

Living Legend: Sylvia Ann Soares discusses her life lessons



Ms. Sylvia Ann Soares is a legend in RI with many accolades, including a certificate she received this year from the mayor for her hard work and dedication in the arts. She is an actor, poet and historical educator, and I recently spoke to her about some of the lessons she's learned throughout her life.

Damont Combs (*Motif*): For those who don't know you but should, can you please introduce yourself?

Sylvia Ann Soares: I am Sylvia Ann Soares, second generation Cape Verdean, Rhode Island native and the second Cape Verdean girl in Rhode Island to attend college in 1959. I am an actor, writer, director and historian. I belong to SAG-AFTRA and Actors Equity Association. One of the first members of Trinity Repertory Company, I left Providence in 1965 to pursue an acting career and returned home in 1981. More about career later. I earned an honors associate's degree at CCRI in 1993 and an honors BA in theatre from Brown University in 1995 at 54 years old. I will be 79 in November 2020.

DC: Can you tell me about some of the important projects you've been a part of?

SAS: There is far more public cultural activity than when I was young here in the '50s and '60s. With funding from the RI Council for the Humanities (RICH), I give researched illustrated talks on local history and create solos enacting historical figures. RISCA and Art, Culture and Tourism have supported my projects. My creative contribution thus far has dealt with Cape Verdean and African American history in Rhode Island. All are searchable online. I'll give you some highlights.

I have always been available to read my poetry or pertinent poetry for charitable or activist events. For example, in 1990 for the Rape Crisis Center Art Exhibit, I read poetry of those not ready to read their own in public. In 1991-2, I read for Rhode Island Working Women and the Minority Recruitment and Child Placement Program, and in recent years for the Refugee Dream Center in Providence and others. As an actor and poet, I have performed solo in libraries from Woonsocket to Westerly, including the Athenaeum and RISD Museum a few times, at Newport Museum of Art, Tomaquag Museum, Cape Verdean Museum, Cape Verdean Progressive Center, URI Cultural Center in Kingston and Providence Feinstein, RI College, student events at Brown, Bell Street Chapel, The Mediator, the RI Black Heritage Society, the RI Historical Society, John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities, at the RI State House, at local churches including the First Baptist Church for the RI Indian Council and other organizations. I have performed in Providence Black Repertory, the Perishable, at AS220, Mixed Magic, Wilbury Fringe, PVDfest, WaterFire Arts Center, Stages of Freedom, Westerly Shakespeare, Southside Cultural Center for RI Black Storytellers, for Langston Hughes Community Readings, at Pell Chafee Center, Culture Park of New Bedford, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center, at the Nora and the New Repertory in Boston, Brooklyn Museum of Art, on Zoom readings, and notably Rites and Reason Theatre at Brown's Department of Africana Studies, performing in their highly significant social plays addressing diverse ethnicity. Rites and Reason offered beautiful roles. There, I have played a Spirit Guide; a tree hosting birds of all feathers; the mother of an ostracized lesbian; 'Mama Africa;' John Quincy Adams in Ifa Bayeza's *String Theory*; and much more. Okay — a few additional significant projects. In the mid-80s, I joined an activist group RI Mobilization for Survival, later called RI Survival Education Fund, and performed poetry at anti-war demonstrations and events. In 1990, I joined an activist group, RIDivest, promoting divestment from Apartheid South Africa, and run by Representative Joe Newsome, Carol Bragg, Prudence Mashile of South Africa, Isabel Barten and others. I read for them at Pond Street Church and at a RIDivest local conference of African Ambassadors including Randall Robinson. In line with that, in 1992, I created a show titled *Mayibuye iAfrica/Black South African Poetry, Song and Slides*. The poems were from the book of poetry of the same name by South African women. 'Mayibuye iAfrika' means 'Let Africa Come Back.' Along with the reading, I played recorded South African music, popular and traditional, and showed slides, some of which were loaned by Phil West and Ann Grant. Also, did the show at the Warwick Museum in Claude Elliot's "Black, Brown And Tan Exhibit."

