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**February 15 - March 11, 2007**  
previews February 13 & 14

**PENUMBRA THEATRE STUDY GUIDE**  
**Blue**

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## **Educational Tools**

### *Penumbra Theatre Study Guide*

Greetings! Thank you for visiting Penumbra Theatre Company's **Study Guide Library**. We are so pleased that you seek to extend and engage your understanding of the drama we produce and the thematic issues it brings to the fore.

**Penumbra Theatre Company** occupies a very unique place within American society, and by extension of that, the world. Penumbra was borne out of the Black Arts Movement, a time charged by civic protest and community action. An artist making art by, for and about the black community was charged with merging aesthetic (artistic) principles with ethical (moral) ones. Subsequently, in this historical and political context, art had an agenda to strive toward social change. African American artists were part of, and greatly influenced, the social currents that carried people from their homes, schools and places of worship to the streets.

Bonding artistic interpretation with civic responsibility engenders an important kind of creative dissonance, a harmony of balance. It creates something neither art nor civic action could do alone. This is mission driven art, informed by a black ethos and aesthetic, which can adequately illuminate our experience. **Ensemble Theatre** in that context is the creation of a community of people committed to the telling of a story that acknowledges the experience of everyone involved. This kind of art demands that each audience member recognize his or her place in relation to the art. When that happens, we begin to think about ourselves as interactive forces in a greater social context. Our own agency becomes clearer to us; our choices and reactions start to make sense within a broader, more nuanced environment. We begin to see that others have lived with similar issues, and that their perspectives have great potential to enrich our experience and help us problem-solve. This kind of art creates and sustains community. It encourages coalition.

The function of an **Education and Outreach Program** inside an institution such as Penumbra Theatre Company is to use informed discussion and interdisciplinary tools to unpack the issues stimulated by the drama. Just as an actor must learn lines and blocking before interpreting a character, we offer our audiences the practical tools so that they may respond to the art both critically and creatively. It is our job to push conversation, critical analysis, and commentary beyond emotion toward solution.

The **Study Guides** are meant to stimulate discussion, not to present a definitive voice or the "right answer." Theatre is *fluid*, active, interactive and reactive; we must engage it intellectually that way too.

We hope to create space for the themes inspired by the drama to take root and blossom. Penumbra invites audiences to participate in the art and social action, by using our Education and Outreach tools to locate their contribution, their voice, within the larger human story we tell over and over again. We love. We fail. We begin anew. Over and over, told by countless tongues, embodied by some of the finest actors and carried in the hearts of some of the most committed audience members; we speak our human lessons through the prism of the African American experience.

## The Artistic Process

### The Social Symbolic: Individuals in Society

Art is a complicated process that we rarely fully engage. It stimulates emotional, intellectual, even physical responses in audiences. Art is so powerful because it is one example of a deep and necessary connection between an individual and the collective world. To better understand the process of art, it helps to consider this connection and how it works.

The connection between an individual and society is made by through complex systems of meaning and metaphor; groups of symbols created by humans that represent how we feel, think, see and understand the world in which we live. These systems represent the tie that binds us all to one another in relationships that constitute identity, and help us comprehend our human experience. Art is one such system and there are others too.

Individuals can only access these systems through the collective, social world. In order for a human child, for example, to learn to use language (really just a system of symbols, meaning and metaphor), that child must come into contact with other human beings who already grasp and make use of the faculty of language. Once the child is inducted into this social system, the symbols, meaning and metaphor common to all members of the community will eventually dominate the life-experience of that child and his or her ability to reflect upon or process that experience. In fact, these systems are so powerful, that the child will also only come to understand him or herself in relation to other community members, and only through the system of meaning and metaphor common to that group. This process is called socialization. A community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism forms its culture. Socialization does two things: it sustains culture and forms an individual's identity.

### Social Commentary and the Nature of Art

Art works by tapping into a community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism to represent the experience, knowledge or reality specific to that culture. Art is ultimately the expression of an idea, emotion or experience through the creation of a symbolic structure. The artistic product does not have to have *physical structure* to be considered art. Music, story-telling, dance are all artistic modes that are active and not permanent. Instead art is defined by its ability to recreate human experience through the point of view of the artist and affect a response within an audience. This might seem fairly simple, or even obvious. A deeper examination, however, will illuminate the special quality of art and explain why it is so important to a healthy society.

