

## STUDY GUIDE

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### THE PLAY

Broadway, 1950s: it's the first day of rehearsal for *Chaos in Belleville* and everyone has gathered. The bright-eyed young actors, the stage veterans, the demanding director, the over-eager stage manager: this company of black and white artists is ready to put on a dramatic, new show: an anti-lynching drama (see article).

Except, there is nothing new about it. It is a play typical of its time: a play about African-Americans written, produced and directed by white men, and loaded with racial stereotypes.

But it's just a play ... or is it?

**Wiletta**, an experienced actor, knows all about being a black woman in professional theater. However, when the director, **Al Manners**, asks her to find the truth in her character, Wiletta can't escape that her role is a painful stereotype. Does playing a stereotype compromise who she is as an African-American woman and artist ... or is it just playing a role in a play? Are her beliefs worth breaking the unwritten rules and risking her job?

Outside the theater, the Civil Rights Movement is gathering steam. Inside, the company grows heated and divided as it confronts the truth about racism and sexism in show business and in themselves. Will the company be able to unify or is its production doomed to failure?

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## TROUBLE IN MIND



*"Trouble in Mind, I'm blue  
But I won't be blue always,  
'Cause the sun's gonna shine  
In my backdoor some day."  
– Trouble in Mind, Richard Jones (1927)*

By Alice Childress  
Directed by Irene Lewis  
September 9 – October 23, 2011  
in the Kreeger Theater

## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT ALICE CHILDRESS



"I write about the losers, those who come second or not at all."

Alice Childress was born in Charleston, South

Carolina, in 1916 and grew up in Harlem, New York, with her grandmother. Even though she could not finish high school for financial reasons, she educated herself at the library and became an accomplished actress and playwright. Childress acted with the American Negro Theater and also did radio and television work.

During her career, she was told that her skin was not dark enough to play African-American characters, but she could not be cast as white characters either. Therefore, she sought artistic freedom by writing plays herself. She published her first play, *Florence*, in 1949.

Many of Childress' plays focus on the experience of African-American women, who often did not have a voice in the male-dominated racial politics of her day. She would write about ordinary people to show that their stories had meaning.

Childress also wrote novels for young people, including *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich*. Though nominated for prestigious awards, it was banned from several school libraries, in part, because it dealt with a 13-year-old drug addict.

Childress continued to write until her death in 1994.

Childress' first play, *Florence*, was the first professionally produced play written by a black woman.

# HISTORICAL CONTEXT: AMERICA IN THE 1950s

The 1950s, the setting for *Trouble in Mind*, were not all apple pie and perfect American families. It was also a volatile time, full of struggle, fear and change. At the play, observe how some of these events influence the characters and events in *Trouble in Mind*:

## CIVIL RIGHTS

Some of the most important events in the Civil Rights movement happened in the 1950s:

- The Montgomery bus boycott started in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, when Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man on the bus. The boycott, 40,000 people strong, forced changes the city's segregation laws and was a catalyst for change in other cities.



- U.S. schools were desegregated in 1954 through the Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education*. Southern states fought this ruling, and in 1957 in Little Rock, Arkansas, President Eisenhower sent soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division to escort black students into Central High School, through a white mob that threw rocks at them.



Cold War propaganda poster

## COLD WAR

After World War II, the U.S. entered into a Cold War with the USSR (Soviet Union). An era of suspicion, there was widespread fear that Communism would overthrow American democracy. The FBI had files on Americans who were accused, or "named," as

Communists. If named, a person could be blacklisted, get fired or go to jail. Many liberal entertainers, artists and activists, including Alice Childress, were monitored by the FBI as suspected communists or communist sympathizers. ●



## ACTIVITY:

Imagine a diverse (racially, socioeconomically and sexually) theater company putting on a play today. How might current events affect the choice of play? Group dynamics in the cast? Audience response to the play? What challenges might they encounter?

# THE CHANGING FACE OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN THEATER

*“You don’t have to take what I’ve been through ... don’t have to take it off ‘em.” – Wiletta*

Minstrel shows were a type of performance popular between 1830 and 1960 featuring white men in blackface depicting stereotypes of blacks. As popular entertainment, minstrel shows helped spread the stereotypes through the U.S., making a joke out of African-Americans. After the Civil War, many minstrel performers were black but still performed in blackface.



Minstrel show advertisement

*Porgy and Bess* (1935) is a Gershwin folk opera about the lives of poor African-Americans in Charleston, South Carolina, in the 1920s. It featured an all-African-American cast of classically trained singers – revolutionary at the time!

