

Dayton poet, author, filmmaker spotlighted at Ed Dixon Gallery this weekend *By Don Thrasher*

Hsanni Scott-Matthews juggles many projects

As a poet, author and filmmaker, Hsanni Scott-Matthews is accustomed to wearing many creative hats. She was days away from shooting a small part in a locally produced film but, at Third Perk Coffeehouse on Third Street on a recent weekday morning, she was more focused on her reading and book signing at Edward A. Dixon Gallery in Dayton on Sunday, Sept. 25. "I've been writing since I was 8 years old," Scott said. "I've gotten a chance to meet so many different people. I've been involved with a lot of different things over the years, from starting my own magazine to the naming of the Peace Bridge, but I never got any acknowledgment. Now, I'm having opportunities to do things to enlarge myself."

The written word

Scott has a bachelor's degree in communications and journalism from Central State University and a master's in educational leadership from Antioch McGregor. She'll be doing another reading and signing at Epic Bookstore in Yellow Springs on Friday, Nov. 18 at 232 Xenia Ave from 6:30-8pm.

"In 2015, I wrote a novella," Scott said. "It's called 'The Rhythm of Love.' I had it published but I didn't really do anything with it. I had to get my feelings out and the feelings of my sisterhood. It was about a young African American female finding her way. She came from a very exclusive, wealthy family, which you rarely see in books or on screen. I also write poetry and I published a book of my poems called 'Chasing Love' in 2020. Now, I'm going to do some events to promote both books. I'll be doing some readings and signing copies of the novella and the poetry book."

Changing media

With two books out, Scott moved from the printed page to the screen and began working on a film adaptation of "The Rhythm of Love." "I'm a writer that decided I wanted to do a film," Scott said. "My agent suggested my book would work better as a streaming series because you have so many layers there. If you watch TV on a consistent basis, they are looking into the lives of whatever that writer wants to explore."

As the CEO and executive producer for Soul Fire Productions, Scott made several trips to South Africa between 2017 and 2019. She tried, unsuccessfully, to secure funding to shoot the series in the country using a local crew. "Everyone was excited to have me come down to South Africa because all of the other American filmmakers they had been entertaining were white," Scott said. "They ended up not producing it, but it was a real learning experience."

Branching out creatively

Scott is currently developing a documentary, "Wordology," and several other film and television projects. Financing remains difficult but she is hoping the South African experiences help her find a path to success.

"My major focus is African American filmmakers, especially the female aspect of it," Scott said. "Between 2020 and 2021, women directed 39 percent of independent films made in Hollywood. Almost a decade earlier, between 2011 and 2012, less than 30 percent of Hollywood independent films had female directors. There was an increase in female producers and writers between 2020 and 2021. We've jumped up but that's females, not African Americans."



"The top grossing films between 2007 and 2019, only nine were directed by women of color," Scott continued. "The disparity is so evident. People ask me why I'm still trying to do this and it's because my passion hasn't waned. My love of movies is so great. I can tell you more about movies than I can about people. I respect the talent of actors but it's really about the love affair of a writer who recognizes the power of film."

Looking local

Recently, Scott has looked closer to home for support. "I got introduced to Film Dayton and I (received) more help from Lisa Grigsby and her organization than I ever have," she said. "Her knowledge has been so helpful. In Ohio, we also have film organizations like Mid Ohio Filmmakers Association out of Columbus. They have Black filmmakers from all over the state. Of course, even with Film Dayton, getting sponsorship can be difficult."

"We have a small pool of sponsorship but it's not enough," Scott continued. "We're lost because we run into the same thing with funding every time. A lot of corporations in Dayton will only give money if it can be written off. When we did our last poetry show, Culture Works came in and became our major sponsor. We had other local sponsors too, but Culture Works really saved us."

The spoken word

In addition to film production and her own writing, Scott also produces live events with a mix of spoken word poetry and music. In May, she and her husband, the poet and percussionist David Matthews, produced and performed in "Rhapsody-N-Soul: Revival Revelation Rejoice" at The Tank inside the Dayton Arcade. "I went back and forth to Cape Town like four times from 2017 to 2019," Scott said. "It was insane. I couldn't believe it didn't work out. I really had to rebuild myself, so, in 2019, I decided I was going to do a poetry show downtown. David and I put together the first 'Rhapsody-N-Soul' in February 2020. That went really well and we were going to take the show on the college circuit. "Once I got immersed in all of this, I realized Dayton has such a wealth of spoken word poetry folks," she added. "We had all of these plans and then COVID hit. I was so excited we were able to bring it back for a second time in May. The show at The Tank was so amazing. If all goes well, we'll do more 'Rhapsody-N-Soul' shows while we work on these other film projects."