

Award-winning Local Poet, Playwright and Screenwriter to Perform at SMC

By A.K. Carroll



Chinaka Hodge

Photo provided

When Chinaka Hodge was a freshman at Berkeley High, it's unlikely that the young writer imagined she would one day be featured as a notable alumnus. Yet today her face is plastered on one of the bright blue utility boxes outside the school, with a simple tribute that states: Chinaka Hodge, class of 2002, started writing and performing poems as an awkward, pimply BHS freshman, and art-making saved her life. She is a playwright, poet and performer. She shares the box with Lonely Island and Joshua Redman, fellow alums and BHS notables.

It was that box that first drew the attention of Rosemary Graham, professor of English and creative writing at Saint Mary's College of California. When Hodge's first book, "Dated Emcees," launched this past spring, she was a featured guest on KQED. Graham heard the program and from that point on, she was determined to get Hodge as a speaker at Saint Mary's.

Thursday, Nov. 10, her hope will be realized as Hodge will come to Saint Mary's for a special public performance and speaking engagement. The event is sponsored by a broad coalition of programs within school of liberal arts and is open to the public. It will take place in the Le Fevre Theater starting at 7:30 pm. Hodge will kick off the evening with selections from "Dated: Emcees" and will finish with a time for Q&A.

It isn't just Hodge's local roots and artistic talent that make her such a prime voice to feature at the college—she received the Phelan Literary Award for emerging Bay Area talent, was a Sundance Feature Film lab Fellow for her script "700th&Int'l," was Artist in Residence at The Headlands Center for the Arts and has been featured twice on HBO's "Def Poetry" — but also her passion for youth and literary arts education.

"Helping young people find their voices is her educational mission," said Graham.

Hodge herself began writing as a very young child. "My father was an educator and had a bunch of rules about what could happen when we got home from school," said Hodge. One of those rules involved Hodge and her siblings writing alongside their father.

"I started with short stories and quickly realized that poems are shorter, so I started writing poems," said Hodge. That was at age six.

By the time Hodge got to high school, writing was second nature. As a freshman at Berkeley High she was an early participant in Youth Speaks/The Living Word Project, a leading literary arts non-profit that was only just starting out. Hodge's participation came at a teacher rec-

ommendation.

"They asked us all to free write and I free wrote something," said Hodge. "They asked if I wanted to share and my hand shot up. I was the first person to go to the front of the classroom. I shared my poem and I've been hooked ever since."

At the time, Youth Speaks was the only place in the country that was sponsoring poetry slams for someone of Hodge's age. "I just fell right in with those folks," said Hodge. "Intensive writing workshops after school, slams, open mics, bridging literature and poetry — sort of all that was my jive in high school."

Hodge's passion for working with words and with youth have been constants in her life. After graduating from Berkeley High, she went on to finish a degree at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study in New York with a focus on creative writing, non-profit strategy and hip hop, and a goal of gaining tools she could bring back to Youth Speaks and other nonprofits in the Bay Area.

"I took a full gamut of the offerings available to me, but I've ap-

plied almost all of it," said Hodge. "Even jewelry making."

Hodge has worked with Youth Speaks/The Living Word Project for over 15 years, and has served as Program Director and Associate Artistic Director, as well as working directly with Youth Speaks' core population as a teaching artist and poet mentor.

"Now I'd say I'm more of a consultant," said Hodge. "I work with them on a couple of initiatives, always from a loving place. I love to engage with young people, it's my favorite aspect."

Hodge also writes plays for youth that range in subject matter and genre.

"I write a bunch of children's theater," said Hodge. "Some of my favorite stories or fairytales have made it into the plays, but I also write what is salient to the moment, so there's mentions of Black Lives Matter and conversations about equitable playing fields. I'd like to think that no subject matter is too far out of my reach. That's my job as a writer — to make all subject matter feel closer to the reader."

Hodge will offer a public performance at Saint Mary's Le Fevre Theatre from 7:30-8:30 pm on Thursday, Nov.10. The event is sponsored by the English Department, the Roy E. and Patricia Disney Forum, the Communication Department, Catholic Institute for Lasalian Social Action (CILSA), Intercultural Center, Theatre Program, World Languages and Cultures, MFA in Creative Writing, Women's Resource Center, and the Committee on Inclusive Excellence.



Photo A.K. Carroll



LeapFrog Plumbing

Holiday times are a joy... but they can overload your plumbing!

Now's the time to get ready for the holidays!

\$50 off any job*

SAVE up to \$450*
Tankless Water Heater
AHHH...ENDLESS HOT WATER
*\$159 off + up to \$300 federal tax credit. Equipment provided and installed by LeapFrog Plumbing.

\$50 EBMUD rebates on water saving toilets!
*1 coupon per job, exp. 12/16/16

We Hop To It!
Family-owned and serving Lamorinda since 1993

green solutions!

(925) 377-6600
www.LeapFrogPlumbing.com

CA Lic 929641



STOP CLEANING Get Gutter Guards!

- Fits all sizes of gutters
- 10 year No-Clog Warranty
- High quality aircraft alloy
- We will clean and repair your gutters before installation of your new guards

Licensed & Insured #939838

Fall Special - 20% OFF

The Gutter Guard Company
925-247-7044
www.bayareagutterguards.com

Gold Star Families Star at Town Hall Theatre

... continued from page B4

These people taught us by thought, word and deed how to be one in service to others. They brought the ability to directly affect the cause, to jump right in, because the moment always passes. Were you a participant in the moment, or simply a bystander? Did you elevate the cause or did you let it pass? This is your life, it is not a dress rehearsal."

He continues, "We have the platform, we have the know-how, and as one of the mainstays of the

community we feel it is our duty to acknowledge and honor Jake, his family, and the other Gold Star Families affected by this loss. We want them to know we care, and we want to bring our supportive music fan base in to help us show that."

Those interested in being part of this special community event can get tickets at the Town Hall Theater website www.townhalltheatre.com. Doors will open at 6:30p.m. for the event which begins at 7:30p.m., Sat. Nov. 5. Blue Star Moms will

be in attendance and Gold Star Families will be honored in a moving and heartwarming tribute, he says. Vega will speak and there will be a short presentation.

"We will create a very special little community within the walls of Town Hall on Nov. 5," says Stack, "with healing energy and the power of love, coupled with some very beautiful music. We will sing together. I happen to think we need more of that, everywhere, right now."