

---

# The Colored Museum Study Guide

---

Ball State University 2006-2007

---

Provided by the Department of  
Theatre and Dance Performance

Compiled by Chelsea Picken

# Table of Contents

---

About the Author	2
Synopsis	4
Themes and Topics to Explore	5
Vocabulary Words	7
The Characters	8
About the Creators	9
Production History	9
Ball State University's Production	9
Designer's Notes	10
Director's Notes	11

# About the Author

## George C. Wolfe

George C. Wolfe was born in Frankfort, Kentucky, on September 23, 1954. As an African American, he experienced segregation in Frankfort but because of the close-knit black community, he hardly experienced much difference in the cultures. The loving attention he received from his family always assured him that he was extraordinary and special, not inferior to the predominant white people in the city. It wasn't until Wolfe was seven that he first took racism head on. He was denied a ticket to see the Disney film *101 Dalmations* at a theater in his hometown. Wolfe attended an all black private school, until his family moved him to an integrated high school, in which he felt very isolated. He couldn't seek happiness or acceptance until he tried his hand at directing for his high school's theatre department. Wolfe would say that he was "obsessed with theatre" and it showed on his face when he saw his first Broadway show, *Hello Dolly!* Since that experience, George started writing his own plays. When he graduated from high school, he furthered his education by attending Kentucky State University, and later Pomona College in Claremont, California, to study theatre.

At Pomona College, Wolfe wrote a number of plays and many went on to theatre festivals to win awards. When he graduated in 1976, he remained in California to teach theatre to inner city students, and to produce his plays among these artists. His time in Los Angeles taught him many life lessons that expanded his views beyond the small town where he grew up. He learned about the inner city conflicts among many peoples, including African Americans, Hispanics, Asians and homosexuals. A few years later, Wolfe packed up his life on the west coast and decided to give the east coast a chance. He relocated to the New York City and he taught theatre at City College and the Richard Allen Center for Cultural Art. At the same time, he studied at New York University and was granted his masters degree in dramatic writing in 1983. Wolfe's musical debut off-Broadway, *Paradise*, was a flop; he quickly got back on his feet when *The Colored Museum* fell into the hands of the director of the New York Shakespeare Festival, Joseph Papp. That summer, *The Colored Museum* began its early run in the Public Theater. Although the critics loved the show, many patrons were offended by the controversial topics expressed in the play. Wolfe won the Dramatists' Guild's Elizabeth Hull-Kate Warriner Award for the best play dealing with

social, religious or political topics. Following the run of *The Colored Museum*, Director Papp invited Wolfe to be the Public Theater's resident director.

George C. Wolfe knew he had made it big when he grabbed eleven Tony nominations for his musical *Jelly's Last Jam*. Up until this point, the actors he had worked with had been mostly African-American, but that soon changed when he was asked to direct the Broadway premier of Tony Kushner's much-acclaimed AIDS play *Angels in America: The Millennium Approaches*. This masterpiece earned him another Tony award, and made him the first African-American director to win this award for directing a "white" play. The production earned an additional three Tony Awards, five Drama Desk Awards and the New York Drama Critics Award. One of the Drama Desk Awards was given to Mr. Wolfe for best director in a play.

Wolfe's mentor, Joseph Papp passed away in 1991; Wolfe was subsequently named the producer and artistic director of the Public. His objective has always been to include the conflicts faced by all modern day Americans into this creative spirit; which includes Hispanics, Asians, and homosexuals.

Most recently, George C. Wolfe directed the Broadway musical *Caroline, or Change* and received the Pulitzer Prize in 2002 for drama. He later decided to end his career at the Public and pursue his life as a film director. In 2005, his film *Lackawanna Blues* made it to the Sundance Film Festival where it gained great respect.

# Synopsis

## The Play

*The Colored Museum* satirizes the black experience in America in the 1980's. Although the play is controversial, its comedy is found through satirical, exaggerated images of black life. *The Colored Museum* accentuates the extreme stereotypes of blacks by splitting the show up into eleven vignettes, or museum exhibits. The exhibits include: *Git on Board*, *Cookin' with Aunt Ethel*, *The Photo Session*, *A Soldier with a Secret*, *The Gospel According to Miss Roj*, *The Hairpiece*, *The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play*, *Symbiosis*, *Lala's Opening*, *Permutations* and *The Party*.

# Themes and Topics to Explore

## Discussion Questions

### ***Racism***

- 1.) The opening exhibit, "Git on Board," caused the public to stir when this previewed in 1986. How does Miss Pat evoke racism in this scene? Why do you think viewers were so bothered, or why might patrons still be bothered today?

