

Next Stage Resource Guide



Jumping Through Hoops
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Trouble in Mind

By Alice Childress

Directed by Irene Lewis

Feb 2–Mar 4, 2007

The Pearlstone Theater

Irene Lewis Artistic Director
Michael Ross Managing Director

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TROUBLE IN MIND

By Alice Childress

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Catherine Zuber Costume Designer

Rui Rita Lighting Designer

David Budries Sound Designer

Deena Burke Dialect Coach

Catherine Sheehy Production Dramaturg

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SETTING THE STAGE

Trouble in Mind by Alice Childress

by Shannon M. Davis, Publications Associate

Characters:

Willetta Mayer, a middle-aged actress

Henry, the elderly stage doorman

John Nevins, a young actor

Millie Davis, a young actress

Sheldon Forrester, an elderly character actor

Judy Sears, a young actress

Bill O'Wray, a character actor

Al Manners, their director

Eddie Fenton, his assistant

Setting:

Ten o'clock on Monday morning, fall 1957. A Broadway theater in New York City.

Willetta Mayer finally has a chance at the role of a lifetime.

A talented, yet struggling, African American actress, she's been cast in *Chaos in Belleville*, an anti-lynching play set to open on Broadway. She's paid her dues throughout years of playing stereotypical supporting roles in second-rate shows, and is ready for her star turn. She also knows show business—this play might not be quite as enlightened as she's been hoping for, but that doesn't mean it won't sell out.

Selling out is the question at the heart of Alice Childress' *Trouble in Mind*. When she wrote the play in 1955, Childress created a microcosm of the theatrical and social circles in which she had moved for years, within which Black creativity had little room to grow. Reflecting her own experience, her protagonist Willetta resolves that the time has finally come to rekindle her dreams of stardom and make a name for herself on her own terms, only to meet with the very real limits of narrow minds and bad habits. Her director's attempts at manipulation clash with Willetta's determination to maintain her integrity and play her role her way. Tempers flare, and *Chaos in Belleville*'s questions of equality and institutionalized racism play out in rehearsal.

Having joined Harlem's American Negro Theater in 1940 as an actress and playwright, and performed on Broadway in the ANT's production of *Anna Lucasta*, Childress knew intimately the frustrations and temptations faced by Willetta. Ironically, and perhaps fittingly, Childress was forced to confront nearly the same choice about her play that she dramatized within it. Following the tremendous success that *Trouble in Mind* enjoyed Off-Broadway, even winning an Obie for best original play, a commercial run was announced—but only if Childress would write a happier, less-ambivalent ending. Like Willetta, Childress had to decide: soften her message, follow the formula, and sell out for success; or maintain her integrity and risk everything. She decided on the latter. ●

TROUBLE IN MIND

“Oh, there’s so much

CAST (in alphabetical order)

Starla Benford* Millie Davis

E. Faye Butler* Wiletta Mayer

Thomas Jefferson Byrd* Sheldon Forrester

Maria Dizzia* Judy Sears

Daren Kelly* Bill O’Wray

LeRoy McClain* John Nevins

Garrett Neergaard* Eddie Fenton

Laurence O’Dwyer* Henry

B. Thomas Rinaldi Stagehand

Craig Wroe* Al Manners

Mike Schleifer* Stage Manager

Debra Acquavella*
Assistant Stage Manager

* Member of Actors’ Equity Association

SETTING

Act One: A Broadway theater, 1957

Act Two: The same, a few days later

There will be one 15-minute intermission.



for women to write about today.”

Alice Childress’ Life in Print

by Catherine Sheehy, Production Dramaturg

Alice Childress was, like anybody, a sum of her experiences. And while she never wrote an autobiography, she often put those experiences at the service of her acting, writing and directing work, weaving them into her art. So for the Childress scholar or the theater company presenting her work today, those scraps of experience tantalize with their promise to provide enlightenment and context. Tracing all those scraps accurately, however, proves to be a bit of a snipe hunt.

Approximately half of all sources about her biographical bona fides list Childress’ birthday as October 12, 1916; half in 1920; and a letter she wrote to the FBI requesting a copy of their dossier on her under the Freedom of Information Act discloses that her birth certificate lists October 13, 1916 as the day. So she shaved a few years off? You can’t blame a woman for that; my grandmother hid her age until, two decades after her death, we dug up her birth certificate, and my grandmother wasn’t even in show business.

The question of who Alice Childress was doesn’t end there, however. Most obituaries announcing her death in August, 1994 give the impression that Childress was the author’s maiden name. It wasn’t. She acquired the name from a failed first marriage to Alvin Childress, an actor who ironically is best known for playing Amos in the color-corrected *Amos and Andy* TV show. (The original radio incarnation was performed by two white actors in vocal blackface.)

The research biography accompanying the bibliographical record for the Alice Childress papers at the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library proclaims that she was born “Alice Herndon,” though the biographer admits being baffled about the source of the last name as neither of her parents carried the handle. Again, according to her strangely worded letter to the FBI, “Alice Childress, a writer, legal name Mrs. Nathan Woodard, was born (according to my birth certificate) Louise Henderson....” The author herself even abdicates authority about the circumstances of her beginnings to a now-missing document.

Among the facts not under dispute are the place of her birth—Charleston, South Carolina—and the fact that she moved to Harlem to live with her grandmother, Eliza, in 1925, when she was either 9 or 5 depending on when you start counting. Also undisputable is that 1925 was an extraordinary time for a young African American girl with theatrical aspirations to live up on 135th Street. There’s no record of what became of her parents; she said in an oral history she gave in 1973 that they had died. Her grandmother was clearly the center of Childress’ life; Eliza was the daughter of a slave and had very little formal education but she was an amazing storyteller. She and the young Alice would lean out their brownstone >>>

Childress, Alice

MEMO

To: Alice Childress

RE: Dossier request under Freedom of Information Act

Pursuant to your request 121 pages were reviewed and 13 pages were withheld in their entirety. The decision to withhold exempt portions of our records is the responsibility of William H. Webster, Director, FBI.

FBI

To the director of the FBI,
April 11, 1951

“On page five of the ‘Daily Worker’ dated April 3, 1951, it is reflected that Alice Childress will teach evening classes at the Jefferson School of Social Science during the spring term beginning the week of April 9, 1951. It is stated that Miss Childress, now starring in ‘The Candy Story’ will teach the ‘Dramatic Workshop.’

