



BY THE WAY,
**MEET
VERA
STARK**

**STUDY
GUIDE**

GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE

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RECIPIENT OF THE EDGERTON FOUNDATION NEW AMERICAN PLAY AWARD

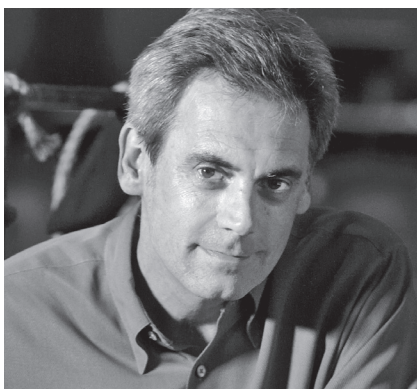
SECTION 1

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



By the Way, Meet Vera Stark is a play that our late Producing Director Gil Cates had the opportunity to see while in New York the season before last. Enthusiastic to bring it to the Geffen, we made an attempt to do it in the 2011/2012 season, but because of the size and scope of the play, we decided that it would be better served launching the 2012/2013 season. There were so many reasons to select this play beginning with our ongoing relationship with writer Lynn Nottage, the Pulitzer prize winning playwright of *Ruined*. In addition, Jo Bonney is a director with whom we have worked numerous times so for us, this was a dream artistic team. Further, and most importantly, *Vera Stark* is a play that addresses the invisibility of African American actors in film. As we live at the epicenter of the film world, we thought what better place to produce this play than in the town that cast and then marginalized African American artists. We are attracted to Lynn's work time and again because she delves into the subjects of race, humanity and social perception with such skill, all the while creating wildly entertaining plays that move audiences time and again. Her plays are complex, funny and can cut to the bone, and at the Geffen, these are attributes we look for in all of our plays.

PLAY SUMMARY

ACT 1

Hollywood, 1933

ACT 2

Hollywood, 1973

Hollywood, 2003



Photos by Michael Lamont.

SYNOPSIS TAKEN FROM:

theater.nytimes.com/2011/05/10/theater/reviews/by-the-way-meet-vera-stark-at-second-stage-review.html

SETTING

The first half of the play takes place in Hollywood in 1933, while the second half moves back and forth between a 1973 talk show and a 2003 academic colloquium. The following is a play summary excerpted from a *New York Times* review of the Second Stage premiere production.

By the Way, Vera Stark ... imagines the back story of one of those talented actresses seen of '30s movie screens almost exclusively in the roles of maids, slaves or mammies. (Lynn Nottage has said she was specifically inspired by Theresa Harris's appearance in the 1933 Barbara Stanwyck vehicle *Baby Face*, but Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers and Fredi Washington come to mind as well.)

In the first act Vera is a real-life maid to Gloria Mitchell, a self-dramatizing movie star known as "America's little sweetie pie." While Vera makes sure that the self-sabotaging Gloria knows her lines, arrives at her appointments and wears the right clothes, she is also hoping to break into pictures herself. And when an opportunity comes along for Gloria to play a Camille-like creature in antebellum New Orleans, Vera sets her cap for the role of the loyal maid.

Among those who accompany Vera on the rocky road to demi-celebrity are two other aspiring actresses: the full-bodied Lottie, a once-slender performer in Broadway revues who has eaten her way into Hollywood's idea of a mammy, and the sleek and pale-skinned Annie Mae, who hopes to pass as a South American exotic.

Then there's Leroy Barksdale, a musician working as a chauffeur. "How come in Los Angeles nobody actually does what they do?" asks Vera. It's a question that could just as easily be asked today. But it acquires particular resonance in Depression-era Hollywood, where the rules of make-believe are strict and confining. Everyone, it seems, is playing a fabricated part, often of several layers.

... In the second act ... [the cast] show up as 21st-century cultural pundits, pondering the career of Vera, now vanished.

CHARACTERS



VERA STARK (Played by Sanaa Lathan)

28 years old, an African-American beauty wearing a maid's uniform

Actors to reference: Theresa Harris, Nina Mae McKinney, Mildred Washington



GLORIA MITCHELL (Played by Amanda Detmer)

28 years old, insecure flighty White starlet vying for the central role in a *Gone With the*

Wind like film – dramatic, funny, versatile, 'girlish' quality, she's 'American's Little Sweetie Pie'

Actors to reference: Miriam Hopkins, Carole Lombard, Barbara Stanwyck



LOTTIE (Played by Kimberly Hébert Gregory)

20s, a pretty heavy-set brown skinned woman

Actors to reference: Hattie McDaniel, Ruby Dandridge

CARMEN LEVY-GREEN (Played by Kimberly Hébert Gregory)

African-American University Professor of Media and Gender Studies



ANNA MAE (Played by Merle Dandridge)

A very fair skinned African-American woman (can pass as Latina), a carefree bon vivant with a reckless streak.