### ***Social Recognition***

- 1.) In "The Gospel According to Miss Roj" what do you think snapping your fingers represents?

### ***Stereotypes***

- 1.) In "The Gospel According to Miss Roj" how does Miss Roj's attitude change when she discusses her thoughts on homosexuality? Do you believe she is confident and upset? Or insecure and embarrassed?
- 2.) In "The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play," what is Lady in Plaid addressing when she recites her poem when she first enters the stage? Why does she choose to ignore Son when he tries to talk to her? What tactic is used to finally get through to Lady?

### ***Storytelling***

- 1.) What message is Aunt Ethel trying to convey in "Cookin' with Aunt Ethel" and why do you think George C. Wolfe decided to incorporate such a joyful sounding song with these lyrics?
- 2.) Through Normal Jean's endearing story "Permutations," how does she evoke passion? Why do you think she believed in her unrealistic, supernatural happening?

### ***Class Distinction***

- 1.) How did Girl and Guy benefit from being glamorous in "The Photo Session?" Do you believe they missed the life in which they had feelings and emotions? If yes, why?

### ***Prejudice and Pain***

- 1.) Why did Junie choose to kill his fellow soldiers in "A Soldier with a Secret?" How does the story begin? How does the tone change as it continues?

**Family Roles**

- 1.) What kind of relationship does the Kid and the Man have in "Symbiosis?" Why does the Man desperately want to erase his son from his memory? How does the Kid respond to this?

**Self Worth**

- 1.) What are the advantages and disadvantages of wearing the afro wig in "The Hairpiece?" What about the straight wig?
- 2.) Describe the symbolic elements in "Lala's Opening." Why did Lala deny what was actually behind the closet door? Describe who Lala was when she was "performing." Describe who Lala became when her wig was removed.
- 3.) In "The Party," what is Topsy's motivation to express the maddening life she possesses? How does she feel about life and her place in the world? What is her philosophy on how to live?

**Satire**

- 1.) Why do you believe George C. Wolfe decided to dress a man in drag for "The Gospel According to Miss Roj?" How would the exhibit change if the character were played by a woman?
- 2.) Mama claims that her son wouldn't have been shot if he had been part of an all black musical in "The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play." Why does she think this? Why do you believe he was murdered in the first place? Why do you think George C. Wolfe chose to make this exhibit, which could be offensive, a satire?

# Vocabulary Words

## Words to Define and Discuss

**Shackle:** a round metal band that can be opened or locked in order to hold the wrist or ankle of a captive, usually attached by chains in pairs

**Oppressed:** to subject a person or a people to a harsh or cruel form of domination; a source of worry, stress or trouble to somebody

**Contradictions:** something that contains parts of inconsistent with each other; a statement that opposes or disagrees with somebody or something

**Oblivion:** a state of being utterly forgotten

**Debased:** to reduce something in value or quality; to reduce somebody's status, significance, or moral worth

**Tenement:** a large residential building in a city

**Vespers:** an evening church service

**Anguish:** extreme anxiety or emotional torment

**Countenance:** somebody's face or the expression on it; composure or self-control

**Infiltrated:** to cross or send somebody into enemy territory without the enemy's knowledge

**Transcended:** to go beyond a limit or range, for example, of thought or belief

**Insinuations:** something unpleasant artfully and indirectly suggested to another person

**Symbiosis:** a cooperative, mutually beneficial relationship between two people or groups

**Existentialism:** 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical movement that denies that the universe has any intrinsic meaning or purpose and requires individuals to take responsibility for their own actions and shape their own destinies

**Satire:** the use of wit, especially irony, sarcasm, and ridicule, to attack the vices and follies of humankind

# The Characters

**Miss Pat:** "Git on Board"  
**Aunt Ethel:** "Cookin' with Aunt Ethel"  
**Guy:** "The Photo Session"  
**Girl:** "The Photo Session"  
**Junie:** "A Soldier with a Secret"  
**Miss Roj:** "The Gospel According to Miss Roj"  
**Janine:** "The Hairpiece"  
**LaWanda:** "The Hairpiece"  
**Woman:** "The Hairpiece"  
**Narrator:** "The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play"  
**Mama:** "The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play"  
**Son:** "The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play"  
**Lady in Plaid:** "The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play"  
**Medea Jones:** "The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play"  
**Man:** "Symbiosis"  
**Kid:** "Symbiosis"  
**Lala:** "Lala's Opening"  
**Admonia:** "Lala's Opening"  
**Normal Jean:** "Permutations"  
**Topsy Washington:** "The Party"

## The First Production

- n Rick M. Khan: executive director of *The Colored Museum's* world premier, and co-founder of the Crossroad Theatre Company.
- n Lee Kenneth Richardson: artistic director of *The Colored Museum's* world premier, and most recently film actor. Richardson directed at the New York Shakespeare Festival when the show first previewed.

