

After loss, noted poet finds solace, inspiration th

By Gerald M. Gay

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

You don't see a lot of Pulitzer Prize-winning poets reciting works on "Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry."

Though the HBO series features the occasional literary icon, up-and-coming spoken-word performers seem to take centerstage over established writers.

Despite the show's focus on performance artists, when former poet laureate of the United States, Rita Dove was offered the opportunity to read her poetry on the show, she was happy to oblige.

"I thought it was a great idea," Dove, 52, said in a recent interview from Charlottesville, Va. Her appearance aired earlier this season. "It introduced fans of the spoken word to the concept that poetry written on the page can work out loud. It was also good for me to see what it's like to be in that mix of people."

For Dove — who comes

through St. Philip's in the Hills Episcopal Church Wednesday as part of the University of Arizona Poetry Center's Visiting Poets and Writers Reading Series — new experiences are what life is all about: a philosophy rooted in tragedy.

In 1998, Dove's Virginia home was struck by lightning and burned to the ground. Dove and her husband, Fred Viebahn, escaped unharmed but many original copies of her life's work were lost.

"It was traumatizing," Dove said. "After the fire I didn't feel the need to write because there were more pressing matters to work on like putting our lives back together."

In an effort to distract the couple from their loss, neighbors invited Dove and her husband to a benefit ballroom dance. The experience led the couple to regular lessons and eventually inspired Dove to create many of the poems found in her most-recent collection,



Rita Dove

IF YOU GO

► **What:** Rita Dove Poetry Reading, presented by the University of Arizona Poetry Center, part of the College of Humanities

► **When:** 8 p.m. Wednesday

► **Where:** St Philip's in the Hills Episcopal Church, 4440 N. Campbell Ave.

► **Cost:** Free. Dove's book "American Smooth" is \$22.95 and can be purchased at Borders Books and Music and Barnes & Noble Booksellers.

► **Information:** 626-3765

"American Smooth" — published this year by W.W. Norton and Company.

"We stumbled into this crazy and wonderful world of ballroom dancing," Dove said. "At first I thought of it as a hobby. Then I began to wonder how it was going to fit in with the rest of my life. It's so very different from being a poet. But then the poems began to happen. When I began dancing it was the relief from reality, the fire and the day-to-day life. In the end if be-

came part of my reality."

"American Smooth" — named for an improvisational form of ballroom dance, deriving from traditional dances like the fox trot and the tango — is a collection of works written by Dove that express the freedom and creativity of the American spirit.

"As the poems about dance began to happen it became more than just poems about dance," Dove said. "It became about doing something with a kind of

through ballroom dance

panache. About enjoying life but enjoying it with a certain kind of flair. Our spirit of improvisation."

That spirit is celebrated in poems like the short-and-sweet "Fox Trot Fridays," and "Rhumba" — a work that follows a man and woman's inner-monologues as they make their way across the dance floor.

"You can read it ('Rhumba') from her side or his side or as one poem all together," Dove said. "It was incredibly frustrating to write but I liked the challenge."

Though the collection's messages are predominantly conveyed through movement, Dove strays from the dance formula from time to time. In "Ripont" she tackles the subject of the 369th Regiment — an all-black unit sent to fight with the French military during World War II when the U.S. wouldn't put the men into battle. In "Meditation at Fifty Yards, Moving Target," she writes in-

directly of America's attraction to guns.

"It's not politically correct in the sense that it doesn't sit there and rail against guns," Dove said. "But it does talk about the lure of them. I thought it was very important to include. I couldn't imagine a book with this title that wouldn't deal with one of the major issues of our culture."

Dove plans on reading several pieces from "American Smooth" at Wednesday's event. She hopes her works inspire people to live life to the fullest.

"What I really wanted to do was have people think about negotiating the mine field of living with grace," she said. "Every day is such a gift that one should embrace. Time is short and you never know when lightning is going to strike, so get out there and dance."

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