



[www.liverichdiepoor.org](http://www.liverichdiepoor.org)

Ann Perry Wallace

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## **What Professors Are Saying About Live Rich Die Poor**

**"Everybody worth anything knows a good bit about our black southern woman heroine, the Eatonville ethnographer who wrote and lived as beautifully as anyone could ask for. But Ann Perry Wallace's *Live Rich Die Poor* goes beyond the Zora that circulates in Internet quotes or even in our own imaginations. In it we see through Hurston's interiority, told through Wallace's body and lens, but decidedly Zora's spirit and learn so much more about our heroine, the woman, the artist and moreover our own selves. What does it cost for a black woman artist to be free? Ann Perry Wallace beautifully channels Zora Neale Hurston, beyond what we know about her and into her interior life, assessing the costs of living and dying free in America today."**

*Zandria F. Robinson, Ph. D*  
*Associate Professor of Black Studies*  
*Georgetown University*

## **Synopsis of Live Rich Die Poor**

In 1973 famed writer Alice Walker discovers Zora Neale Hurston's unmarked grave in a quest to honor Hurston, and proclaim the late writer's genius. But, what if during Alice's search for the unmarked grave and her desire to breathe life into Zora's work, she accidentally awakens Zora only to learn that Zora, in the haziness of death and all of the places her spirit has been, no longer remembers the prolific, rich life she lead and thus cannot understand her impact? This is where *Live Rich Die Poor* begins.

Based on the life of Zora Neale Hurston, the brilliant writer who grew to prominence during the Harlem Renaissance comes a new look at her colorful life. Zora revisits her life and is astonished at what she discovers. Actress and writer Ann Perry Wallace re-imagines scenes from Hurston's

life; from her happy days in Eatonville, the devastating loss of her mother, hints of the lost years of wandering that she never spoke of, to arriving in New York and becoming a fixture within the art world of the Harlem Renaissance, becoming an anthropologist, and even her falling out with her best friend Langston Hughes. This is a study of a woman who fought to express and use every single gift while she lived. Her life has the power to instruct, inspire and illuminate. This show captures the vulnerable Zora we don't often read about, and it asks us if we are living in a way in which we are emptying ourselves out and using all of our gifts. Strap in and put yourself in Zora's shoes as she confronts her life choices and discovers the reach of her impact.

## Ann Perry Wallace Bio

Ann Perry Wallace is the 2023 winner of the Ostrander Award for Outstanding Original Script for her play *Live Rich Die Poor*, based on the life of Zora Neale Hurston the famed folklorist, anthropologist and Harlem Renaissance writer. Ann is an actor and writer from Memphis, Tennessee and holds a Bachelor's Degree in Theatre from UT Chattanooga. She is a writer of fiction, plays, children's stories and has just started the torture of writing her first screenplay. She is currently gearing up to tour *Live Rich Die Poor*, where she plays 18 characters from Zora Neale Hurston's life. Besides her own one woman show, Ann was last seen on a Memphis Stage in Tennessee Shakespeare's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, also playing multiple roles in Tennessee Shakespeare's Educational Tour of *Romeo and Juliet*. Ann can also be seen in the independent films *100 Lives*, *The Romance of Loneliness* and *The Department of Signs and Magical Intervention*. Ann is currently writing a play with the Memphis Orpheum Theatre Group. [Neighborhood Play Program](http://neighborhoodplayprogram.com) | [Orpheum Theatre Memphis \(orpheum-memphis.com\)](http://orpheumtheatre.com)

## Publicity

[Dailey Memphian Feature](#)

**Memphis playwright pours herself into project honoring literary hero**

By [Jane Roberts](#), Daily Memphian

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For nearly 25 years, Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston has burned in Ann Perry Wallace's imagination the way a character does when an actress — out of necessity — has other scripts in her head.

It wasn't just Hurston and her words. It was her will and determination banging like a wayward muse on Wallace's brain.

In stolen moments from raising children and her own theater work, Wallace studied Hurston's letters and biographies and now at "50-ish," has written the 90-minute, one-woman show, "[Live Rich Die Poor](#)" — [the story of Hurston's life](#) — strung together in a series of vignettes.

In the voices of 18 people, 12 of them men, she also acts out — in quick character skits with the barest of props — a mustache here, a necktie there — the stories of her hero, an independent Black woman who early in the last century wrote in the voice of her people, to the scorn of other Black writers, including Richard Wright.

“Their Eyes Were Watching God,” published in 1937, unleashed his public vitriol.

“The bravery to write in the dialect when everybody is telling you that is buffoonery,” actress and writer Wallace said. “They said, ‘You are making our people look illiterate and dumb.’”

Hurston, who spent her formative years in the all-Black community of Eatonville, Florida, one of the earliest incorporated Black settlements in the nation, didn’t see it that way.