## Production History

- n Premiered at the Crossroad Theatre Company on March 26, 1986.
- n Previewed at Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival on October 7, 1986

## Ball State University's Production

- n Premiered February 15, 2006 and ran through February 24, 2006 in University Theatre
- n Directed by Dwandra Nickole Lampkin
- n Cast included: Chadae McAllister, Andrew Shade, Yutopia Essex, Dan Cesar, Christine Harrison, Brandaun Allen, Aubrey Baumgartner, Brian Harrison, Dee Dee Batteast, Kwame Micah, Keenan Harris, Joshua Moaney

# Designer's Notes

## **Kristin Sartor: Costumes**

"I'm very excited to be a part of this production. This is the biggest production I've ever designed, and I think the Colored Museum is an important show for us [Ball State] to do. For the costumes, I wanted to keep them in historical context but at the same time, have some fun with some of the characters (like miss Roj!)."

# Director's Notes

## Dwandra Lampkin: Director

### **Why this play? Did you feel especially connected to the text when you first read/saw the play?**

Why this play indeed? A month after graduating from Western Michigan University in 1994, I was asked to be in a production of *The Colored Museum*. I'd never heard of the play, but accepted the offer blindly, because I was dying to work with this particular director. Well, after reading the play, I was blown away! I had never read such a provocative, raw, and in your face piece as *The Colored Museum*. As a young actor, I don't know if I fully knew how profound this play was. Following an extremely challenging and rewarding rehearsal process, I had grown both personally and creatively. Of course, as time went on and I let my experience of *The Colored Museum* "marinate", I realized just how amazing the piece was, and it's stayed with me over the years.

### **Did you choose to direct this production at Ball State for a reason?**

Absolutely! After being asked to direct here at Ball State, I then had to ask myself "What piece of theatre do I want to spend four months (if not more) of my creative life with? What story do I want to eat, sleep, and breathe night after night in the rehearsal process? Moreover, what piece do I think can/will make an impact on the students in the Department of Theatre and Dance?" I briefly entertained the thought of doing *The Colored Museum* but quickly dismissed the thought due to the very rawness that I spoke of earlier. After dismissing the thought of *The Colored Museum*, I found myself filing through my mental library of other plays that I have loved, and respected. After much thought, and consideration, and not much success coming up with other alternatives, I spoke to a few friends who are also in the business (actors and directors). I mentioned the thought of doing *The Colored Museum*, and after some very long discussions, I then knew that *The Colored Museum* was the piece to do. I simply had to consider what my options were as far as casting the piece, and what it would mean (if anything) to the Ball State University community, and Muncie community as well to have a show like this done.

**Did you have any preconceived notions before heading into auditions?**

Preconceived notions? Not really. I knew that there were students who were excited about the show, and that were interested in being a part of it. They knew that I was considering doing some “non-traditional” casting, so I had no doubt that those who were truly interested would bring their ‘A’ game to auditions.

**How did you plan to cast a show that was written for African Americans when our department is just beginning to become diverse? What were/are your feelings on colorblind casting?**

As you know, *The Colored Museum* is traditionally done with only five actors (all of which are African American). However, since this show consists of nearly 20 characters, it was a perfect opportunity to spread the wealth, if you will, so that more students in the department could be a part of this show. Therefore, I knew early on that I had “room to play” when it came to casting this show. Yes, our department is just beginning to become diverse, however, when I started teaching here two and a half years ago, doing this play wouldn’t have been an option, unless of course I decided to cast the majority of the show “color blindly.”