Another great project: the same year, 1992, I was a mentor for Rhode Island Children's Crusade. Children who remained with the Crusades' after-school program through high school earned a scholarship to college. So, working under Crusade director Linda A'vant Deishinni, who ran the RI Black Heritage Society then, I designed and directed *A Kwanzaa Celebration* featuring multi-ethnic students. Also, while at CCRI that year, and funded by RISCA, I designed a Kwanzaa program engaging local storytellers, entertainers and community leaders. I had met with elementary school teachers imploring them to engage their students in creating Kwanzaa art. I gave them all the information. Then I drove around, collected the art and hung it in what was the Atrium of CCRI Providence Campus, where we held the Kwanzaa. I went street by street placing fliers at the neighborhood homes. A local supermarket agreed to donate refreshments, which I picked up. I did all this alone because a woman Dean of Students at CCRI at the time forbade anyone to work with me, even after my description of this cultural African American project. On short notice, she had scheduled a meeting with me during my class time to discuss the program. Requesting a different time, I opted for class and she responded in anger. She sent around a notice that no one should participate with me on my Kwanzaa program. Jack White, President of the Providence Campus, was appalled and iterated that the woman had no

jurisdiction in his campus. He encouraged me to do any project that I wished at the Providence Campus. The Kwanzaa evening opened with an African drum procession and we performed for 200 people. The children came to see their art. Everyone went home with snacks and Kwanzaa reading material. I brought the program to Brown a few years later and Black students did it one year. They kept my script and likely have done it elsewhere since.

Also, 1992 was the Quincentennial, 500 years since Columbus' invasion. I researched and designed a show: *Native Americans, African Americans and American Quakers: A Quincentennial Celebration of Love-Stories, poems and songs*. In it were writings of Langston Hughes, Joy Harjo, Chief Seattle, Quaker founder John Woolman, and a Harriet Tubman song. I performed the piece for Providence Friends Meeting (Quakers) and later at the Friends Yearly Meeting at Hampshire College, Amherst, and at St. Paul's in Wickford. I did a similar one at CCRI called *Encounter: Native American Poetry with Historical Comment on the Columbian Legacy*. And I laid Columbus out.

I was at Brown from 1993 until 1995 performing in student activist events and then I was out of state until 1997. I returned to care for my mother who had Alzheimer's until her passing in 2002.

In 2003, under a consortium of the RI Historical Societies, I was funded by RI Council for the Humanities to write a play on slavery in RI that I titled *Plantations Complex: A Harvesting of Souls*. I directed four staged readings, one at the Newport Colony House. The piece is undergoing edits for an upcoming project. Also, in 2003, at Trinity Rep, under Oskar Eustis, artistic director for theatre from the Four Directions on Native American theater, I directed a staged reading of *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers* by resident playwright William S. Yellow Robe, Jr.

In 2008, RICH funded my oral history project on the Local International Longshoremen's Association, ILA Local #1329. I interviewed 14 men and transcribed the texts, including Traudi Coli's tape of my father Arthur S. Soares, who was president of ILA #1329 for 16 of 20 years, 1954-1974. I created bios of the leaders. My presentations displayed numerous donated images of related people and dock work.

In 2013, RICH supported my research to become the 'Living History of Nancy Elizabeth Prophet,' the first woman graduate from RI School of Design. She was African American Narragansett Pequot, and I have performed her diary and numerous solo versions of her story, adjusted to the venue and occasion. I performed in a number of places from RISD Museum to Brooklyn Museum. The first performance was at RISD Museum for Stages of Freedom's three-day event and exhibit for the RI Black Heritage Society and most recent being in 2019 at the Newport Art Museum (see it on YouTube.) There were more attendees than usual, almost 200. My previous Prophet performances had different titles, versions on the title *Defiance!* This performance accompanied NAM's exhibit "Sculpture: Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney" because Whitney had supported Prophet. Whitney purchased Prophet's wooden head 'Congolais' and placed it on permanent display. I have seen it there. Newport Art Museum worked with a local non-profit that serves low income populations, and they gave free tickets to people. The Black

attendees were thrilled to learn about Prophet and were audibly responsive throughout the show. RISD Museum has hosted me as Prophet a few times.