She saw the everyday lives of people living outside the glare of what another group thought they should be. The artistry of their lives and their loves, Hurston said, was worthy of literature.

“That’s someone who I would love to be like, fierce and independent. And you don’t care what anybody thinks,” Wallace said.

“My 25-year-old self, at that time, was just a mousy, little actress, living in Chicago and feeling so small. To read about a woman, who in the face of all this criticism, was just authentically herself, struck me as heroic.”

Jamari Baugh, 15, shoots a basketball past a friend at Elizabeth Park in Eatonville, Fla., next to a mural of author Zora Neale Hurston, who grew up in Eatonville and depicted a fictionalized version of the historic Black town in her work.

Hurston, who wrote in the muscled, writerly voice of a fearless Black woman, is obscure enough that many people have never heard of her.

Wallace is not surprised. For most of her life, she hadn’t either.

Her mission now is to take the show on the road, acting the script she wrote herself and living out of suitcase, if that’s what it takes.

“Let’s say it made it to Broadway,” Wallace says hypothetically in her office at First Congregational Church in Cooper-Young, dust motes dancing in the morning light of her east-facing windows.

“I wouldn’t mind if they said, ‘You know what? For us to sell this on Broadway, we need a celebrity actress,’” she says in the conversational stage voice that’s become her own.

“If they said — and I’m just making this up — ‘Viola Davis wants to do it.’ Well, go ahead, Viola Davis. I will sit back and watch.”

Wallace, as head of food justice ministry at the church, prepares meals for 375 to 400 hungry people in Midtown a week. She’s also given at least 20 years to collecting the stories of Hurston’s life, focusing on those that show her determination, including divorcing a husband who wanted her to keep house to the exclusion of her own talent.

Hurston also earned a bachelor’s degree at Barnard College and studied anthropology at Columbia University.

“The bravery to write in the dialect when everybody is telling you that is buffoonery,” actor and writer Ann Perry Wallace said about Zora Neale Hurston. “They said, ‘You are making our people look illiterate and dumb.’”

But in less glamorous times, she also did a stint in the circus, worked at Paramount Pictures, reported for The Pittsburgh Courier and cleaned toilets — after she was famous — anything that paid the bills so she could write.

That quality — giving one’s all in life — is Wallace’s message told through her literary hero.

“Use up your gifts; don’t leave anything here. When I looked at her life, she was still writing up to her death,” Wallace said.

“I don’t advocate dying poor literally, but I do advocate living a rich life and not taking all those jewels and gems with us,” she says, laughing that the graveyard may be the richest ground in any town.

“There you will find all the books that weren’t written, all the cures that weren’t found.”

In early March, Wallace performed the show for several hundred at the Cossitt Library in Downtown, a gift from a handful of patrons who support her work and want to get the word out.

“I saw an opportunity to reach out to people I know are thoughtful people, committed people who care about Memphis, who care about theater, who have a personal commitment to care about race relations,” said Pan Awsumb.

She also likes the idea of encouraging people to employ all their talent in a city that could use their passion.

“When you employ your talent, it’s like a flow. It’s a channel. And more happens,” Awsumb said.

Wallace will perform the show at 6 p.m. June 7 at Voices of the South theater, 1000 Cooper St., to an audience that will be asked to watch over interruptions caused by a film crew.

“Any time you’re applying for grants or individual artist’s awards, people really want to see the film version of it. So, we’ll have that,” Wallace says.

Ann Perry Wallace acts out scenes from her one-woman show “Live Rich Die Poor.” Perry Wallace will perform the show at 6 p.m. June 7 at Voices of the South theater, 1000 Cooper St.

In the meantime, she is also developing a children’s version of the show, done in puppetry, and hopes to hire a second actress who can do the full-length show when she can’t, a nod to how serious she is about making Hurston known.

“Ann’s doing something that actors have done, actually for centuries,” said Stephanie Shine, director of outreach, resident artist and general manager at Tennessee Shakespeare Co., where Wallace has acted for more than a decade.

“They have a vehicle, and then they go and market it themselves and create it themselves. There’s no other way this story is going to come out and have the reach that it’s going to have than by Ann being an independent, creative and producer.

“In our community, it’s very difficult to make a living as a theater artist. We have a lot of theaters, but they are community theaters, and they don’t pay actors to work,” Shine said.

“Ann deserves to be paid for what she’s doing. And she’ll have such a far reach and a variety of touring situations and schools. There will be no middle person. It’s absolutely the best thing in the world.”

The show is directed by Karon Samuels, who also directed “The Mountaintop” at Hattiloo Theatre in 2022.

Besides telling Hurston’s story of pluck and grit, Samuels sees the show as a stake in the ground for independent theater here and the power of one-person shows in general.

“I would love to see the show travel to some of Zora’s old stomping grounds, cities that are mentioned in the show that shaped Zora as a person. I would love to see this story give her a second life — so to speak — and have her exist in another time in these spaces.