Actors to reference: Dolores del Rio, Dorothy Lamour, Carmen Miranda

AFUA ASSATA EJOBO (Played by Merle Dandridge)

African-American journalist, poet, performer and lesbian

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CHARACTERS



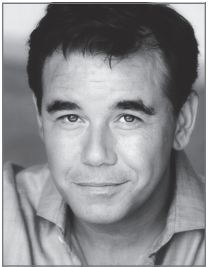
LEROY (Played by Kevin T. Carroll)

African-American horn-blower, works for Von Oster. He is in late thirties or early forties, confident, charismatic and funny.

Actors/musicians to reference: Lawrence Brown, Dizzy Gillespie, Chu Berry, Lester Young

HERB (Played by Kevin T. Carroll)

Colloquium facilitator, he's a filmmaker, musician and entrepreneur.



SLASVICK (Played by Spencer Garrett)

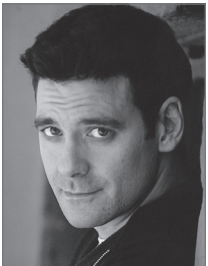
Fifties, white movie studio chief

Executives to reference: Adolph Zukor, Darryl Zanuck

BRAD (Played by Spencer Garrett)

Charming television talk-show host

Hosts to reference: Mike Douglas, Dick Cavett



MAXILLIAN VON OSTER (Played by Mather Zickel)

Thirties, eccentric, intense Austrian film director

Filmmakers to reference: Erich von Stroheim, King Vidor, Otto Preminger

PETER RHYS DAVIES (Played by Mather Zickel)

Funky English rock musician

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES



JO BONNEY (Director)

Premieres of plays by Alan Ball, Eric Bogosian, Culture Clash, Eve Ensler, Jessica Goldberg, Danny Hoch, Neil LaBute, Warren Leight, Lynn Nottage, Dael Orlandersmith, Suzan-Lori Parks, Darci Picoult, Will Power, David Rabe, Jose Rivera, Christopher Shinn, Diana Son, Universes, Naomi Wallace, Michael Weller. Productions of plays by Caryl Churchill, Nilo Cruz, Anna Deavere Smith, Charles Fuller, Lisa Loomer, John Osborne and Lanford Wilson. Theatres: PS 122, The Public Theater NYC, New York Theatre Workshop, Second Stage, NYC, The Goodman Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse, MCC, NYC, Geffen Playhouse, Williamstown Theatre Festival, The McCarter Theatre, Playwrights Horizons, Arena Stage, Mark Taper Forum, Signature Theatre, NYC, Long Wharf Theatre, The New Group, NYC, Classic Stage Company, NYC, Humana Theatre Festival, Almeida Theatre, London, Edinburgh Theatre Festival, The Market Theatre, Johannesburg, Cine 13, Paris. Recipient of a 1998 Obie Award for Sustained Excellence of Direction, Lucille Lortel Best Musical and Lucille Lortel Best Revival. Editor of “Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solo Performance Texts from the Twentieth Century” (TCG).



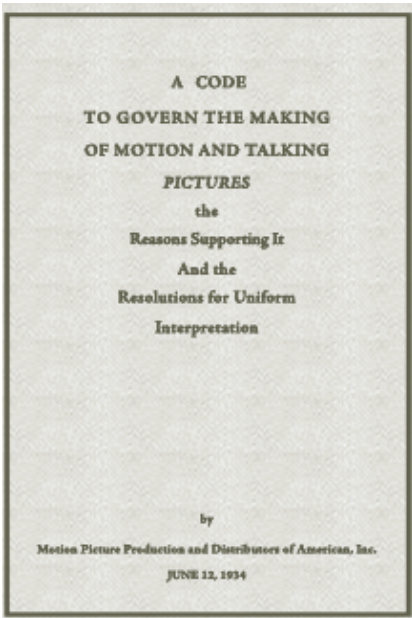
LYNN NOTTAGE (Playwright)