Also in 2013, RICH funded me to do illustrated talks: “Kerosene Lamp Church” about Sheldon Street Church in Providence, the First Cape Verdean Protestant Church in America, and then in 2015 for “Eddie Soares Tribute: RI Ambassador of Jazz” on the famous local jazz pianist who was my uncle.)

Besides Prophet, I discovered an enslaved Rler named Sylvia Torrey and I began my ‘Silvy Tory Stories’ having her deliver lively historical narratives about Rhode Island. As ‘Silvy Tory,’ I presented at art exhibits curated by the Committee for the Commemoration and Study of Slavery in RI, one at URI Multi-Cultural Center and another at Center for Reconciliation. At the Southside Cultural Center Holiday Bazaar of 2018, my ‘Silvy Tory’ compared historical RI Yuletide enslavement duties to the present day empowerment of Kwanzaa. Silvy Tory also takes on the persona and deep voice of a historical RI Black Regiment soldier and delivers a lively poem on the induction of the Regiment.

In 2016, I first performed my bilingual (Cape Verdean) Kriolu/English poem “Kenha Ke Nos;” for the President of Cabo Verde Jorge Carlos De Almeida Fonseca, and later in 2018 in my first extended bilingual Cape Verdean poetry show at Southside Cultural Center, with Santos Spenser on guitar, vocals.

My Board affiliations are as follows; Mt. Hope Learning Center for which I put bands in Billy Taylor Park, 2008, 2011—Zili Mizik, Carlos De Leon, Paul Williams, Johnny Miranda, Al De Andrade Dixieland. During that time, I served on the Board of RI Rhythm and Blues Preservation Society, founder musician Ed Coates, Ph.D., and created programs with them at Roots Café and elsewhere. I am the Board of Cape Verdean Museum Exhibit that has hosted one of my Cape Verdean presentations. With excess of work pending, I had to step down from the Refugee Dream Center.

DC: You recently received an award from the Providence mayor can you tell us about that?

SAS: On, February 12, 2019, the city honored me for my exhibit in their 2nd annual Black History Month Celebration and exhibit, “Pillars on Race: The Story of Race in Providence.” I was ecstatic. What a surprise! One citation was a State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations City of Providence Official Citation: “...In recognition of being honored for your commitment and dedication to the community at the 2nd annual Black History Month Celebration. The members of the City Council extend their very best wishes on this memorable occasion and express the hope for continued good fortune. Signed by Sabina Matos, Council President and ‘Sponsored’ and signed by Councilwoman Mary Kay Harris Deputy Majority Leader. The second is a: “Citizen Citation presented to Sylvia Ann Soares. I, Jorge O. Elorza, Mayor of the City of Providence, do hereby confer upon you this citation in recognition

of all the tremendous work you do for our community in the City of Providence. An honor reflecting your visionary and creative work, as an educator and African-American Artist. I join the residents of Providence, friends, and family in congratulating you as one of the 2020 Black History month Honorees, wishing you the best in all your future endeavors.”

Now, as Cape Verdean I do not claim to be African American. However, most official forms have no line for ‘Cape Verdean’ and even though my DNA is 51-54% European, I align with my African heritage, so on these forms I check off “African American” or “Black.”

OK, how did I get into the exhibit? In January ‘20, City Archivist Caleb Horton contacted me about using a photo that he saw in a 2010 Projo article about my traveling illustrated oral history talk on International Longshoremen’s Association Local #1329. Titled “By the Sweat of Our Brow;” the project had been funded by RI Council for the Humanities in 2008. The photo Caleb saw was of former Local ILA #1329 President John ‘Jackie’ Lopez who was the father of Earl Lopez, who is presently of Providence Mayor’s Security. When I informed Caleb of the numerous images loaned by families, that accompanied my talk, he invited me to join their 2020 Black History Month Exhibit in Providence City Hall. My exhibit, located just outside the Council Chambers, contained images and bio blurbs of ILA #1329 founders Manuel Q. Ledo and John F. Lopez and noted longshoremen and veterans, some who had additional jobs. Images included Arthur S. Soares (my father) who served as President for 16 years between 1954-1974; Matthew Bento, Business Agent; Sidney Lima, RI’s first Black fireman who rose to Lieutenant. Displayed in the exhibit and present for the opening was 96 year old retired longshoreman Avelino ‘Chapette’ Rose, RI’s first Black processing sheriff. The exhibit was to run a month, but City Hall closed due to COVID-19.