It is noted that in the report of SA [redacted] 3/21/51, in the case entitled ‘Masses and Mainstream, Internal Security--C, Urfile 100-89571,’ it is reflected that Alice Childress contributed an article to the February 1951 issue of ‘Masses and Mainstream.’ It is further reflected that G-2 advised that Alice Childress is an actress and an authoress who on March 19, 1950, attended a meeting of the Harlem regional Committee of the Communist Party.

You are requested to conduct an investigation to ascertain the background and activities of this subject and determine if her name should be placed in the Security Index.

"...I said I can express myself on a piece of paper, and I stayed with it ...,"

>>>

apartment window and make up narratives about people passing beneath them. Childress herself found it financially necessary to leave school before attaining her high school diploma, but she was a voracious reader. Everything that could be found in a book was interesting to her. The combination of bibliophilia and an ingrained love of oral narrative means that most of her work, regardless of the form it takes, reads like drama.

Having seen a Shakespeare play, though she doesn't say which, she decided to become an actor. She worked hard to learn the craft but was continually frustrated by the limitations racial prejudice placed on opportunities. In 1939 she was an original founding member of the influential American Negro Theatre. But when of one of the company's early triumphs, *Anna Lucasta*, was preparing to transfer to Broadway, she was not allowed to reprise the role she'd originated. She was told point-blank by the producer that she was "too light" to play on the Great White Way. She said she received a phone call telling

her that her light skin might confuse and "insult" the audience if they mistook her for White. (Childress was always a little sensitive about her fairness. During the '70s she told a reporter, "I was somewhat ashamed of being so pale of complexion that I fulfilled the old jokes: 'So pale she looks like death eating a soda cracker.'")

After getting that phone call, she got so angry that she made an important decision: "This is the reason I dropped out of acting, I said I can express myself on a piece of paper, and I stayed with it trying to do that, because I wouldn't let this society cut me off from total expression...." That passion for expression is not just the motivating factor in her writing; it is the very subject of many of her best pieces. Alice Childress delights in giving voice to the voiceless. Though teachers encouraged her to write about "the winners" because that's what gratifies the audience, Childress later admitted, "I write about the losers, those who come second or not at all...."

This is the case with her heroine, Wiletta Mayer, in *Trouble in Mind*. Here's a woman of obvious dignity and talent, a powerful stage presence, and the patience of Job. But all these assets have landed her the same part over and over again. When she meets the younger Millie, they indulge in a rueful reminiscence about the waste of their gifts. Millie claims that her last role consisted almost entirely in her intoning, "Lord, have mercy" for two hours every night. Wiletta laughs it all off, tamping down an outrage she has never imagined herself capable of, until she is finally pushed past the breaking point. Over the course of the play, Wiletta comes into a sense of herself and her place in the world that changes her forever.

Childress spoke in interviews, articles, and through her characters about the necessity for African Americans to see themselves on stage and screen and in print and paint as they were, not filtered through the White lens of fear or condescension. Again in the 1973 interview, she said: "There is a set of

From a subsequent report:

██████████ of known reliability, advised on September 21, 1951, that ALICE CHILDRESS was a member of the Communist Party.

The 'Daily Worker' edition of March 19, 1950, page 14, column 2, reported that ALICE CHILDRESS was among those who led songs at a meeting held under the auspices of the Harlem Regional Committee of the Communist Party. It is noted that the 'Daily Worker' is the East Coast daily Communist newspaper.

██████████ of known reliability stated that "Candy Story" made a mockery of free enterprise and tried to show a completely erroneous view of America where the small businessman is eradicated by the giant monopolies.

MEMO

To: The director of the FBI

Plan of Approach

It is noted that the subject resides at 800 Riverside Drive, New York City, and is an unemployed actress. In view of the above the subject has no set routine, however it is planned that a discreet surveillance will be conducted. When the subject is observed to leave her residence, a direct approach will be made at a safe and secure distance from her residence.



because I wouldn't let this society cut me off from total expression...."

ideas that Black people are supposed to have or not supposed to have. They would have us into two or three categories. You hear people speaking about a militant, a moderate, Tom, you know, three or four things. We are as varied as a people, with as varied opinions, and more so than anyone in the world, because we have had a more varied experience I think. I think the Black experience has so many facets that they cannot be described."

But Childress indefatigably went on describing different facets of that experience unphased by how her message might be perceived or received. In her play *Wedding Band*, she tackled miscegenation, and when Joe Papp produced a television version in 1973 to be aired on ABC, several affiliates refused to carry it. Her best known work, the young adult novel *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, tells the story of a 13-year-old drug addict. In his review, Ed Bullins said: "There are too few books that convince us that reading is one of

the supreme gifts of being human. Alice Childress in her short, brilliant study... achieves this feat in a masterly way." Despite the critical and popular success of the book, it was one of nine books banned by a Long Island school district from its public libraries, until a court ruling forced its return. Childress herself wrote the screenplay for the Cicely Tyson film of *Hero*. In *Florence and Wine in the Wilderness*, Childress takes on the problem of intraracial oppression. In Childress' first play, *Florence* is ready to spend her own rent money to drag her daughter, a struggling actress, from the maw of New York because she doesn't believe the girl can make it. In the later play, heroine Tomorrow-Marie takes on Bill, a Black painter who is creating a triptych that depicts the modern African American woman as lost, "a messed up chick." *Trouble in Mind* was optioned for Broadway almost as soon as it had opened. The producers requested a reworking, starting with the title; it was to be called *So Early in the Morning*. But

the biggest rewrite was to be the end. It had to be up, up, *up*. Anyone who sees *Trouble in Mind* will understand how ironic such insistence was, and why Childress could just never quite bring herself to comply. The project was scrapped.

Human dignity is at a premium in Childress' work, and the only way to it is down the path of self-knowledge. Her regard for that dignity made Alice Childress a perfect citizen of the theater, a great collaborator, and an inspiring presence. When she died in 1994, the *New York Amsterdam News* mourned: "She was a personality of wide range in both subject matter and concerns. She was distinguished for an extraordinary quickness, vitality and artistic honesty. To put it simply, she was a genius. But one with a contagious and persistent humanity. Her passing on Sunday, August 14, left us with a void that refuses to submit to measurement. It is immense." Alice Childress was 77 or 73 years old. ●

Childress, Alice

Quotes from Alice Childress used by permission of Flora Roberts, Inc., 275 Seventh Avenue, 26th Floor, New York, NY 10001, tel 646-486-4600.