“I think that would be really beautiful.”

Wallace smiles at the possibilities, careful, she says, not to rule anything out.

“I want to bring Zora to the forefront. She was really innovative, and I think, ahead of her time.”

## Things I Saw This Week Review

ELLE PERRY (No relation to Ann Perry Wallace)

Most famous for her novel “Their Eyes Were Watching God,” Hurston’s work also includes plays, essays, anthropological work, and short stories.

Over the 90-minute run time of “Live Rich Die Poor,” the Memphis actor and playwright presents her encapsulation of Hurston’s life. The play offers something new about Hurston for both established fans of the renowned author and those who only know the broad strokes of Hurston’s story.

Explored are Hurston’s family life, literary spats, love life — there are even references to her “lost years.”

The play opens in 1975 in a darkened room. The audience hears writer Alice Walker awaken Hurston after her death. The fictional portrayal mirrors the real-life tale of Walker marking Hurston’s unmarked grave and plucking Hurston’s work out of the dark and into re-acclaim. Through Hurston’s words, and through words of those Hurston had relationships with — including her father, stepmother, Langston Hughes, her husbands, and Richard Wright — the viewer steps into Hurston’s shoes.

A complete picture of the “peculiar” artist is painted, complete with pain, joy, and plenty of humor.

Wallace switches persons by way of costumes. A series of blocks on the stage, which Wallace interacts with throughout the work, are the constant set piece, serving as a coffin, a place to sit, and other functions.

Another prominent piece of the set is Hurston's typewriter — dubbed “talking Talibah.” Housed in a black box theater inside TheatreWorks, sound design and lighting also play roles in the production. In addition to use of voiceover, the play employs sounds like howling wind and rain. At appropriate moments, colorful accent lights are used, and Wallace-as-Hurston is bathed in light.

Although the audience learns that some see Hurston as odd or “crazy,” the underlying message Hurston receives (as does the audience) is that one must “jump at the sun.” This tale, told enthusiastically and lovingly, encourages all who listen to live their lives in a way that gives their riches and richness to others so that when they perish, they have left nothing to wonder “what if.”

To “sprinkle their magic” on those around them, rather than letting all of their glitter go unused.

Wallace, in her years of tweaking and developing this work, has found a way to do just that.

## **OTHER ARTICLES TO CHECK OUT**

<https://tri-statedefender.com/live-rich-die-poor-one-woman-play-spotlights-life-of-author-zora-neale-hurston/07/26/>

<https://choose901.com/memphis-actor-brings-life-of-zora-neale-hurston-to-stage-in-one-woman-show/>



## THE REVIEWS ARE IN ABOUT LIVE RICH DIE POOR

"Ann Wallace delivers a virtuoso performance. The show is fresh, vital, and relevant. This show does not beg to be seen, it demands to be seen."

Antonio Horne  
Associate Professor, Hendrix College

"This was an evocative and transformative experience. Ann captures beautifully the complicated artist and the audience leaves with a better understanding of this icon of American Literary history. Zora Neale Hurston would have been proud."

Amina Dafalla  
Theatre Goer

"Marvelous! A rich tapestry that made me want to go read all of her books. Funny and moving all at once. A complex character creatively staged."

Irene Crist  
Theatre Director

"Brava"

Glenda Mace, Artistic Director  
Founder, Cloud9 Memphis

"Ann Perry Wallace masterfully glides from character to character creating the population of Zora's world. The stage feels inhabited with many thanks to Wallace's agility and specificity, which allows her story-telling to soar with clarity."

Stephanie Shine, General Manager  
Tennessee Shakespeare

"Beautifully written and performed. I was transported through time to the places, people, and events that shaped our beloved Zora."

Tienne Anderson  
Theatre Goer

"Ann brings the vibrant characters of Zora's world to life. The language and life of Zora Neale Hurston are resurrected with vibrancy, clarity, and humor."

Taylor St. John  
The Memphis Orpheum

"Tears streamed as I was encouraged to decide if I lived rich...because I have had the nerve to go my own way. Thank you for being a beacon of freedom."

Jenita Nakamura  
The Memphis Orpheum

## EMPTY YOURSELF, DENY THE GRAVE YOUR GIFTS

Written and Performed by ANN PERRY WALLACE    Directed by DARIUS WALLACE

# LIVE RICH DIE POOR

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*The Ostranders*

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breathless."

-Zoe

"I was mesmerized by the  
material and especially  
the performance. Truly a  
gift. Thank you."

-Gail

WRITER AND ACTRESS ANN PERRY WALLACE *presents*

# LIVE RICH DIE POOR

*An Original Zora Neale Hurston One Woman Show*

This is not your average Zora story. "The show is fresh, vital, and  
relevant. This show does not beg to be seen, IT demands to be seen."

-Professor of Theatre, Antonio Horne

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