Lynn Nottage is a playwright from Brooklyn. Her play *Ruined* enjoyed successful runs at Manhattan Theatre Club, the Goodman Theatre and the Geffen Playhouse and won several awards including the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and Obie Award. Her plays, which have been developed and produced at theaters both nationally and internationally, also include *Intimate Apparel* (New York Drama Critics' Circle Award); *Fabulation or The Re-Education of Undine* (Obie Award); *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*; *Las Meninas*; *Mud, River, Stone*; *Por'knockers*; and *Poof!*. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including the 2007 MacArthur Foundation “Genius Grant,” the National Black Theatre Festival’s August Wilson Playwriting Award, the 2004 PEN/Laura Pels Award for Drama, the 2005 Guggenheim Grant for Playwriting, as well as fellowships from the Lucille Lortel Foundation, Manhattan Theatre Club, New Dramatists and New York Foundation for the Arts. She sits on The Dramatists Guild Council, an alumna of New Dramatists and a graduate of Brown University and the Yale School of Drama, where she is a visiting lecturer.

SECTION 2

THEMES AND IDEAS TO EXPLORE

HOLLYWOOD IN THE '30s



GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF THE HAYS CODE

1. No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

In 1927, *The Jazz Singer* premiered as the first “talkie” – that is the first major American motion picture that had synchronized actor dialogue in addition to a score (music). This extremely popular film was being closely watched for its technological innovation, and featured Al Jolsen, a white actor, playing a jazz singer – in black face. “Black face” was a technique where white actors portrayed black characters by covering their faces in black make-up and adopting the perceived behaviors and speech patterns of black Americans at the time. Its tradition derived directly from minstrel shows, which were cabaret-like pre-cursors to the American musical.

The late 1920s/early 1930s were a period of major transition in American cinema. The 1952 musical film, *Singin’ in the Rain* (one of the AFI Top 100 Films of All Time) is entirely based on a studio trying to make the transition from silent films to talkies. One of the most successful commercial films of 1933, also submerged in technological innovation, was *King Kong*. The following is excerpted from the site: www.emanuellevy.com/review/king-kong-1933-masterpieces-of-american-cinema/

King Kong came out in one of the worst years of the Great Depression ... A huge box-office hit, it also helped boost the Hollywood industry. Technically, *King Kong* launched a new era of sound and visual effects, with groundbreaking work by stop-motion master Willis O’Brien. The movie was produced by RKO and co-directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, and produced by David O. Selznick. Though the notion of high-concept didn’t exist in the 1930s, *King Kong* epitomized it since it was based on a single idea-image that reportedly inspired Cooper to make the movie. As he put it: “Let’s have a beast so large that he could hold the beauty in the palm of his hand, pulling bits of her clothing from her body until she was denuded.” It’s noteworthy, that *King Kong* was one of the last movies made before the Production Code was established as Hollywood’s moralistic guide.

HOLLYWOOD IN THE '30s

AN EXCERPT FROM
THE MOTION PICTURE
PRODUCTION CODE
OF 1930 (HAYS CODE)

If motion pictures present stories that will affect lives for the better, they can become the most powerful force for the improvement of mankind.

A Code to Govern the Making of Talking, Synchronized and Silent Motion Pictures. Formulated and formally adopted by The Association of Motion Picture Producers, Inc. and The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc. in March 1930.

Motion picture producers recognize the high trust and confidence which have been placed in them by the people of the world and which have made motion pictures a universal form of entertainment.

They recognize their responsibility to the public because of this trust and because entertainment and art are important influences in the life of a nation.

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The Production Code referred to in multiple places here is the Hays Production Code of 1930. Enforced beginning in 1934, the HPC was drawn up by The Association of Motion Picture Producers – AMPP – and The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America – MPPDA – to regulate what could and could not be shown in film. The Code acknowledged both the power of film and its responsibility to uphold a certain morality, outlined in almost thirteen very specific pages including elements like:

Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden ... Pointed profanity (this includes the words, God, Lord, Jesus, Christ – unless used reverently – Hell, S.O.B., damn, Gawd), or every other profane or vulgar expression however used, is forbidden... The treatment of low, disgusting, unpleasant, though not necessarily evil, subjects should always be subject to the dictates of good taste and a regard for the sensibilities of the audience ... Dancing or costumes intended to permit undue exposure or indecent movements in the dance are forbidden ...

While this Code was an attempt to maintain self-regulation and avoid external dictates from government on what would and would not be permitted in film production, it was perceived by many working in Hollywood as shockingly restrictive.

It is interesting to note David O. Selznick, producer of *King Kong*, also produced the 1939 epic *Gone with the Wind*, based on the 1936 Margaret Mitchell novel of the same name.