MEMO

To: The director of the FBI
June 16, 53

...Referenced NY letter pointed out that the subject, a negress, was an unemployed actress and playwright. This letter also pointed out that since the subject had no set routine, discreet surveillances would be conducted to determine just when and where the subject could be interviewed. Surveillances, spot checks and pretext inquiries to date however, have borne out the fact that the subject does not appear to have any set hours and it is therefore almost impossible to determine just when she might be expected to leave or return to her residence. On the one occasion that the subject has been seen, she was observed as she crossed the street from her house only to turn back and immediately go back into her house, thus affording the agents no time at all to approach her. Added to these difficulties is the fact that the subject's dwelling is a large apartment house which has some four separate exits. It is felt, therefore, that only through the maintenance of several surveillance teams at each of these exits could the proper contact with the subject be effected.

Subject was not reinterviewed because: she is currently a self-employed writer and in the past has been active in the writing and theatre field both as playwright and actress. It is felt that contact with the subject at this time could possibly be a source of embarrassment to the Bureau by reason of her employment and background.

THE GOOD OLD, BAD OLD DAYS:

A Portrait of 1950s America in Black and White

by Catherine Sheehy, Production Dramaturg



Trouble in Mind

(1927) Richard Jones

Trouble in mind, I'm blue
But I won't be blue always,
'Cause the sun's gonna shine
In my backdoor some day.

I'm all alone at midnight
And my lamp is burnin' low
Ain't never had so much
Trouble in my life before.

Trouble in mind, that's true
I have almost lost my mind,
Life ain't worth livin',
Sometimes I feel like dyin'.

Goin' down to the river
Gonna take my ol' rockin' chair
And if the blues don't leave me
I'll rock away from there.

You been a hard-hearted mama
Great god! you been unkind
Gonna be a cold, cold papa
Cause you to lose your mind.

I'm gonna lay my head down
On some lonesome railroad line
And let the two nineteen
Pacify my mind.

Well it's trouble, oh trouble
Trouble on my worried mind,
When you see me laughin'
I'm laughin' just to keep from cryin'.

Close your eyes and conjure a single image that says domestic tranquility, economic prosperity, and moral stability. You're picturing some magazine ad from the 1950s, aren't you? Perhaps it's one of those wasp-waisted, ice-cream-cone-breasted, gingham-tea-dress-clad, half-apron-sporting, perfectly-coiffed-and-rouged, pert little housewives whisking a crown roast out of the Tappan oven with a decorative oven mitt, as her square-jawed breadwinner in trench coat, gabardine suit, thin black tie, and Trilby halloos "Honey, I'm home," as he reaches down to tousle the heads of their two Campbell's soup kids. The musk of normalcy mingles with her Chanel No. 5 and his Old Spice.

With half-a-century's accumulation of revisionist dust on the lens of memory, the Fifties look to us today like an oasis in a mad wilderness. Indeed, whenever Hollywood wants a shorthand for precarious innocence, it reaches for the decade of Eisenhower and Dior's New Look. It's only logical.

After the grimness and sacrifice of the Great Depression, when no one had work, and World War II, when women made up a great part of the domestic workforce, America consoled and cajoled itself with the return of the inutile feminine. Yes, we had won the war in Europe and Japan, but at a cost. Cold War anxiety split, and its two vectors diverged. The one we all remember fondly pointed to national myth rebuilding—traditional (White) hearth and home were resuscitated with the stay-at-home mom with the standing hair appointment, the weekly bridge game, and the (often Black) domestic as familiar an accessory as the new Buick coupe. The other vector was a bully's reaction to the same anxiety—an ugly exercise of cowardice masquerading as strength and avoiding justice by taking refuge in our national blindness, legislated inequity, and prejudice ingrained for centuries.

So for all the homogeneity of its image in our mind's eye, there were two very distinct Americas in the Fifties; they were (and largely remain) separate and wholly unequal. Most will recognize in that phrase the deliberate echo of segregation's battle cry. "Separate but equal" was a dubious salve applied by the Supreme Court to the country's conscience in the late 19th-century landmark case *Plessey v. Ferguson*. Though the case was about train cars, the doctrine applied to everything from lunch counters and drinking fountains to public schools and hospitals. (Blues legend Bessie Smith died unnecessarily from a wound suffered in a car accident when the nearest hospital refused to treat her.)

But even as Alice Childress was working on *Trouble in Mind*, the *Plessey* decision was on its last legal legs; *Brown v. the Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas*, outlawing segregation in schools, was handed down by the Court on May 17, 1954. This, of course, was the beginning of desegregation but not the end of the struggle. During the run of the play at the Greenwich Mews Theatre in New York City, the first major test of *Brown* made headlines. Nine African American schoolgirls were caught in a vortex of segregationist hate in Little Rock, Arkansas, where the governor called in the National Guard to keep them out—forcing President Eisenhower to call in the 101st Airborne Division to get them in. A few years later, Norman Rockwell, the illustrator of record for mid-century Americana, put his whole-hearted wholesomeness at the service of the cause to illustrate the event complete with graffiti hate speech.

In 1955, too, Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, sparking the year-long bus boycott that also was the cradle of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Baptist Leadership Conference and the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. As these events unfolded during the rehearsal and run of *Trouble*, Childress went back and wove them into the fiber of her play.

Earlier that year, a fourteen-year-old African American boy from Chicago *allegedly* whistled at a White woman in Mississippi, where he was visiting relatives. Emmett



Till was so badly beaten, his body so mutilated, that he actually looked as “other” as his assailants had cast him. In an act of incredible courage and foresight about the power of media, his mother insisted on an open casket funeral for her son. She allowed *Jet* to photograph the event and publish those horrific images along with a picture of Emmett in happier times. And while Childress doesn’t refer to the Till incident directly, she does point out the fact that such violence against African Americans was not just a “pastoral scene of the gallant South.” The play that the cast is rehearsing in ***Trouble in Mind*** is an anti-lynching melodrama written by a White author, but one of the Black members of the cast, Sheldon, has seen a lynching. And in fact, the Civil Rights Congress and NAACP reported that in the 1950s, the number of African Americans lynched since the mid-19th Century had reached that shamefully round number, 5,000. (This was the reported number; the actual number is assumed to be much higher.) Well into the 20th Century, lynchings were commemorated in postcard form, the proud or complacent citizens standing beneath the “strange fruit” hanging from the trees, the light posts, or the bridge trestles. (An extraordinary archive of these “souvenirs” has been documented in the book *Without Sanctuary* with thoughtful commentary and essays by Congressman John Lewis, critic Hilton Als, historian Leon F. Litwack, and James Allen.)

