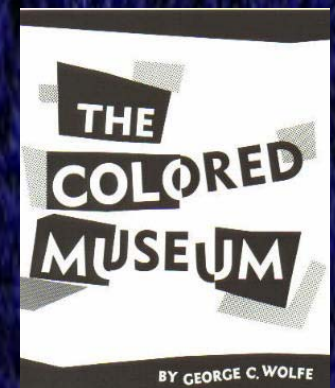


# The Colored Museum

by George C. Wolfe



A dramaturgical presentation by Kylie McCormick

# George C. Wolfe

- Born September 23, 1954
- Raised in a segregated city, with a tight community – no notion of racial inferiority
- Studied theater in both college and high school
- Artistic Director at the Public Theater in New York City (1993-2004)
- Most of his work focuses on racial or political issues, including *The Colored Museum*.
- His main goals in theater are to produce works with a multicultural cast and have a culturally diverse audience.



# Historical Background

- In 1985, George C. Wolfe wrote *Paradise* which was a failure in theatre terms.
- However, his come back came in 1986, when he completed *The Colored Museum*.
- Some black Americans still view the play as anti-black.
- It won the Dramatists' Guild's Elizabeth Hull-Kate Warriner Award, which is awarded to the best play with a controversial religious, political, or social topic.
- However, *The Colored Museum*, while famous, is not considered his best work. His best-known work is *Jelly's Last Jam*, which went up in 1991. It was about a jazz musician.

# Overview of the Play

- *The Colored Museum* employs the embracing of stereotypes associated with black Americans while making fun of them.
- Each of the “exhibits” in the play has a historical context as well as a main stereotype which can be used by the actor.
- The projections between exhibits are meant to either contradict, compliment, or comment on what the audience has seen.
- While the play has Brechtian structure, the production will not have Brechtian directing. Instead, different methods will be used to create an atmosphere of question.
- One major concern is “taking the play the wrong way”.

# Overview of the Play

- Some black Americans felt that the play was anti-black.
- This is not without reason; indeed, the play seems to reproduce stereotypes on the stage.
- This can happen, of course, if the production does not aim to claim, embrace, criticize, and display the stereotypes presented in the text.
- It is important to remember that, in order to produce *questioning*, which is the goal of this play, the acting will need to reflect both embracing and the criticizing of the characters.
- Technical works also need to compliment the situation; projections, lighting, set, and costumes will all have to compliment the ideas of the director for that scene in order to produce the correct effect.

# Exhibit Basics

- Each scene (or “exhibit”) will have a title that will be projected for the duration of it.
- Generally speaking, the actors will be moving the set by themselves, with the apparatus of the stage revealed to the audience. (Dim lights will enable the audience to see the movement on stage.)
- All actors will have multiple roles.
- Scenes may be enhanced beyond the script notations with projects, lights, and “special effects” to enrich the show.
- Reference materials, historical facts, and other information can be found inside of the dramaturgical packet.

# Exhibit A: Git on Board

- The play opens with Miss Pat, who addresses the audience as if they are slaves boarding a ship to the new world.
- The historical references made throughout this scene set a context for the rest of the play to take place; think of it as the Cliff Notes of history.
- It presents a fun, challenging opening; sound, lights, and acting all have to fit in to create at first an atmosphere of controlled airplane then shift the the atmosphere of craziness and catastrophe.
- “Git on Board” models itself after an airplane, although several references within it relate to slavery and shipping people over the Atlantic Ocean.

# Exhibit A: Git on Board

- Miss Pat is reminiscent of a slave driver (although a much nicer one) as she is a black person in charge of keeping rebellions at bay.
- A barrage of slave imagery (from initial capture to ship sailing) will hit the audience before the scene takes place.
- Miss Pat (the actor) is faced with several character decisions which will severely affect her role.
- Drums are equated with rebellion; they are a symbol of black heritage from Africa.
- Emphasis should be placed on themes throughout this piece to introduce them.



# Exhibit B: Cookin' with Aunt Ethel

- Like “Git on Board”, this scene is meant to be a bit of a history lesson, this time from a social perspective.
- Aunt Ethel, the epitome of black American cooks (like Aunt Jemima), sings about the development of the modern black American.
- Entertaining and funny, the song is presented as a culinary art, which adds the twist of irony (“melting pot”).
- The major theme of this scene is generalize black social history, which begins in slavery (although not mentioned).
- Coming after “Git on Board”, this scene is generally considered to be a pick-me-up on the roller coaster ride of the show.