Gone with the Wind is a good example of a Hays Code film especially where race relations were concerned. Control of Hollywood at this time rested in the hands of a select few producers and studio chiefs – and David O. Selznick was one of the most prolific. Other prominent producers included Darryl Zanuck and Adolph Zukor, and these men have been identified by Ms. Nottage as inspirations for the character of Slasvic in the play.

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HOLLYWOOD IN THE '30s

Hence, though regarding motion pictures primarily as entertainment without any explicit purpose of teaching or propaganda, they know that the motion picture within its own field of entertainment may be directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking.

During the rapid transition from silent to talking pictures they have realized the necessity and the opportunity of subscribing to a Code to govern the production of talking pictures and of re-acknowledging this responsibility.

On their part, they ask from the public and from public leaders a sympathetic understanding of their purposes and problems and a spirit of cooperation that will allow them the freedom and opportunity necessary to bring the motion picture to a still higher level of wholesome entertainment for all the people.

THE HPC IN ITS
ENTIRETY CAN BE
FOUND HERE:

[www.artsreformation.com/
a001/hays-code.html](http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html)

Real-life figures are echoed throughout *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*. Ms. Nottage has accredited actress Theresa Harris and her role in the 1933 film *Baby Face* opposite Barbara Stanwyck as a major inspiration. She makes this link quite clear, as in her play, the film everyone is buzzing about in the first act – *The Belle of New Orleans* – is non-coincidentally similar to a film featuring Ms. Harris from 1941 entitled *The Flame of New Orleans*.

Ms. Harris, over the almost thirty years she worked in Hollywood (from 1929 to 1958), made close to eighty films, and in most of them she was either a maid, a prostitute, a hat check girl, various other such roles – or she simply went uncredited. But at the beginning of her career, and just before the Hays Production Code took effect, when she played opposite Barbara Stanwyck, she featured prominently as “Chico” – someone more akin to the lead character’s best friend and accomplice than simply “her maid.” The complexity of the the role and the characters’ relationship intrigued Ms. Nottage, and became the basis for investigation that led to *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*. In the “Supporting Materials” section of this guide, there is a link to a New York Times interview with Ms. Nottage that addresses this interest in great detail. Here is an excerpt from that article:

Ms. Nottage seems less interested in rescuing the African-American actresses who were her inspirations than in arguing for the complexity of their images. She sees films like *Baby Face* and movies made before the [Hays] code was enforced as presenting a more realistic vision of race in America than many later films simply because they show blacks and whites existing alongside one another. “If that code hadn’t set in,” Ms. Nottage speculates, “the whole trajectory of Hollywood would have been different, and some would argue that race in America would be different because the representations of people of color and particularly of women would have been much more expansive.”

"PASSING"

IN HOLLYWOOD:
FREDI WASHINGTON
(1903 – 1994)



Fredi Washington was an African-American actress often mistaken as caucasian on the account of her fair skin, green eyes and flowing hair. In 1934, she played Peola, a mulatto maid who denies her black mother to cross the color line. In reality, Washington refused to deny her heritage, advocating for blacks in entertainment.

Other famous actors of mixed race who dealt with issues of passing include Merle Oberon (Cathy in 1939's *Wuthering Heights*) and Carol Channing (who first shared the information to the world in her 2002 memoir, *Just Lucky I Guess*).

Sourced from Lynn Nottage's dramaturgical materials.

Another film relevant to an understanding of the play might include *Imitation of Life*, produced in 1934 and featuring Fredi Washington as Peola, the fair-skinned daughter of dark-skinned Delilah, maid to Claudette Colbert's Bea Pullman. Peola is desperate to shed any trace of her blackness and be perceived of simply as white. She leaves her mother to pursue this other life, and the consequences are dire. The theme of "passing (as white)" features prominently in *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, and it is explored in the plot in both subtle and more blatant ways. Lottie, one of the characters in *Stark*, has this to say:

LOTTIE

You may not believe this, but I had a pretty slender figure when I first came out here. Yes, indeed. Had to fight off the fellas. Fight 'em like ole' Jake Jefferson. But you gotta be high yella mellow or look like you crawled outta Mississippi cotton patch to get work in this rotten town. So here I am, Or should I say here is.

Her statement is commenting on the fact that in this period in Hollywood, what little work there was went to black actors who were either extremely light-skinned, or extremely dark. Much like the roles in which they were cast, there wasn't much room for variety or nuance. In an already limited field, this inescapable reality shut even more doors. For one scholar's take on the historical tensions between light and dark-skinned blacks in America, see the Supporting Materials section of this guide.