These outrages are the relief against which the more mundane but no less dehumanizing prejudices of everyday life and the rehearsal room in ***Trouble in Mind*** play out. Wiletta Mayer, the moral center and main character of the piece, just wants to be herself, just wants to see herself onstage. Tired of the cartoon characters that have made her a meager

living—the maids, the mammies, the comfort women—she often speaks Alice Childress’ mind. What Black women could and could not play and say on stage had driven Childress to become a playwright and a director. Her experience was not unusual.

In 1951, MGM released its splashy remake of Edna Ferber’s classic *Show Boat*. Even though Lena Horne had famously played Julie LaVerne in an excerpt of the piece filmed to be part of the review flick, *Till the Clouds Roll By*, a couple of years earlier, the part of the tragic mulatta was given to Ava Gardner, who couldn’t sing a lick. In fact, Horne claimed that the base makeup that the studio had prepared to lighten her complexion was then used to darken Gardner’s. (Waste not, want not.) The reason for the switch? Having Horne sing Julie was one thing, but MGM realized that the film could have been banned in the South for showing a Black woman and White man in a romantic relationship. Of course, that’s the essential plot of *Show Boat*, but as long as the mulatta was played by a White woman cunningly slathered with custom color all would be well in Dixie.

Childress spent her life combating such absurdities. In a 1974 interview in the *New York Amsterdam News*, Childress said, “The outstanding ill of American life is racism. And Black women are concerned with that. Not that their lives are more liberated than White women, only that this fight must come first.” When ***Trouble in Mind*** debuted in November of 1955, it was widely praised as dynamic and occasionally criticized as didactic, but today it functions not only as terrific theater-going but as dramatic testimony about a time whose rough edges we’ve willfully smoothed over. Today ***Trouble in Mind*** is documentary. ●

Strange Fruit

By Abel Meeropol

A photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith moved New York schoolteacher Abel Meeropol to write the haunting poem, “Strange Fruit.” He set it to music, and shortly thereafter it became the signature song of Blues great Billie Holiday.

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.



The performers who have recorded “Strange Fruit” include:

Billie Holiday
Nina Simone
Cassandra Wilson
Diana Ross
UB40
The Cocteau Twins
Carmen McRae
Dee Dee Bridgewater
Lou Rawls
Terence Blanchard
Jimmy Scott
Dinah Washington

HAM on Wry

The Serious Fun of The Rehearsal Comedy

by Catherine Sheehy, Production Dramaturg

With the possible exception of hotdogs, people love to know how things are made. A quick glance at the offerings of basic cable, from the Food Network's *Unwrapped* to *The Operation* on the Learning Channel, will confirm this. Among the oldest forms of such exposé is the rehearsal comedy; this is perhaps why the act of revealing the secrets of any profession is spoken of in theatrical terms: "pulling back the curtain," a "behind-the-scenes look," "tearing the mask off." Alice Childress pointedly called *Trouble in Mind* a "Comedy Drama," but, as we'll see, almost all rehearsal comedies are up to something not only serious but often outright subversive.

The genre to which the backstage play belongs has long been known as *metatheater*; recently, however, theorists have rechristened the form *theatricalism*. A rose by any other name.... So what is the metatheatrical or theatricalist impulse? It is calling an audience's attention to the theatrical event itself, to make them aware of the artists' act of "authoring" the event, and of themselves in the act of watching it. This keeps an audience from that dangerous state, credulity. Theatricalism is artful self-consciousness deployed to arouse the consciousness of the spectator. Plays that employ this strategy are most often comedies because, as an ironically self-critical act, theatricalism *tends* toward satire.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the heyday of the genre in English came during the Restoration and 18th Century as Renaissance humanism was spinning into the Enlightenment, as the drab Puritan government of Oliver Cromwell failed in favor of the

far more theatrically interesting monarchy—which in turn would be curbed by the famously performative politics of the British Parliament, first with its overweening Prime Ministers from Walpole to Pitt, then with flamboyant orators like Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who actually rose to prominence as a playwright. From the safe remove and plausible deniability of writing about the theater, authors gleefully threw stones at the government, until Henry Fielding awakened the giant with his irreverent missiles. Parliament passed the Licensing Act of 1737, which institutionalized censorship and put Fielding firmly on the path to novel writing.

Sometimes the genre is used to mingle the realms of our "real life" and the fictional drama, thus calling into question the authority or truth of both worlds. Spanish Golden Age dramatists in the long shadow of the Inquisition might in this way examine the validity and viability of the Catholic Church's worldview or their country's arcane code of honor. Calderon's *Great Theater of the World* is such a theatricalist foray.

Often dramatists will crank the device like a can opener to display the comic foibles of the human character. This use is, of course, causally related to the previous two, because human foibles are at the heart of political and doctrinaire failings. Here Shakespeare's *Midsummer* mechanicals, Peter Quince, Snug the Joiner, and Bottom the Weaver, with their theatrical aspirations, share the stage with the melancholy Danish prince-turned-playwright, who knows that "the play's the thing to catch the conscience of the king."

Alice Childress uses the genre in *Trouble in Mind* in all three ways. Certainly—certainly she is making a political statement with her play. She sought to make political statements with all her work. From the relatively and deceptively comfortable (for her audience) remove of the play-within-the-play technique,

CREAM PUFF

A Quiz about the Art Inside the Art

It's a common device—the play-within-the-play (or film)—a work that lives only in the heart of another work. In *Trouble in Mind*, the actors are rehearsing a play called *Chaos in Belleville*, and though we only hear snippets of *Chaos*, we feel we know it very well by evening's end. Here's a little quiz to test your knowledge of the phenomenon. Can you name the play or film in which each fictional work is mentioned?