# Exhibit B: Cookin' with Aunt Ethel



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No Wonders... more women prefer Aunt Jemima than all other brands combined!

Let your fork sink into the fluffy lightness of a stack of golden Aunt Jemima Pancakes. Ever see such fine, fluffy texture? Ever taste such melting tenderness? Now you know why homemakers everywhere choose these better pancakes. Treat your folks to America's favorites tomorrow morning!

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**3 Piece Aunt Jemima SPICE SET!**  
For your most used spices - Nutmeg, Cinnamon, Paprika

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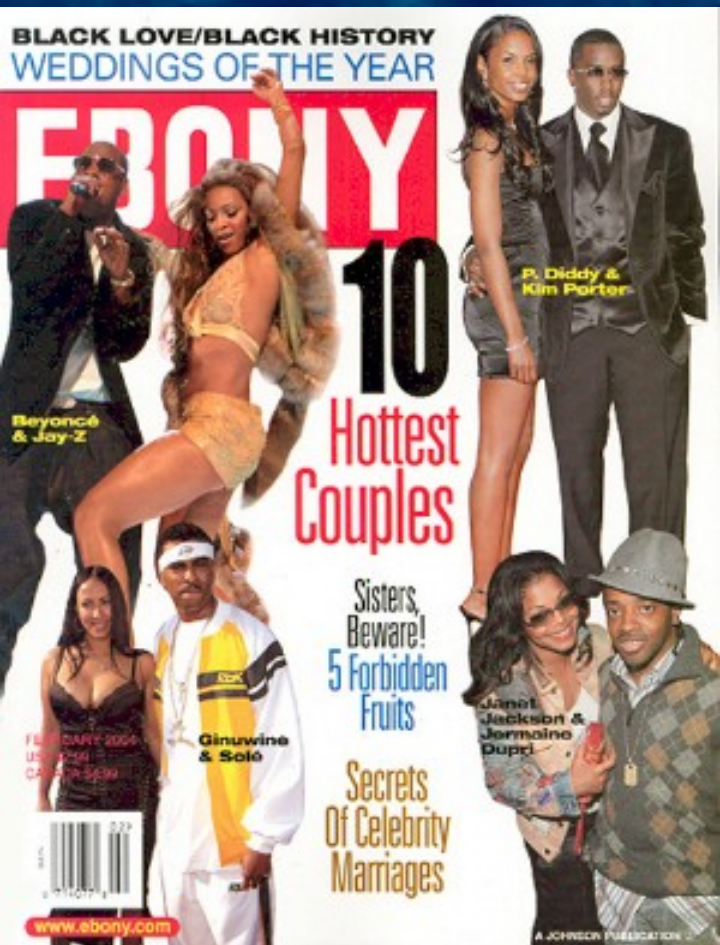
Reynolds Aluminum Foil, 1952 ◀ Aunt Jemima Pancakes & Waffles, 1950

618 Food and Beverage ▶ Puffin Blasts

# Exhibit C: The Photosession

- The man and woman within this scene address the idea of black beauty in America.
- Two models lose themselves inside of a magazine in order to escape life; such an idea creates the feeling of absurdity as well as confusion.
- Various model poses will be used throughout this scene in order to create the effect of having a literal photo shoot.
- The characters presented here seem flat and simple.
- Ebony Magazine (and other black American magazines) was made as an attempt to present more positive black images to America.

# Exhibit C: The Photosession



# Exhibit D: Gospel According to Miss Roj

- This scene incorporates queerness, which is not commonly shown in black American theater.
- Miss Roj, a drag queen, preaches her story through various stages of drunkenness and rage.
- Separating queer blacks from non-queer blacks has been a problem in past black drama.
- By including the stereotype of drag queens, Wolfe includes a group of people who are doubly discouraged in the media: black queer people.
- The atmosphere is especially important within this scene; technical notes include dark, dingy, and dank.

