — is a gift, delivered by the work-worn, world-wise hands of a remarkable theater company.

*Spunk*, presented by California Shakespeare Theater, runs through July 29 at the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (off Highway 24), Orinda. For information, call (510) 548-9666 or visit [www.calshakes.org](http://www.calshakes.org).



L. Peter Callender  
Photo Ohlen Alexander

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# Lafayette Native to Bicycle Over 4,000 miles for HIV/AIDS

Submitted by Valerie Zhao



Lafayette native Valerie Zhao

Photo provided

Lafayette native and Dartmouth College freshman Valerie Zhao dipped the back tire of her bicycle in the Pacific Ocean at Ocean Beach in San Francisco June 18, and began an epic journey across the country by bicycle. Zhao and 19 other students who make up the 2012 Ride Against AIDS team will cycle for approximately 67 days over 4,000 miles across America, ending this August in Boston.

Zhao first heard about FACE AIDS through a tweet from Partners in Health, a non-profit organization co-founded by Dr. Jim Yong Kim, the current president of Dartmouth College and president-elect of the World Bank. As a childhood asthma patient, she has had plenty of experience with the U.S. health care system and knows that even in the developed world, there are significant barriers to adequate medical care. Zhao's own experiences have inspired her to pursue a career in medicine, with a focus on global health. She is also interested in how policy affects global health access, and HIV/AIDS is a major piece of the global health and policy puzzle; she

plans to major in biomedical engineering with a minor in public policy.

On why she joined the Ride Against AIDS, Zhao says, "I want to spread the message about HIV/AIDS and its widespread impact, not only on health but also on social, economic, and cultural conditions. The fight against HIV/AIDS is a global issue and we need to engage people from every corner of the globe, starting in our own backyard. I view the Ride Against AIDS as the beginning of my work for global health, health equity, and social justice."

This unique and powerful cross-country bike ride is dedicated to raising awareness and funds to fight HIV/AIDS. It is run by FACE AIDS, a youth-led nonprofit that works in the U.S. and Rwanda. The Ride was started in 2007 by two Stanford students. This summer, the fifth annual Ride Against AIDS aims to raise over \$100,000, as each rider pledges to raise at least \$5,000.

Of this high goal, Zhao says, "Since I'm still a college student, I am mostly counting on a large number of small donations from my friends and

classmates. Especially as the Nyamirama Health Center in Rwanda faces serious budget cuts, I cannot emphasize enough how much of a difference each donation makes. I am excited to fundraise because it gives me a chance to talk to my family and friends about why I'm doing the Ride and why the funding is so crucial to FACE AIDS programs."

In addition to fundraising, riders will speak with and give presentations to community groups, summer camps, elected representatives, Rotary Clubs, schools, FACE AIDS chapters, and individuals across the country about the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The 2011 Ride Against AIDS team biked almost 4,500 miles over 67 days and stopped in 54 cities.

Zhao attended elementary and middle school in Lafayette and was heavily involved with community service projects through Stanley Middle School. To learn more, visit [www.faceaids.org/raa](http://www.faceaids.org/raa) or <http://www.citizeneffect.org/projects/face-aids-ride-against-aids-2012-valerie>.

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2012 Ride Against AIDS team