1. *Enchanted April*—This weeper plunked down in the middle of a Kaufman and Ferber comedy gave Katharine Hepburn her oft-imitated line, "The calla lilies are in bloom."
2. *God of Our Fathers*—This collaboration between a nebbish and a mobster is almost marred by a moll who can't act.
3. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—This is the serious art film near and dear to the heart of a successful Hollywood hack during the height of the Depression.
4. *Pretty Lady*—When the star goes down, a sweet chorine goes on and "comes back a star."
5. *Nothing On*—There's something fishy about this frenetic farce. Could it be a plate of sardines?
6. *Gestapo*—A Polish theater company takes on the German army one gag at a time. Will the Führer really end up as a piece of cheese?
7. *The Passion*—Oscar Jaffe wants to regain his Midas touch by reuniting with Lily Garland. He'll even bring in German actors and sand from the Holy Land.
8. *The Mousetrap*—This is a Danish rewrite of an old classic, *The Murder of Gonzago*.
9. *The Dueling Cavalier*—This period picture gets the full musical treatment with the advent of talkies.

...“pulling back the curtain,” a “behind-the-scenes look,” “tearing the mask off”...

Childress lays open the most self-satisfied layer of American society—the White liberal who believes himself free from prejudice, and congratulates himself on the accomplishment continually. It is ironic that a play taking as its very subject the tyrannous exclusion of unfiltered representation of Black life should itself be kept from a promised (and announced in *The New York Times*) Broadway engagement because the producers demanded sunnier narrative outcomes than Childress could bring herself to write.

This brings us to the second method of metatheatrical technique: the confusion of realms, the destabilization of the real. It is Childress' triumph in *Trouble* that she manages such a feat for both the play's audience and for her main character onstage. After a very funny scene in which Millie and Wiletta bemoan the ridiculous dialogue they've been forced to spout by the White authors who write them nothing but stereotypical straitjackets, Wiletta is brought up short when she hears herself actually saying a line from *Chaos in Belleville* in her “real” life. She realizes that she is always performing, even when not onstage, for a White audience. She comes to understand firsthand what W.E.B. DuBois in his *Souls of Black Folks* called “double-consciousness”:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

After Wiletta is awakened to her internal confinement, she spends the rest of the play opposing it. She dogs the director

with a plea to allow her to be real onstage, a mother not a mammy. She even goads him into a confession that he knows the play they're working on “is a lie.” Wiletta's first moments with the naïve John, a young actor who hasn't experienced racial prejudice in the same way as the older company members, are spent giving him acting lessons for real life. She admits it's “Tommish,” but pragmatism dictates that however the White man likes his Black man must be the standard: bright but not too smart, congenial but not too familiar, complacent and just a little bit grateful for the grudging and tenuous equality the White man has graciously granted him. This is a textbook lesson in double-consciousness. After her awakening, however, Wiletta repudiates the lesson: “I told this boy to laugh and grin at everything you said, well...I ain't laughin'.”

As for having a laugh at human failings, *Trouble in Mind* makes full use of the metatheatrical situation to mine a rich vein (or perhaps, considering these are theaterfolk, the word should be vain). Childress begins with types her audience can recognize in a quick sketch and then she draws new life into them with her meticulous addition of detail. In such masterly hands, there's poignancy and just a little pain with each laugh.

When Alice Childress set her rehearsal play on a bare Broadway stage, she did it so we would never forget as we sat in the audience that we *were* an audience—don't just sit there and soak, think and change, she implored. Childress sought to trouble our minds. When she created Wiletta and Manners and Millie and Sheldon and John and Judy and Eddie and Bill and even Henry the doorman, such vivid characters so lively and so lifelike, she ensured that we would remember *Trouble in Mind* long after we'd left the theater. ●

10. *Godspeed*—A rube from Oswego penned this powerful drama about the deplorable conditions endured by miners. But if the producer can't dodge his hotel bill, the world will never see it.

11. *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*—The performance of this tragic love story is, to be fair, a little mechanical.

12. *The Spanish Armada*—Mr. Puff's soggy play about England's nautical heyday is sunk before it opens in this rehearsal comedy from the 18th Century.

13. *Springtime for Hitler*—Is there anyone who hasn't heard of this Max Bialystock recipe for failure?

14. *Red, White, and Blaine*—This pageant celebrating a stool-manufacturing, UFO-obsessed small town, directed by Corky St. Clair, has Broadway aspirations.

15. *Rochelle, Rochelle*—From the only TV show in the category, any fan will recognize this story of a young girl's erotic journey from Milan to Minsk.

1. Stage Door, 2. Bullets Over Broadway, 3. Sullivan's Travels, 4. 42nd Street, 5. Noises Off, 6. To Be or Not To Be, 7. Twentieth Century, 8. Hamlet, 9. Singin' in the Rain, 10. Room Service, 11. A Midsummer Night's Dream, 12. The Critic, 13. The Producers, 14. Waiting for Guffman, 15. Seinfeld
Photo: Thomas Ikeda in A Midsummer Night's Dream (1997-98)





"Still there's a hesitancy about how to handle racial things. It's an unpleasant topic, true, but that's no reason not to go through the discomfort."

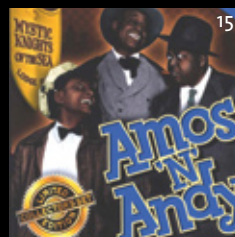
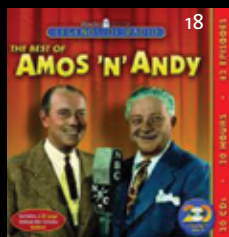
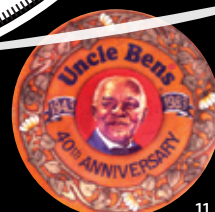
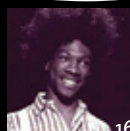
—Alice Childress