PRE-SHOW DISCUSSION PROMPT

If a body governing an artistic outlet (ie., the AMPP, MPPDA or MPAA – Motion Picture Association of America) creates ratings systems and rules of operation, is it effectively the same as censorship? Is censorship necessarily good or bad? Should the intention of the creator be a consideration – for example if work is being developed as an artistic endeavor vs. strictly for entertainment value? Please explain.

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION PROMPT

How does the playwright use the inequality of 1930's Hollywood, the Civil Rights Era of the 1970's and the more equalizing post-2000 era to reflect back the arc of a particular African-American experience in this country? How does she use the forum of her play to upend some of the very struggles she highlights?

MUSIC IN THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

AN EXCERPT FROM
“THE BLACK JAZZ
MUSICIAN IN AMERICAN
MAGAZINES, 1930-1950”

The period between 1930 and 1950 represents a paradigm shift in Americans’ thinking about race and its status in public discourse ... Changes in the portrayal of jazz musicians in magazines from 1930 to 1950 are closely associated with concurrent changes in racial ideology ... By the 1930s, jazz’s transgressive appeal had been mitigated by Swing music’s admittance into the white mainstream. Band leaders such as Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson popularized swing in performances at urban nightclubs and large dance halls which, in the South at least, were segregated. The musicians themselves, however, were both white and black, with black band leaders such as Ellington and Count Basie enjoying at least as much success as white band leaders like Benny Goodman. Indeed, Louis Armstrong, the most celebrated and recognized Swing musician of that era, was African American.

Sourced from Anne K. Minoff’s essay in *Journal of the Undergraduate Writing Program at Columbia University*, 2007-2008.

Leroy is a musician who grows fond of Vera in the play. He is not an actor, and has trouble understanding why the women are in such hot pursuit of “being in the pictures”:

LEROY

It tickles me how half the Negroes in this town are running around like chickens without heads trying to get five minutes of shucking and jiving time, all so they can say they’re in the pictures. It’s just lights and shadows, what’s the big deal? I’m a musician, right? I play cuz’ it’s like how I tell my story. And I can begin here in chains –

Leroy hums, whistles, sings and beats out Dixie, slowly de-constructing it the song transforming it into something entirely fresh, new and playful. Vera smiles.

LEROY

And I can end right there. Free. If you wanna be in pictures, where you gonna begin, and where are you gonna end?

Leroy brings up an interesting point. In the first place, making music is and was something an artist could – and can – do on his own. In the second place, some of the first arenas in the country to de-segregate during the time the HPC was in effect were music clubs and dance halls. To be fair, the audiences were not necessarily integrated, and the black musicians wouldn’t necessarily be served in the venues they were playing, but there were some signs of “progress.”

In *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, playwright Lynn Nottage calls for the music of Ethel Waters, a singer and dancer who, in 1917, made her debut on the black vaudeville circuit and was later cast in a Broadway revue by Irving Berlin that rocketed her to stardom. The female characters in the play earnestly, and playfully, sing spirituals, hymns and “slave songs.” Culturally and historically, in this play and beyond, music plays a huge role in tracking African American artistic and personal expression. From the beginnings of slavery, to the vaudeville and minstrel circuits, to the jazz and blues clubs, to Broadway, to the chart-topping rap, R&B, jazz and hip-hop dominating popular music today, it is a forum in which, to paraphrase Leroy, we find a wide array of African-American stories.

SECTION 3

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTISTIC ASSOCIATE/ CASTING DIRECTOR PHYLLIS SCHURINGA

Ms. Schuringa has been with Geffen Playhouse for 10 years. In that time, she has cast about 40 productions and worked with directors and playwrights such as Neil LaBute, Dan Sullivan, David Mamet, Jenny Sullivan, Bart DeLorenzo and Will Frears. Some of her favorite projects include: *All My Sons*, *Rabbit Hole*, *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity*, *Superior Donuts* and *Good People*. She was kind enough to take the time to answer some questions about the casting process and some unique aspects of *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*:

1. What is your “official” title at Geffen Playhouse?

PS: My official title is Artistic Associate/Casting Director.

2. How would you describe what you do?

PS: I introduce actors to directors, sometimes through auditions, sometimes through discussion. The director and I create a strategy for putting together the best possible cast. As the Assistant to the Artistic Director I work with Mr. Arney in all aspects of the Artistic office. I’ve worked with Randy for more than 20 years, first in Chicago at the Steppenwolf Theater and now at the Geffen, so we have a kind of short hand about what needs to be done and how to do it. I am grateful for that. I also try to see as many plays in Los Angeles and beyond as I can.