After World War II many majority-black and all-black shows opened on Broadway. These shows were written and produced primarily by whites for a white audience, though they increased opportunities for black performers.

In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* became the first play by an African-American woman to be produced on Broadway. This play portrayed African-American characters and themes realistically and in a natural manner.



Lorraine Hansberry

From the 1980s to 2005, African-American playwright August Wilson wrote his acclaimed 10-play Pittsburgh Cycle. He wrote about the struggle and richness of African-American life, creating complex, real characters affected by love, betrayal, duty, dignity and hardship. Today, there is a Broadway theater named after Wilson. ●



August Wilson Theater



Hattie McDaniel

IN 1939, HATTIE MCDANIEL BECAME THE FIRST BLACK ACTRESS TO WIN AN OSCAR FOR HER ROLE AS MAMMY IN *GONE WITH THE WIND*: “WHY SHOULD I COMPLAIN ABOUT MAKING \$700 A WEEK PLAYING A MAID? IF I DIDN’T, I’D BE MAKING \$7 A WEEK BEING ONE.”



MILLIE, ONE CHARACTER IN *TROUBLE IN MIND*, IS FRUSTRATED BY ALWAYS PLAYING THE MAID: “LAST SHOW I WAS IN, I WOULDN’T EVEN TELL MY RELATIVES. ALL I DID WAS SHOUT ‘LORD, HAVE MERCY!’ FOR ALMOST TWO HOURS EVERY NIGHT.”

**THE ARENA CONNECTION:** WHEN IT OPENED IN 1950, ARENA STAGE WAS THE FIRST THEATER IN WASHINGTON, D.C., TO HAVE INTEGRATED AUDIENCES. THE NATIONAL THEATER, WHICH WAS ONE OF THE ONLY PLACES TO SEE PROFESSIONAL PRODUCTIONS IN WASHINGTON, CLOSED IN 1948 RATHER THAN INTEGRATE ITS AUDIENCE, AND IT DID NOT REOPEN UNTIL 1952. LATER, ARENA STAGE BECAME THE FIRST AMERICAN THEATER TO HAVE AN INTEGRATED ACTING COMPANY.



Director Edwin Sherrin addresses the cast of *The Great White Hope* at Arena Stage (1967), including James Earl Jones and Jane Alexander (center).



## ACTIVITY:

Choose three African-American performers and research their performance history. What roles have they played? What do you think are their best performances? Are any of their roles stereotypes? What role would you like them to play next?

# THE PLAY-WITHIN-THE-PLAY



The play performed in *Trouble in Mind*, *Chaos in Belleville*, is an anti-lynching drama. A form of torture and murder usually involving the hanging and burning of a black person, lynching was primarily used between 1865 and the 1960s to silence and punish blacks for a variety of legal and social offenses. Some whites commemorated lynching in postcards and attended them as social events. Anti-lynching plays, often melodramatic, were written to raise awareness about this brutality. ●

**Believe it or not, even with its serious issues, Alice Childress describes her play as a “comedy drama.” Part of the fun is peering behind the scenes at a rehearsal and watching actors playing actors who are acting. Which is the comedy and which is the drama: *Trouble in Mind* OR *Chaos in Belleville*? What effects can a playwright achieve with a play-within-a-play?**

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Books

- *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* by Alice Childress
- *Rainbow Jordan: She's Too Brave to Be a Child, Too Scared to Be a Woman* by Alice Childress
- *Selected Plays* by Alice Childress, edited by Kathy A. Perkins
- *In the Shadow of the Great White Way: Images from the Black Theatre* by Bert Andrews and Paul Carter Harrison (out of print)

### Film

- *Beyond Tara: The Extraordinary Life of Hattie McDaniel*: AMC documentary, 2001

### On the Web

- *Broadway: The American Musical Online*: [pbs.org/wnet/broadway/index.html](http://pbs.org/wnet/broadway/index.html)
- Alice Childress: [voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/childressAlice.php](http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/childressAlice.php)
- Black Tony Award Winners: [theroot.com/multimedia/tony-award-winnners-gallery](http://theroot.com/multimedia/tony-award-winnners-gallery)
- *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, [umbc.edu/cadvc/foralltheworld/index.php](http://umbc.edu/cadvc/foralltheworld/index.php)

## THREE BIG QUESTIONS

What do you think & why?

1. Why should or shouldn't a white person write plays about African-Americans or the African-American experience?
2. How relevant are the themes of *Trouble in Mind* today?
3. How accurately do plays, television and movies reflect African-Americans?

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 30 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.
- Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.
- Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum.
- Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.
- Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

**Enjoy the show!**



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