DC: I know you have read some poetry over the years. Can you tell us the importance of poetry in society?

SAS: People are drawn to and respond to aesthetics. New brain imaging technology is bridging the gap between art and science. As for music, technology has shown that music lights up the entire brain. It is healthy for the brain, the psyche and great for the immune system. Poetry, which is musical word weaving is right behind that. Technology has shown that poetry, versus prose, is like music to the brain. Technology found evidence that poetry activates brain areas that have been linked to introspection. It gets you thinking. Combining poetry with music you are speaking the soul and the intellect. Poetry an exquisite effective tool for education, for effecting beneficial social change, for supporting justice, promoting the environment, for storytelling and fun, and for healing.

DC: Is there anything you can say to the youth of today?

SAS: Discover who you are. Others may reflect their opinion of you or advise you, but allow no one to define you. Humans are basically similar, but since the beginning of time to the end of time, there never has been and never will be another human exactly like you. See how beautiful you are? You belong here on this planet. You were born with the means to discover your particular talents and mission(s). Continuously investigate your talents. Fame is not a goal. Self discovery and honorable evolution brings the ultimate prize. People become famous because it's their destiny, not because of what they do. However, what they do along the way and on arrival is the significant lesson. Respect the difference in others. Never hurt anyone and never allow anyone to hurt you. Utilize compassion wisely. Find the safe way to help others in need, especially of psychological healing. You have the permission to point them to pertinent organizations. This is the best help you can offer. In these situations, you are not seen as an authority, and feeling the guilt or need to change their behavior may be to your detriment. Forgiving does not set you free. Forgiving may remove from the perpetrator the onus of changing. Saying, "I am sorry you have been through this, but I know that you can change and do better," is more effective for both parties, for you are encouraging them to evolve. There is truly more to you than meets the eye. Move out of your comfort zone, go the distance. Don't run from the difficulty. It's in the difficulty that lies the opportunity. Stay well informed on local and global matters. Learn what came before you, what influenced your present situation and thoughts. Observe history and your closest influences. Allow your emotions to flourish, yet learn to be objective. Let not emotion be your reasoning. Yes, exercise caution, but find the joy in your heart and let it shine. You will inspire others. It's okay to say, "I don't know." If it's knowable you can discover it.

DC: COVID has affected all of our lives. How are you adjusting?

SAS: I am grateful to have my usual minimal needs met. I intend to remain truly socially distanced until January. I'm close to 79 with no health problems, no meds, I am avoiding public transportation, so I walk everywhere. My naturopath, Dr. Joann, takes good care of me physically and spiritually. I am used to sheltering-in developing my researched public projects. Trips to libraries and historical societies can wait. There is loads of internet info available. Of eclectic propensity, I am enjoying diverse online journeys from the arts to science, and watching far more documentaries. Doing some reading. Zoom meetings are awesome and I hope they continue. My family is fine. Yet, deeply saddening are the deaths local and worldwide, and the financial devastation. Sadly, some will always ignore advice, ignore reality. Ironically, after the police murder of George Floyd, due to unemployment caused by the pandemic, we witnessed enormous support in the massive outpouring of peaceful protesters of all ethnicity.

DC: What works can we look forward to in the future?

SAS: Much of my past work can be found by Googling my name or on YouTube or at Brown University Media Lab. My recent project funded by RISCA and Arts Culture and Tourism, slated for May 2020, was postponed due to COVID. In it, I use the name 'Nha Silbanha.' I was named for my maternal grandmother whose name was 'Sylvania,' hence my first name is 'Sylvia Ann.' However the Kriolu pronunciation excludes the 'v.' Cabo Verde (official name) was started by the Portuguese Slave Trade.

