

# Nancy Giles

## Sunday Morning

### Sage

BY MEREDITH HOLMES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DALE ROTHENBERG

#### Actor-writer-performer-pundit

When multitalented multihyphenate Nancy Giles '81 returned to Oberlin for her 25th reunion in 2006, she picked right up with her old pals—and old habits.

"I got together with a good friend, and we decided to do an impromptu performance at the Cat in the Cream coffee house," recalls the actor-writer-performer-pundit. "Our dynamic hadn't changed at all. She was very organized and deliberate, and I was very spur-of-the-moment, go with your gut. She kept saying, 'Let's write everything down. What if they don't laugh?' And I was saying, 'It'll be fine, let's not over-rehearse.' And it was fine; everybody loved it."

In all fairness to the old college friend, Giles has had a lot of experience thinking on her feet in front of an audience. Since graduating from Oberlin, she has worked on stage and in radio, television, and film. She is best known for her lively, idiosyncratic commentaries on *CBS News Sunday Morning* and funny but pointed punditry on *Larry King Live*. Nothing escapes her subversive questions, her baffled outrage, and her genial wit; she's tackled high heels, Homeland Security funding, the real meaning of Sarah Palin's \$150,000 campaign wardrobe, even her own impending 25th college reunion. (As the *Sunday Morning* camera slowly closed in on her Hi-O-Hi 1981 yearbook picture, she wearily anticipated the questions she'd be asked at the reunion: "Are you married?" "Any kids?" "Are you looking?" Not that she minds—much: The commentary was titled "The Hippest Spinster.")

Not bad for someone whose first professional role was as a singing bag of garbage with the Paper Bag Players, a nonprofit New York City troupe that creates original theater for children. Bigger and better parts on many stages in New York and elsewhere followed. Giles has written and performed two solo shows, *Black Comedy: The Wacky Side of Racism*, and *Notes of a Negro Neurotic*. In 1985, she won the prestigious Theatre World Award for Outstanding New Talent for her off-Broadway debut in the musical revue *Mayor*. She also toured for three years with the Second City Comedy Troupe.

Her film credits include parts in *Big*, *New York Stories*, *Angie*, *I'm Not Rappaport*, and *Working Girl*. Giles played G.I. Frankie Bunsen for three seasons on the ABC-TV drama *China Beach*, and she played Connie in the ABC-TV comedy series *Delta*. On Philadelphia radio station WPHT she co-hosted *Giles and Moriarty* with CBS news correspondent Erin Moriarty. The show was on the air for only two years but won two "Gracies"—American Women in Radio and Television awards.

Her audience has outgrown the Cat in the Cream now. When she came to Oberlin this last November, as the keynote speaker for the Great Lakes Colleges Association Students of Color Leadership Conference, her show was held in Finney Chapel.



As an African American female at Oberlin in the 1970s, Giles was not without her frustrations, but she managed to turn some of them into building blocks—for comedy routines and self-confidence.

A creative writing major, she felt that one instructor taught "by demographics"—expecting gay students to draw inspiration from gay writers, and African American students to draw from writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. She says it was only when she turned in a story full of references to street crime and gritty urban desperation, of which she had almost no direct knowledge, that she got any traction in the class. The professor shared it with the class as an example of "the authentic black experience."

That's just the kind of experience she's been able to use in her comic performances, and she advises young people who want to make a serious point to do so in a funny way. "Humor bridges what divides us and can even stop people from shouting at each other."

Giles also felt that her acting interests were thwarted by the lack of roles available in Oberlin's theater department productions.

"It was lily-white at that time, and nobody was doing color-blind casting," she says. Instead, Giles participated in student-run productions, once playing the lead in *Wings*, about a woman stunt flyer. "It was a difficult part because the character was aphasic, but I loved being in the play," she remembers. "Not getting any parts as an undergraduate fueled my 'I'll show them' attitude. This attitude has served me well and drove me to succeed in New York and at Second City."

What's next? In addition to the *Sunday Morning* essays and appearances on the *Today Show* and *Larry King Live*, Giles is working on a book of essays and looking for a publisher. You've also likely heard her voice on commercial voiceovers for such things as the Food Network, Gorton's Fish, and the osteoporosis medication Boniva, for which she provides the serious-sounding side-effects warning, and which she recited to her campus audience in the fall to great comic effect. "I still do political comedy with my hippie friends," she says, "and I'm still dreaming of being on Broadway. Also, I hope to get married by the time I'm 60."

Giles encourages young people to consider Oberlin and says the college has been a strong influence in her life. "When I arrived as a freshman, I was overwhelmed with all the interesting people I wanted to meet. In a way, Oberlin was like a big, crazy overnight camp, and I loved it. Who knows? If I had gone to camp as a kid, maybe I wouldn't have been attracted to Oberlin. Then my whole life would have been different."

*Meredith Holmes is a poet and freelance writer in Cleveland Heights. In 2005 she was named that city's first poet laureate*