3. *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* had its premiere at Second Stage Theatre in New York in 2011. This is the West Coast premiere. Are any of the original cast members coming with the production? How are the actors who will move with the show selected?

PS: We invited all of the original actors to be part of this production. Sanaa Lathan and Kimberly Hebert Gregory accepted our offer. The others found themselves committed to other projects at this time.

4. How often is a portion of your cast predetermined?

PS: Only when we ask a director to reprise a piece that they recently worked on, or when we are putting together a co-production with another theater. Once in a while a director and a cast member or two come to the project as a package. This could happen maybe once or twice a year.

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5. *What process do you/did you go through to assemble the rest of the cast?*

PS: Everyone else in the cast auditioned for their parts. The casting process starts with the careful definition of what we are looking for. The director is usually the one to put these requirements into words. We talk about what is important in terms of telling the story of the play. I try to push the envelope, to get a director to think of the character in a different way. Then we talk about actors we would love to see in the parts. Agents and managers will let us know who's available and interested in doing a play. When an actor's work is well-known we can make offers without asking for an audition, but for this play we held auditions. Jo Bonney, our director for *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, is wonderful in an audition room. She gives specific direction that is exciting to actors, everyone gets better.

6. *Can you explain what an audition is, and talk a bit about what that process was like for Vera? Are you able to define what you're looking for? Who is in the room with you?*

PS: An audition is a chance for the actor to show us how they would do the part. The actor will get the play about a week before the audition and one or two scenes to prepare. For *VBy the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, Jo Bonney, Lynn Nottage, a reader and I were in the room. We were looking for actors who are good at comedy, and who understood the world of the play. I tend to gather the best actors I can think of and trust that they can do almost anything. Lynn and Jo had very specific ideas about this cast since they had just done a production, so for this one, it was very clear who was successful and who was not.

7. *For Vera, race and skin color are important thematic elements. How do you finesse the process of openly hiring or not hiring people according to their skin color?*

PS: For this play skin tone was very important. I had to be concerned with the actresses playing Anna Mae and Gloria. The script is specific. Anna Mae is a very light-skinned black woman. She can pass for Latina, and she uses that to get ahead in the world of Hollywood. It's part of the story, we needed to find an actress who has a lighter skin tone than Kimberly and Sanaa. Gloria was a little easier because she is an octoroon. In our play, Gloria tries to hide any trace of ethnicity and so maybe she would dye her hair blonde. That is believable. It's hard to physically detect anyone who is 1/8th African American.

8. *Will you describe a moment, either in the audition process for Vera or some other production, where an actor simply blew you away?*

PS: Romanos Isaac learned to speak Greek for his audition for *Time to Burn* by Charles Mee with Tina Laudau directing. Later he told me that he learned from Greek waiters. Cleavant Derricks singing "Feeling Good" for his audition for *Paint your Wagon* was incredible. Young Bess Rous did a very brave audition for Bob Falls and Beth Henley for *The Jacksonian*. It was completely original and nothing like what the other actresses did.

9. *Can you articulate a couple of specific qualities that make for a successful audition?*

PS: Acting in a play must reflect behavior that you might see in real life. Sounds simple right? But so often actors tend to push too hard, yell too much, take everything too seriously. After a particularly frustrating day of auditions a director once said to me "When will they realize that they are enough?" A very successful audition will consider the circumstances of the play, the relationship of the characters and use imagination and humor to bring it alive. A good actor will make acting seem easy. ■

SECTION 4

SUPPORTING MATERIALS AND SITES

- *Los Angeles Times* feature on Lynn Nottage and *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*: www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-fall-preview-lynn-nottage-20120909,0,1415098.story (Please see pages 17-18 of this Study Guide to read full article).
- The premiere production of *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* took place in 2011 at New York's Second Stage Theatre. The company created a specialized website for their world premiere production! View it here: www.meetverastark.com
- The full text of the Hays Production Code of 1930 can be found here: www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html
- To read more about the history of minstrelsy and how it influenced music, performance and race issues in America, visit this robust pbs site: www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/foster/sfeature/sf_minstrelsy.html
- The Society Pages is a site concerned with sociology and cultural issues. This is a link to a photograph (and blurb) that incorporated some of the non-miscegenation no-nos according to the MPAA Production Code: www.thesocietypages.org/socimages/2010/02/06/making-fun-of-the-mpaa-hays-code/
- To read briefly about some of the "black films" that exploded onto the cinematic scene following the abolishment of the Hays Code, and how "blaxploitation" films followed a period of such stringent cinematic restrictions: www.blackclassicmovies.com/Movie_Database/blaxploitation.html
- To learn more about playwright Lynn Nottage's inspiration for the play (actress Theres Harris in the 1933 film *Baby Face*) visit this April, 2011 New York Times Theatre article: www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/theater/theresa-harris-a-black-actress-who-left-an-impression.html?pagewanted=all
- The full filmography of Theresa Harris, the actress by whom the character of Vera Stark was inspired, can be found here: www.imdb.com/name/nm0365382/
- Na'im Akbar is a clinical psychologist at Florida State University specializing in African and African-centered approaches to psychology. He wrote a book of essays in the 1970s called *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery* that was re-published in 1984 and focuses, in concrete ways, on how 300 years of black slavery has impacted the modern psychology of African-Americans. This is a link to another text of his. The essays are available on Amazon: www.cultural-expressions.com/diaspora/akbar.htm