The African language had no 'v' so I knew my grandmother as 'Nha(our) Silbanhia.' (phonetic spelling) I narrate bilingually the origin of Cabo Verde in an opening spoken word poem, and tell stories of Cape Verdean immigration to RI, our culture and RI Cape Verdean leaders. It includes a live Kriolu band some of who have played with Cesaria Evora, and a huge slide show of RI Cape Verdeans of note. It is complete and will be done. Future holds more Cape Verdean projects with music. More 'Silvy Tory' and Nancy Elizabeth Prophet as needed. A few other ideas on injustice and dramatizing RI history are floating around between my ears. I may actually try to get into some plays. Being in plays certainly a lot easier than researching, constructing a program and composing text. Still, this brain keeps babbling.....

DC: Can you share with us something that isn't well known about you?

SAS: You mean, besides how gorgeous and talented I am! 1) I love you all and wish you health and success. 2) I am exalted in nature especially suspended in the cool of the ocean. 3) I keep no secrets, only yours. 4) I have never been engaged married or given birth — in any order. The world is my family. I hold the world in my solar plexus. 5) I have studied astrology, metaphysics and comparative religions, but Buddhist philosophy resonates best with me. 6) Besides art, I am ever curious about everything, world history and cultures, science, archeology, the cosmos and on and on. 7) My work is fueled with the sanctity of justice for humanity and nature.

Okay, here's some acting work you don't know: In 1965, I toured in a musical revue to all the Service Men's Clubs in Germany and returned to DC joining Actors Equity as an initial member of the Garrick Players. In the late '60s, I joined the New York Black Theatre Movement. My first off Broadway show was in the great Woodie King, Jr.'s *A Black Quartet* originating the role of 'The Madame' in *Gentleman Caller*. I worked at the Public Theater with founder Joe Papp in Richard Wesley's *Black Terror* a play of Black revolution. I performed Sonia Sanchez' *Sister Son/ji* in Negro Ensemble Company's NEC workshop. Major regional theatres included McCarter at Princeton, Cincinnati Playhouse, Ford's Theater in DC where Lincoln was shot (every performance we could see from the stage the box where he was shot). There was LA's Mark Taper Forum, LA Shakespeare Festival. National tours included Charles Gordone's 1st Black Pulitzer Prize play, *No Place to Be Somebody* and the NEC's Tony Award play *River Niger*. While in LA, I guest appeared in scenes with the stars of *Kojak*, *Baretta*, *Doctor's Hospital*, *Nancy*, *Good Times*, *Delvecchio*, *Police Story*, *The Rookies*. Back in RI, I played 'Tituba' in the 1984 PBS American Playhouse mini series *Three Sovereigns for Sarah* about the Salem witch trials. In 1989, with the Providence-Niquinohomo Sister City Project, I helped build two small cinder block schoolhouses outside the Niquinohomo, Nicaragua, the birthplace of the revolutionary Augusto Sandino. At that time, I gave up an apartment to become Resident Volunteer Staff at Amos House for two years before returning to school at 51 years old.

DC: How has RI culture changed over the years?

SAS: I will address minimally a large question. I'll let you compare. Even after slavery was abolished in RI in 1843, racist laws persist. Redlining was abolished in the US in 1968, but discrimination in housing still exists. After RI slavery was abolished, freed people from other areas in Rhode Island were denied 'legal settlement' in Providence. Without owning land, men could not vote. Women could not vote. Blacks, Natives, Mulattoes had to step off the boardwalks (the 'sidewalks' then) to allow whites to pass. Gathering in public was considered 'loitering' and punished. There were 9pm curfews. Dancing and playing music in their own homes was punishable. Use of alcohol was curbed. Constant overbearing police presence in their communities. If a woman owned a boarding house, it was automatically targeted for prostitution. Equality in RI has been a gradual process and still evolving.

DC: Do you think it's been a positive change or negative? If so explain.

SAS: US has higher percentage of incarcerated in the world. The highest number are Black. This is the same for Rhode Island. Google the facts. As for acting, in 1962, I was one of the first members of Trinity. Because of my brown skin I was given a tiny role of a few words in "House of Bernarda Alba," when my acting was as good, if not more skilled than some of the others who played the sisters. When Adrian Hall finally arrived that year he began total non-traditional casting, which has lasted since. I left RI from '65 until '81. Since returning, I have witnessed a radical change from when I was young here in the '50s and even '60s. Returning home, I availed myself of free education at CCRI and was awarded full scholarship to Brown, which by that time was hugely diverse. In my absence and continuing, there has been a gradual emergence of non-profits that support social needs and the arts. There are far more free and inclusive cultural events. Many humanitarian organizations have arisen. There is now a wider diversity of ethnicity contributing to RI's rich cultural family. Still, we must alter generational programming within cultural groups. More need to know that programs at institutions of higher learning, museums and libraries are open to the public. All are not made aware of opportunities and their right to attend or apply for free education. Reaching into neighborhoods and minds of disenfranchised is a challenge calling for further development. For every positive humanitarian step, there are visible and covert counter measures, countrywide and globally.