# Exhibit D: Gospel According to Miss Roj



# Exhibit E: The Hairpiece

- The images of black Americans do not stop at just the media.
- Women especially face discrimination not necessarily on their color but rather on the way they do their hair.
- Stereotypes surrounding black people because of their hair styles – dreadlocks, for instance – which are viewed as unsophisticated.
- By using personification, the scene progresses through an argument between two wigs.
- The ridiculousness of the scene, combined with the two wigs taking on the stereotypical attitudes of “blackness”, makes the scene funny.
- The comedy of this scene has been noted as taking away from the power of its message.

# Exhibit F: Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play

- A Satire Upon the acclaimed play *A Raison in the Sun*, which is a major black American play.
- *A Raison in the Sun* has similar characters to “The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play”. A mother, her daughter and son with his wife in child.
- While poking fun at a play, it also addresses the idea of coon performers, which permeates into black performance today.
- Coon performers are anti-black caricatures, which are named after “raccoons”. The idea is to dehumanize black people while portraying them to be silly, stupid, and lazy.
- The idea of coon performers can be traced back to slavery, but the main focus is to present an image of idiocy of black Americans.





By THE COMPOSER OF THE FAMOUS  
**"PAS-MA-LA"**

**THE NEW SENSATION**

# ALL COONS LOOK ALIKE TO ME.

A DARKEY MISUNDERSTANDING  
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For All Popular Amusements.

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The central poster features several caricatured Black men in various outfits, including suits, hats, and checkered shirts, arranged around the central text.

A caricature of a man's face with exaggerated features, including a large nose and wide eyes. The caricature is framed in a decorative, ornate oval border.

# Exhibit F: Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play

- Coon performers still exist today, making a living by promoting a stereotype fueled by racism.
- The dance in “The Last Mama” scene aims to gain the audience’s attention and focus while entertaining them.
- These comments will appear *after* the dance is shown, building a commentary for the audience.
- Overacting, overblown movement, and other techniques may indeed be used in this part of the play.
- As a matter of fact, think “bad Shakespearean actor”.
- Each character within this scene is meant to be warped until she or he is entirely lost in the stereotypes.

# Exhibit G: Lala's Opening

- Black American “divas”, superstars, and hot-shots have flooded the news.
- The major stereotype of black American artists is embodied in Lala, a woman who ran to France to start her career in music.
- Violence, sex, and music – another group of black American stereotypes – are employed.
- It is important to establish the meaning of the “mother” and the “child” of Lala. Is the child actually her child, or her inner child? Is the woman actually her mother? Her servant? Both?
- “Lala’s Opening” is probably the most complex; the actor playing Lala will be faced with major decisions regarding her past life, her current life, and the position of the other characters there within.

# Exhibit H: Symbiosis

- A man and his inner child face off – will he evolve and kill his own past or reconcile his past with his present?
- “Symbiosis” is one of the most moving pieces in the play; a man attempts to violently break with his past by throwing away all the traces of black American culture that he possesses.
- While “Git on Board” and “Cookin’ with Aunt Ethel” present history, “Symbiosis” presents history in a different mode. Modern history.
- Throwing away the past – “baggage” – is a running theme throughout the play.
- Cultural artifacts and references also serve to date the play, which is important to keep in mind.

# Exhibit I: The Party

- The final scene of the play wraps-up the ideas of the play with the use of yet another stereotype. However, this time, the stereotype evolves into something different.
- While there are cultural references, the scene is not entirely devoted to history. Instead, it focuses on the development of black cultural identity in black Americans today.
- “The Party” ties in the stereotypes by incorporating various characters as statues at the end.
- By focusing on the idea that contradiction is power, the scene suggests a positive outlook on the future for black Americans.
- The power of this statement is immense. The goal of this montage of scenes is to show that contradiction is power.

# Themes and Foci

- Claiming Baggage
- Historical References that link present to past
- Keeping the play dated – references to the modern history associated with the play
- Creating the atmosphere of question – alienation from the characters (falls mostly to the actors)
- Drums are equated to rebellion, resistance, as well as heritage.
- Empowerment through changing roles
- Reclaiming the past while living in the present

- *The Colored Museum* aims to make the audience question what they think they know about black Americans.
- By using music, dance, and other modes, the play also entertains the audience so they do not feel “lectured”.
- Questions about the play, different scenes, etc. can be asked. Certain questions should be directed at the director.

# Conclusion