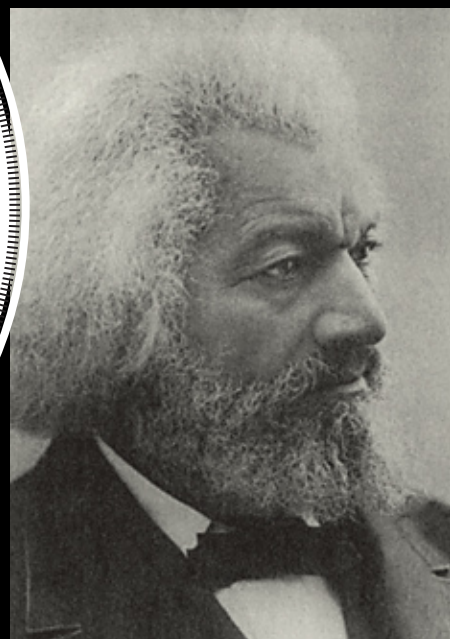
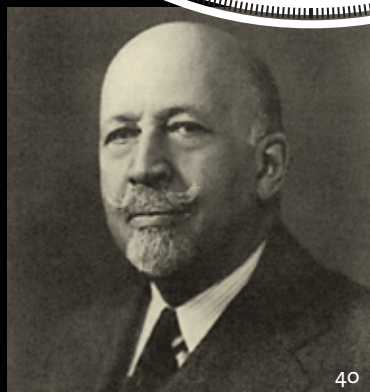
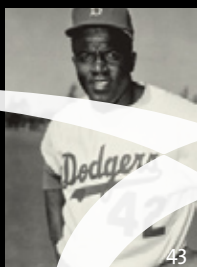
From Reel

by Catherine Sheehy, Production Dramaturg

Alice Childress could have been the first African American woman to have her play produced on Broadway, but when she balked at producers' demands for sunnier rewrites on *Trouble in Mind*, that honor went to Lorraine Hansberry and *A Raisin in the Sun* just two years later. Childress was, truth to tell, a little angered by the number of "firsts" left for African Americans to accomplish even in 1957. Less than two decades earlier, Hattie McDaniel had been the first Black actor to win an Academy Award, and even that was for putting flesh and blood on the world's most famous stereotype, Mammy in >>>



From top Left: 1. food packaging 2. Vaudeville troupe 3. Eddie Cantor in blackface 4. Hattie McDaniel in character 5. ad (Cream of Wheat) 6. food packaging (Aunt Jemima) 7. Shirley Temple & Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson 8. *Gone with The Wind* 9. *Song of the South* 10. Theater poster 11. rice tin 12. Minstrel show poster 13. Al Jolson sheet music 14. Stepin' Fetchit in *Carolina* 15. Amos 'n' Andy on TV 16. Eddie Murphy as Buckwheat 17. Buckwheat 18-20. Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, originators of "Amos 'n' Andy" 21. Shirley Temple & Bojangles 22. Angus Minstrels, 2004 23. Bert Williams in blackface 24. Eddie 'Rochester' Anderson



From top Left: 25. Shirley Chisholm 26. Miles Davis 27. Althea Gibson 28. Alain Locke 29. James P. Johnson 30. Wilma Rudolph 31. Bert Williams 32. Bessy Coleman 33. Benjamin Elijah Mays (President of Morehouse College) 34. Barbara Jordan 35. Frederick Douglass 36. Dizzy Gillespie 37. Paul Robeson 38. Thurgood Marshall 39. Rosa Parks 40. W.E.B. Du Bois 41. Buck O'Neill 42. Lena Horne & Count Basie 43. Jackie Robinson 44. John Coltrane 45. Hattie McDaniel accepting Oscar 46. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

to Real

Gone with the Wind. In her acceptance speech, McDaniel averred she hoped she was “a credit to her race.” It’s almost impossible to imagine a White actor feeling such pressure to represent an entire people.

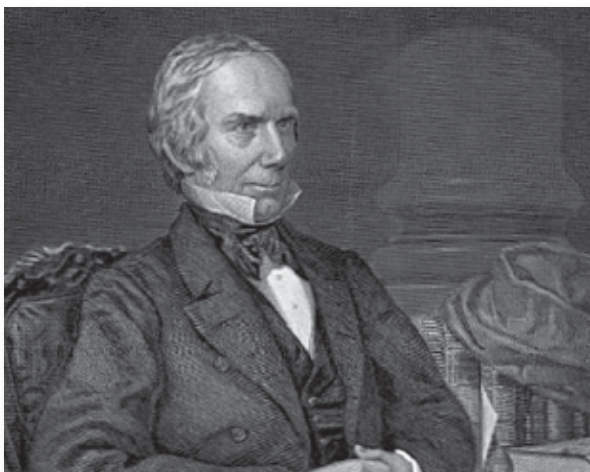
Childress lamented that most of the media—the airwaves, the silver screens, the Broadway houses, the printing presses, the galleries, etc.—were in White hands, and those producers, directors, publishers, and exhibitors controlled the image of African Americans in our popular culture. Here is a pictorial essay about the contrast between the reductive media message and the rich reality of the African American contribution to mid-century America. ●

GLOSSARY

THE WORLD OF RACE

Uncle Tommish, “Tom,” and “Jemima”—Uncle Tom is a pejorative term for an African American who is perceived as behaving subserviently towards Whites. The term comes from the title character of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In similar circumstances, women are sometimes referred to as *Aunt Jemima*, after the popular syrup and pancake mix that long depicted a stereotypical kerchief-headed family cook of that name.

Taking low—Swallowing one’s pride and accepting a subservient role by bowing to someone’s demands in order to take care of one’s needs. Sheldon defends his tendency to “take low” as necessary to his survival in the business; therefore, he considers that it’s not “Tomming.”



Henry Clay (1777–1852)—A leading American politician, Clay was a longtime Congressman, the founder of the Whig Party, and a leading advocate of programs to modernize the economy. Renowned for his exceptional abilities as a leader and orator, he was elected Speaker of the House six times and made that position second in power only to the president. Clay became known as the Great Compromiser because of his success in negotiating compromises on the slavery issue, especially The Missouri Compromise (1820) and the Compromise of 1850. Sympathizing with the plight of free Blacks, he believed that because of “unconquerable prejudice resulting from their color, they never could amalgamate with the free Whites of this country.” He tried to resolve racial integration through the American Colonization Society, a group that wanted to send freed slaves to Monrovia in Liberia, Africa. Renard’s speech at the top of Act II, made up mainly of quotes, sympathizes with Clay’s point of view and could therefore use any number of quotes from the famous orator; it is curious then that the quote he chooses here is “Sir, I would rather be right than be president.”