DC: When did you fall in love with poetry?

SAS: My first recollection of poetry was at Hope High in 1954. They were all the white classical poets that I don't need to mention. I recall writing little pieces. My father was very strict and I was constantly on punishment for maybe getting one 'C' or mispronouncing words or something. Writing poetry was so much fun, I was afraid to get caught, so I threw them all away. I wrote some play scenarios and threw them away. At 25, I went out into the world not realizing that I had such very low self esteem but I manage to get work in professional theatre and television. Still, I was not able to write for years. I didn't know I had blocked certain aspects of my psyche. I wrote occasional scenarios but threw them away. That may be normal for discerning artists, but I truly felt inadequate. Then, in the late '70s I attended a workshop in the hills south of LA and in that safe, encouraging environment I wrote pieces that I still have, some edited, etc. I returned to Providence in '81 and eventually learned that it is possible to rise

out of limitations and recapture the self. Believe it!

Generally, a few highlights of my experience with poetry went as follows. Over the years, I have read free for local human interest organizations and protest poetry of other writers at activist events. It wasn't until I was at Brown in '93 and taking a class with Elmo Terry-Morgan that I was empowered to venture my own pieces. I performed them at events, such as his Mama Etta's Chittlin' Circuit shows, or a benefit for Leonard Peltier or other cultural events. At Brown, I began and have performed, and still editing a huge poem about my rape at 13 years old by several neighborhood boys. Having rescued myself psychologically, I hope the piece will alleviate that trauma from others and encourage the assaulted to come forth and reclaim themselves.

Later, in my 2003 play on slavery in Rhode island, I wrote a huge spoken word piece on the 1824 Hardscrabble Riot, a white against Black riot in the Black hamlet of Hardscrabble, located near the RI State House, before the State House was built. That poem was publicly read a few times. Then, in 2004, at the National Black Agenda Convention convened by Senator Bill Owens at Roxbury College, I performed one of my poems on slavery in Rhode Island preceding the main talk by Reverend Louis Farrakhan. I have read poems of refugees for the Refugee Dream Center's Annual International Refugee Day in Providence. In 2017, I enjoyed reading Sonia Sanchez, Joy Harjo and other activist works in Joyce Katzberg's Pete Seeger's Birthday Celebration at Lily Pads. My last reading was in 2019 at Listening Tree Coop in Chepachet "Politics of the Moment" where I read as usual poems on anti-war, racism, justice, immigration, environment, poems by classic & modern poets, and one of my own, which is included here. I have fewer poems than I should have. I have lots of notes, but one never stops evolving in the understanding of effective word weaving, so I now find it easier to express succinctly.

I must add that since I am primarily an actress, SAG_AFTRA and Equity, which adds drama to my poetry readings, and therefore, I must tell you when I became aware of acting.

I fell in love with acting around 1949 in a French convent boarding school in Woonsocket, no longer there. Couvent de Jesus Marie—St. Clare's school. At nine years old, in my first semester there, for the Christmas play, I played the piano, the marimba, the glockenspiel. I also played a little African boy who visits the newborn baby Jesus and delivered a monologue in French. Then, in 1954, when I was 13, I saw a movie *Carmen Jones*. Starring Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte, it is a sensational Black version of Bizet's opera *Carmen*. Watching them act, I thought, "I can do *that*." Later, interesting note on my 4th grade costume as the African boy that I played in that boarding school Christmas show: a black beret, a pea coat and red plaid slacks. In the 1972 on a national tour of the Negro Ensemble Company's Tony winning play *River Niger*, I played 'Gail,' the girl in the revolutionary gang. I wore a black beret, a pea coat and red plaid slacks!