LYNN NOTTAGE WANTS 'VERA STARK' TO BE A CONVERSATION STARTER

The author's play about a black actress in the '30s comes to Geffen Playhouse with, star Sanaa Lathan says, still-relevant issues.

By Margaret Gray
September 7, 2012

YOU'VE PROBABLY NEVER HEARD OF THE AFRICAN American actress whose film career and life are dramatized in Lynn Nottage's play "By the Way, Meet Vera Stark."

Don't feel bad: Plenty of serious film buffs haven't, either.

Google the name and you'll turn up a documentary by scholar Herb Forrester, "Rediscovering Vera Stark," which includes a clip from her film "The Belle of New Orleans" (1933), a handful of photographs and some speculation about her mysterious fate. Not a lot else.

For Nottage, such yawning gaps in the historical record lend poignancy to flickering images of black actresses in ruffled maids' costumes, dropping off trays of hors d'oeuvres in the 1930s screwball comedies she loves. (She cites "My Man Godfrey" from 1936 as "one of my favorite films in the world.")

"I love the sensibility, I love the quick pace of the humor, I love the irreverence of those 1930s films, but ..." She takes a breath. "The thing that always bothered me is that you'd have these very talented African American actresses who would pop on in these bit roles for two minutes, literally, and disappear."

Who were they? What were their lives like? What happened to them?

"For a lot of them the trail really ends cold," explains Nottage, 47, who lives in Brooklyn but has come to L.A. for the first week of rehearsals for the play, which will make its West Coast premiere at the Geffen Playhouse Sept. 26. "They just sort of disappeared from Hollywood, and you can't find out. The trail for others is that they ended up destitute and forgotten."

Although Vera Stark's career path resembles those of other black actresses of her era, such as Theresa Harris, Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers and Nina Mae McKinney, there is one crucial difference: Vera Stark is a fictional character.

So is Herb Forrester, the putative creator of the "Rediscovering Vera Stark" website. The site is a tongue-in-cheek spoof created by Nottage and a team of collaborators — including director Peter Bogdanovich, whose deadpan commentary is a highlight of the documentary. (Nottage is friends with his daughter.)

Nottage explains, "A lot of people who came to see the play in New York didn't realize that Vera isn't real. And they wanted to find out who she is."

She conceived the website (and another soon to follow) not to hoodwink people but to "allow them to play the game. Vera may not be a real person, but she is a reflection of many people. She's a composite of a lot of actresses. Her circumstances are real."

Upon first acquaintance elegantly beautiful and intimidatingly serious, Nottage breaks into a warm, infectious giggle as she adds, "Interestingly enough, somebody went to Herb Forrester's site and he got invited to lecture at the New York Film Academy. We had to say, 'Unfortunately, he's a fictional character.'"

Nottage, a prolific playwright with multiple awards including the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for drama (for "Ruined") and a MacArthur "genius grant," has been storing up the observations and reflections that inform "Vera Stark" all her life, since she was a child watching black-and-white movies on TV after school.

During the 1990s, while living on 110th Street in New York City, Nottage and her husband ran into Butterfly McQueen, best known as Prissy in "Gone With the Wind," in a grocery store.

"My husband says, 'Are you Butterfly McQueen?'" recalls Nottage. "And she said with that sort of precious little voice she has, 'Yes,' and she was just so delighted that anybody recognized her. Her face just totally lit up. I mean, here's this woman who's sort of an indelible part of film history, wandering the aisles of the supermarket."

For audiences who saw "Ruined" at the Geffen in 2010, "Vera Stark" may look like a radical departure.