Montgomery, Alabama—

The Montgomery Bus Boycott, meant to oppose that city’s policy of racial segregation on its public transit system, lasted from December 5, 1955, to December 21, 1956, and led to a U.S. Supreme Court decision declaring segregated buses

unconstitutional. It was one of the first victories for the Civil Rights movement and gave Martin Luther King, Jr. the national attention that would make him one of the prime leaders of the cause. Triggered by the arrest of African American seamstress Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955—charged for violating racial segregation laws after refusing to give her bus seat to a White man—the citywide boycott of public transit would continue until the demands of the boycotters were met. These included courteous treatment by bus operators, first-come-first-served seating, and employment of African American bus drivers. The boycott proved extremely effective, with enough riders lost to the city transit system to cause serious economic distress. Across the nation, Black churches raised money to support the boycott and collected shoes to replace the tattered footwear of Montgomery’s Black citizens, many of whom walked everywhere rather than ride the buses and submit to Jim Crow laws. Opponents swelled the ranks of the White Citizens’ Council (doubling the membership during the boycott), which sometimes resorted to violence: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s house, Ralph Abernathy’s house, and four Baptist churches were firebombed, and boycotters were often physically attacked.

Tenant farmers/sharecroppers—A system of farm tenancy that arose at the end of the Civil War out of the plantation system. Many planters had ample land but little money for wages and no desire to pay the now-freed former slaves who had so recently been working for them at no cost. At the same time, most of the former slaves were uneducated and impoverished. The sharecropping system kept workers in the routine of cotton cultivation under rigid supervision. The labor was supplied by the cropper while most other requirements—land, animals, equipment, seed—were provided by the landlord, who generally also advanced credit to meet the living expenses of the cropper family. Normally in return for their work they received a share (usually half) of the money realized. From this share was deducted the debt to the landlord. High interest charges, emphasis on production of a single cash crop, slipshod accounting, and chronic cropper irresponsibility were among the abuses of the system, making it a cycle of continued near-poverty practically impossible to escape and sometimes barely an improvement over conditions before Abolition. >>>

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Lynching—A form of vigilantism, usually carried out by an incensed mob for actual, perceived, or completely invented infractions that have ranged in seriousness from rape and murder to small acts of disrespect. Though lynching has sometimes been justified by its supporters as the administration of “swift” justice, victims of lynching have often been members of groups marginalized or vilified by society. Lynch Law cast its worst pall over the U.S. from the mid-19th to the mid-20th centuries, especially but not exclusively in the South. The Ku Klux Klan and many others used lynching as a means to terrorize and paralyze Black populations socially, economically, and politically in support of a racially supremacist status quo. In 1954, as Childress was writing her play, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Chicago boy visiting relatives in Mississippi, was viciously beaten and drowned, and his corpse mutilated, for allegedly whistling at a White woman. Published pictures of his open-casket funeral created a storm of outrage throughout the United States.

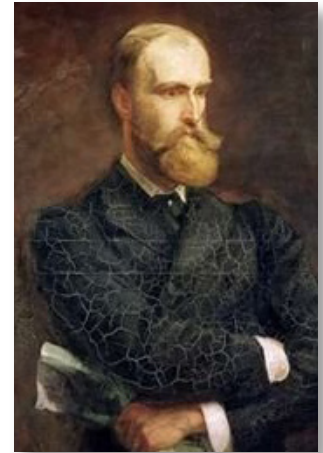


“Throwin’ stones at little children, got to call out the militia to go to school.”—On September 4, 1957, when Little Rock’s Central High School was to be integrated, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called out the National Guard to prevent the nine African American students from attending the previously all-White school for the first time. To attend class, the nine had to carpool to school; get a military escort; pass through a spitting, jeering gauntlet; and endure harassment from classmates. Although federal troops escorted them between classes, they were still teased and even attacked when the soldiers weren’t around. Indeed, one of the so-called Little Rock Nine, Minnijean Brown, was expelled for dumping a bowl of chili on the head of a White student harassing her in the school lunch line. Only one of them got the chance to graduate; when the 1957-58 school year was over, the Little Rock school system voted to shut down completely rather than continue to integrate, and other schools across the South followed suit.

HOME RULE

Charles Stewart Parnell—

Regarded as one of the most extraordinary figures in Irish and British politics, Parnell was an Irish political leader and member of the British Parliament. He single-handedly invented the modern political party, restructuring the Home Rule League to become the Irish Parliamentary Party. A passionate advocate, historians speculate that had Parnell lived longer, Home Rule might have been achieved a decade earlier than it was—and wonder whether this would in turn have meant that there would have been no Easter Rising, no Irish War of Independence, no decades-long violent struggle against British rule, and no independent Ireland. Parnell’s moniker, the “uncrowned king of Ireland,” stemming from his enormous impact on the political landscape, and his untimely death (at the age of 45) created of him an almost mythical figure, remembered for years to come by Irishmen like Henry the stage-door man.



Home Rule—The statutory award of power from a central government to a government at a lesser level. This power may be temporary and can be repealed in the same way as an ordinary statute. The issue of Irish Home Rule was the dominant question of British politics at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th Centuries. From the late 19th Century, leaders of the Irish Parliamentary Party had demanded a form of Home Rule, with the creation of a subsidiary Irish Parliament within the United Kingdom (replacing the Irish Parliament that existed up to the Act of Union in 1800). This demand led to the eventual introduction of four Irish Home Rule Bills, of which only the final one was enacted in 1920. This Act created the six county parliaments of Northern Ireland and the 26 county parliaments of Southern Ireland—though the latter became the Irish Free State in 1922.

Parliamentarian—A member of the Irish Parliamentary Party, which advocated Home Rule for Ireland.

[William] Gladstone, [John] Dillon, John Redmond—British prime minister, Irish nationalist politician, and a leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, all supporters of Irish Home Rule. Gladstone introduced and re-introduced the Home Rule Bill for Ireland while serving as Prime Minister, but Parliament vetoed it both times. >>>

GLOSSARY

Continued

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THE WORLD AT LARGE



“Take Egypt, Russia, all these countries”—Another of Childress’ topical allusions, making her play current with the news of its day. A reference to the Suez Crisis of 1956—when Israel, with British and French support, faced off against Egypt over control of the Suez Canal. Russia and the U.S. were drawn in as a more local confrontation threatened to become a world-wide crisis, and the United Nations Security Council tried with limited effect to negotiate peace.

“Take the U.N.”—Founded in 1945 in the aftermath of World War II, the United Nations was winding up a fraught first decade when Childress wrote *Trouble in Mind*. Formed to maintain international peace and security, develop friendly relations among nations on equal terms, and encourage international cooperation in solving intractable human problems, the U.N. had already been drawn into such intractable global struggles as the Cold War—by intervening in Korea—and the Arab-Israeli conflict—by recognizing Israel and trying with limited success to resolve the Suez Crisis. Now the U.N. was poised to plunge into decolonization struggles throughout Africa.