**What were/are your feelings on colorblind casting?** The term “colorblind casting” has been brought up to me quite a bit in reference to the casting I’ve done. I’m quick to clarify that I’ve not done any “color blind” casting in the show. When one casts “color blindly” one is often saying to the actors and the audience “pay less attention to what you ‘see’ (color that is) and more attention to the story”. I think that there are and have been many successful theatre productions that have been cast “color blindly,” however, a play such as *The Colored Museum* (in my opinion) is not one that should ever be done that way. I believe that it would completely defeat the purpose of what George C. Wolfe intended. *The Colored Museum* is a play that is saturated with issues of race, stereotypes, and cultural misgivings. To erase any color would be detrimental to the story. On the other hand, let’s consider the term “non traditional casting”, casting a piece differently than how it’s traditionally cast. That’s more along the lines of what I’ve done. Once I knew that I had the freedom to cast more than five people, I then started to envision how the play could be done with the possibility of some non-traditional casting. I wanted to find a way to incorporate some of our non-African American theatre students in the production as well, while still staying true to the story that George C. Wolfe is trying to tell. I

believe that I have accomplished that and I couldn't be more pleased with the actors I've cast. Choosing to cast *The Colored Museum* non-traditionally may shake things up a bit; my goal is to get folks talking, thinking, and asking questions. I think it's important that theatre be entertaining, but I also think it's equally important for it to inform on some level or another.

**From a variety of reviews, the content in *The Colored Museum* has been viewed as racist or humorous. How have you decided to manage that fine line with a group of college actors, and how do you personally view the material? What words would you use to describe the piece?**

Some of the words that I would use to describe this piece is SMART, RAW, IN YOUR FACE, and UN-APOLOGETIC. Is it humorous, (absolutely), racist (no, not in my opinion). Because George C. Wolfe is so brilliant in his writing, I don't necessarily feel as if I have to "manage" any fine lines. He does that for us. The fact that this is a college production only means that it will be done partially from their perspective. When one decides to do *The Colored Museum*, there is no way to tiptoe around the subject matter. This piece has been deemed controversial (to say the least), the key for me as a director is to get the audience to be open enough to receive the piece despite any pre-conceived notions, and without instantly shutting down at the first sign of discomfort due to the subject matter. My work is cut out for me, but I never find joy in the process if there isn't struggle involved.

**Did auditions go as you would have liked them to?** Because the first set of auditions were so broad (seeing as actors were "generally" auditioning for a number of plays) they went exactly as I expected. However, callbacks were another story. I called back over thirty-five actors, with the idea of casting approximately 15 or so. Before I began the callbacks, I briefly said to the actors, "Callbacks are the opportunity for you to take the part, to claim the part. Don't make my decision an easy one!" They took my words to heart. They made my job extremely difficult. So many of them came to the callbacks fighting for each role, therefore casting it wasn't an easy task. I was very proud of all the actors. Therefore, to answer your first question, auditions went *better* than I expected.

**What are your reasons why you cast specific actors in specific roles?** To put it simply, each person in this show earned his or her roles. They came into the

callback process and brought their "A" game. Some brought their "B" game, but in the process rose to the occasion. One of the great rewards of working with talented people is that they raise the bar, and in turn, they make other actors do the same. Make no mistake about it, anyone who knows anything about the way that I view the creative process, knows that for me, an actor's work ethic is as important as his or her talent. I have an extremely talented cast; they all know that as actors while you may earn your roles, the work doesn't stop there, you must work to keep them. If you can't handle the responsibility that comes with being in a production there is always someone waiting in the wings who can. However, I'm looking forward to working with the cast I've chosen, and I believe they are equally excited as well.

**Can you explain some of your visual expectations for *The Colored***

***Museum***? The one thing that I can tell you regarding my visual expectations is this: When the audience walks into the space, I want it to be un-assuming. I don't want the space, or the environment to tell the story; I want the actors to tell the story. The audience should feel invited into the world as they walk into the theatre, however, they should not assume to "know the world", based on what they walk into.

**What do you want out of the designers?** I've shared more in-depth thoughts with my designers than what I mentioned above, and they've been a wonderful bunch to collaborate with. I could not have been blessed with designers that are more talented. I'm looking forward to seeing their concepts come to life. They will contribute brilliantly to the story.

**How do you feel about producing a show in University Theatre? Would you have originally chosen another venue?** Ideally, I would have liked the play to be done in Strother Theatre. However, due to scheduling etc, it was put in the University Theatre. It is a piece that I think the audience needs to be close to, however, due to the fact that I have such a talented designers, I believe I'll be able to come close to accomplishing the same intimacy in University Theatre as I would have in Strother. Therefore, I've embraced the idea of doing it in larger space.

**Do you feel connected to any of the exhibits in particular? If so, which ones and why?**

I have an affinity to each of the exhibits for different reasons. There is something in each of them that I can either personally relate to, and/or directly or indirectly understand, and I hope that the audience (despite race, color, and culture) will find their own personal connections as well. When I did this play twelve years ago, I was about the same age as most of the cast is now, and I look forward to seeing them discover this world as I did. It's also exciting to see Dee Dee take on two of the roles that I did, things are truly coming full circle.