"Ruined," set in a brothel in Uganda, is based on interviews Nottage and director Kate Whoriskey did with Congolese women brutally victimized by military turmoil, while "Vera Stark" is a bubbly, glamorous comedy set in old Hollywood. It includes a clip from the (fictional) film "The Belle of New Orleans," in which director Jo Bonney and her cast have a great time with the cinematic conventions of the 1930s.

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There are some unifying themes, though. As Nottage observes, a through-line in her diverse oeuvre is “my focus on African American women, or women from the African diaspora, who’ve been marginalized by circumstance and who are trying to assert their presence.”

From this rather heavy-sounding premise she crafts plays that charm audiences.

In his 2010 review of “Ruined,” Times theater critic Charles McNulty wondered, “How does the playwright manage to get us to pay attention to what the nightly newscasts only flittingly report for fear of losing viewers? She concentrates on the women not as generalized victims but as individual survivors, with specific histories, longings, strengths and shortcomings.”

“If you lead with the anger, it will turn off the audience,” Nottage observes. “And what I want is the audience to engage with the material and to listen and then to ask questions. I think that ‘Ruined’ was very successful at doing that. People had a very rich, complicated emotional experience that forced them to read newspapers differently, so that when a headline about Congo came up, rather than flipping past it, they would engage with it.

“And that’s what I’m asking with ‘Vera Stark,’ that next time you see one of those films, you be conscious of the politics of the film and of Hollywood at the time,” Nottage says.

And, of course, of Hollywood today.

“If you speak to any African American actress, I think that they will echo a lot of themes in the play,” Nottage points out. “I mean, for God’s sake, Kerry Washington is the first African American woman in 30 years to star in a prime-time show on a network. In 30 years, you know? We have a black president!”

Sanaa Lathan, who originated the role of Vera Stark in New York and is reprising it here, remembers that she “got goose bumps” when she read the script. “There are two levels to it, how it does echo the reality of women in Hollywood. I mean, the things that these characters are talking about are the conversations that my friends and I have every day. And then on the actress side, what a delicious role, what a delicious arc! I mean, how often do you get to play a young, innocent 20-year-old in the 1930s and go all the way to the bitter, 68-year-old alcoholic in the 1970s.”

Lathan has acted extensively in movies and on TV as well as on stage. “Just in terms of my personal experience, I feel like I’ve had a great variety of roles. But I do have to say that people don’t really get it, until either you are an African American in this business, or you’re representing an African American. When my agent, my Jewish agent, came to the show, he was so moved. He was like, ‘Sanaa, it hasn’t changed!’ He probably gets more of it than I do, since I try to focus on the yeses and ignore the noes.

You can’t get bitter – otherwise you’ll end up like Vera.”

“People were surprised by how funny the play is,” adds Lathan. “It’s not an angry diatribe. You’re laughing and then you’re like, ‘Oh, my God.’”

Director Bonney, who also directed the world premiere at New York’s Second Stage Theatre, says she was attracted not only by the originality of the play’s subject matter but by its ambition and theatricality. “Lynn leaves it to the director to figure out all the conventions of it, how to pull off all the different elements. It was a challenge, which is always fun.”

“Ruined” and “Vera Stark” had extended runs in New York, and both provoked significant Broadway buzz, but neither has gone to Broadway.

“I’ve been asked a lot why didn’t ‘Ruined’ go to Broadway,” says Nottage. “It was the most successful play that Manhattan Theatre Club has ever had in that particular space, and yet we couldn’t find a home on Broadway. I was repeatedly told that there isn’t an African American woman who can open a show on Broadway. I said, ‘Well, how do we know? How do we know if we don’t do it?’ I said, ‘I think you’re wrong.’”

For one thing, she points out, “African American women in particular have incredible buying power. Statistically, we go to the movies more than anyone. We have made Tyler Perry’s career. His films open with \$25 million almost consistently. So I think there are still some frontiers.”

Her hope for “Vera Stark” in L.A. is that it “will open a conversation. That’s what the play was designed to do.” And of course, she “would be open” to a Broadway run.

She has experienced firsthand the media’s power to change prejudices and, literally, open doors.

For years after she and her husband, filmmaker Tony Gerber, who is white, got married, his grandmother wouldn’t invite them over for fear of “what her neighbors would say.”

“Then she began watching Oprah,” Nottage says, “and Oprah became her best friend, and in some way because she invited Oprah into her home, I was welcome. I never would have seen the inside of that woman’s home without Oprah.”

Winfrey recently considered starring in an HBO movie of “Ruined.” The project ultimately “didn’t work out,” says Nottage. Which is, after all, a very Hollywood outcome – like something out of the play “By the Way, Meet Vera Stark.” ■

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