“I thought you had the ‘tomic bomb”—The atom bomb, or A-bomb, was first developed and deployed by the U.S. in 1945, when devices were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the conclusion of World War II. The nuclear arms race this prompted led to the Soviet Union acquiring atomic capability in 1949; by the time *Trouble in Mind* opened, Britain had joined this elite membership, with France not far behind. Fears of the destructive force and radioactive aftermath of an atomic attack fueled military, civil defense, political, and cultural

responses through the 50’s—from Strategic Air Command to fallout shelters, from the much-debated execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for selling atomic secrets to the Russians to drop-and-cover drills in elementary schools.

“...planning to name me”; “we’re all good Americans”;

“Investigation”—All not-so-subtle reflections of one of the hottest political topics of the time, the anti-Communist witch hunts of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the ongoing investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Even in the terror-fuelled new reality of the Patriot Act and warrantless wiretaps, it is difficult to conceive and often hard to recall the fear and fervor that prompted, sustained, and emanated from these inquiries. As reflected in the play from Childress’ own personal experience (after all, she had an FBI file of her own and was briefly surveilled), investigations calling into question people’s loyalties or possible subversive activities grew more widespread, moving from the government to Hollywood and the entertainment industry, clergy, schools, and the burgeoning Civil Rights movement. As one historian wrote, both HUAC and McCarthy made use of “sweeping accusations, hearings in which being questioned or even mentioned became an indication of guilt, pressure on witnesses to name their former associates, and an assumption that association with a suspect organization proved one’s disloyalty.” Public figures were not immune, and many careers were ruined by the mere whiff of suspicion; taking part in an artistically and politically charged project like *Chaos in Belleville* would have entailed a very real risk for the cast and crew of Childress’ fictional production.

Bridgeport—Though today we may associate Bridgeport with its post-industrial decline and a legacy of bankruptcy and other urban woes, this once-thriving city was, in the late 50s, still in its heyday as a defense manufacturing center. Populous, relatively diverse, and somewhat progressive, Bridgeport and its suburbs would have been a less unlikely and more receptive locale for the mixed barbecue Judy proposes—more likely than neighboring Westport, say, or other nearby Connecticut enclaves.

Cold-water walk-up—The classic bohemian badge of honor, the living conditions of the struggling artist—especially in New York—for many years. An apartment often only one step up from squatting but many steps up from the street, with no elevator service; no access to hot water (nor necessarily with private bath or toilet facilities of its own at all); and maybe questionable heating, cooking, or other basic amenities. These dwellings could include anything from a former industrial space before gentrification to tiny former tenement rooms. >>>

GLOSSARY

Continued

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THE WORLD OF THEATER

Stage-door Man—In Henry, the venerable Irish stage door man, Childress includes one of the staples of a bygone theatrical world—and a common fixture in backstage dramas, musicals, novels, and movies. Always, there'd be an aging former technician or stagehand serving as doorman, concierge, receptionist, handyman, and general dogsbody.

Yale Drama Course—Indeed, while women were not admitted to Yale College as undergraduates until 1969, there were women at the newly constituted Yale School of Drama in 1956, when *Trouble in Mind* premiered. Another example of Childress writing right up to the moment in her topical allusions, as only in 1955 did Yale formally create the separate professional school for theater.

“All right, Barrymore, just read it.”—Manners mocks his assistant, Eddie, for trying to read lines from the script with accent and attitude, teasing him for aspiring to be a member of that great family of American theater, the Barrymores: Ethel, John, and Lionel.



Old Galy Theater—Probably Childress' riff on the old Daly's theaters, jewels of the theatrical empire of writer/producer Augustin Daly. Founded on a steady diet of melodramas, European imports, and innovative productions of Shakespeare,

they would have also featured curtain-raising acts and vaudeville sketches like Henry's hat-tipping father and musical revues like the one Henry remembers featuring Wiletta Mayer.

Brownskin Melody—Just such a musical variety show, based probably on such legendary successes as Lew Leslie's *Blackbird* revues and their derivatives. These compilations of singing and dancing, featuring some of the leading Black performers of the day, drew enormous crowds in New York from the 1920s and '30s onward.

“The last revival of *Porgy and Bess*”—Originally produced in 1935 to critical acclaim but commercial failure, this Gershwin classic, adapted from a novel and later play, was revived on Broadway in 1942 and 1953. This latter revival featured William Warfield, Leontyne Price, and Cab Calloway and just preceded the premiere of *Trouble in Mind*. Filled with elements of Black church music and jazz as well as Jewish chords from Gershwin's own background, the magisterial work has elicited debate since its inception, from its generic status (musical or opera) to its portrayal of Black life (demeaning stereotypes or folk portraits). In 1959, a few years after *Trouble in Mind* premiered, Otto Preminger filmed *Porgy and Bess*; the movie starred Sidney Poitier; Sammy Davis, Jr.; Pearl Bailey; and Dorothy Dandridge.

Character parts—Though the director refers to this in a more generic way, in the sense of a supporting rather than principal role, Wiletta takes it up from a more specific and fraught understanding. For her it refers to the array of stereotypical and archetypal roles she and her African American colleagues have been called on to fill on stage and screen. It becomes for her a euphemism for caricature, for the litany of mammies and porters and nurses and maids and bellhops she can and does reel off. Even a quick glance on www.imdb.com at the repertory of such accomplished performers as Hattie McDaniel, Butterfly McQueen, Charles Moore, or Fred “Snowflake” Toones reveals just what she means.

Passin' for white—Referring to the then-common practice of lighter-skinned African Americans passing, or being accepted as members of the White community. This was also a phenomenon in theater and the arts generally, and functioned as well in reverse—while some light-skinned performers were able to get work acceptably, if they were willing to make that accommodation, artists like Alice Childress were at times deemed too light-skinned for some projects.

PSALM 23 VS. PSALM 133

Psalm 23, sometimes known as the Shepherd Psalm, is perhaps the best-known psalm and has been set to music a number of times. Most people who have any part of the Bible memorized will have memorized this psalm. Its theme casts God in the role of protector and provider. When urged by Henry to recite Psalm 23, Wiletta opts instead for Psalm 133, which speaks to the unity of man.

Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Psalm 133:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments;

As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore. ●

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Trouble in Mind

Wedding Band

String

Wine in the Wilderness

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Mojo

Gullah

Young Adult Novels

A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich

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