Human beings have the unique ability to critically observe ourselves. We can, in other words, reflect upon our actions, emotions and experiences. The fact that the word "reflect" can mean "to think" and "to mirror, or reverse an original image back to its

source,” is quite telling about the nature of art. In the most basic terms, an artist creates a piece of art as a reflection of culture. Culture is made up of individuals, their experiences and the integration of all of these things to become more than the sum of its individual parts.

Artists use many different structures, or “mediums,” to communicate meaning. The artist’s effort to communicate his or her intent is both informed by, and limited to, his or her cultural perspective; no individual exists completely outside of some cultural context. Within that cultural context, the artist embodies different symbols that have meaning within the culture. His or her navigation of the cultural landscape will be informed by these symbols and will also inform the art too. This is what we mean when we talk about an artist’s “voice.” Even though the artistic product may not have sound (like a painting or a piece of sculpture) it was created by a particular person with a particular experience in a particular social context. The artistic product reflects those particularities (the artist’s perspective or point of view) and the meaning it conveys is determined by them.

Moreover, any form of communication (like language or art) requires the use of the symbolic tools of the culture. This means that in order to reflect the culture through artistic representation, the artist has to be able to stand both outside and inside a culture simultaneously (but never be totally in either place). Only from that vantage point can the artist use the symbolic tools of a culture to communicate what he or she observes about the culture itself. This is what is known as “artistic commentary.” It conveys the artist’s intent, or impetus for creating something.

### **The Role of the Audience and the Alienation of the Artist**

The process does not end with the creation of an artistic product. Art needs an audience other than the artist who created it. In solitude, the artist may marvel at his or her creation—might even be enlightened or surprised by it—but the artist will remain unfulfilled without the participation of an audience. The artist was moved to respond to cultural stimuli, the response now requires an audience to receive it, absorb it and refract it back to the artist. This is the contribution of the artistic product to the cultural landscape that inspired it. This way the artist can observe the change engendered by his or her commentary. To comment on something is to change it.

If the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret and then comment in order to change, the nature of the audience is also to observe and interpret. Because each human being has been exposed to an infinite number of symbols in widely divergent patterns and trajectories, and at different points in our lives, each spectator will “read” (or make sense of, interpret the symbols) the artistic product differently. An entire audience might have similar emotional or intellectual responses to a piece of art, but each spectator will have a slightly different experience than his or her neighbor. When the members of an audience have an opportunity to discuss their experience, the entire group is enlightened or engaged, bound by the same artistic element. This is how art creates community. A kind of spontaneous culture is fashioned by virtue of a shared experience. The culture is

singular to itself because of the unique qualities of each audience member and any variance within the art.

The audience has one last critical role to play in the artistic process, and it is both enlightening and violent. The audience is invited to observe a translation of a common experience through the perspective of an artist. The audience is then momentarily able to achieve a similar distance from the culture as the artist did before creating the artistic product, but this time the audience starts at the end and works in retrospect back to the state of things to which the artist originally responded. They are afforded the benefit of the impetus for the art and the art itself simultaneously. This event illustrates the extent, or limit, to the intent of the artist.

In order to comprehend the art, in order to feel it, the spectator must contextualize it within his or her own unique experience. Of course this experience is largely determined by the spectator's cultural context. Even as the spectator experiences the art he or she changes it, manipulates it so that it will fit within the frame of reference particular to him or her. Art encourages all who use the system of symbolism, meaning and metaphor to consider it differently. This is where the integrity of the artist's original intent starts to break down, and it is the moment in which the artist **looses** the ability to control his or her artistic product. The artist can no longer speak for the art; the art now speaks for itself and for the artist. By virtue of its nature, an audience changes the artistic product fundamentally from the scope of what is intended by the artist to the full breadth of the potential audience experience. To claim the art is to fulfill it, it is also to sever it forever from its original intent—it is no longer defined by a striving to effect change through artistic translation and commentary, it is the reception of the comment and the realization of change. The artistic product has traveled a very great distance between the artist and the audience. It is now absorbed back into the cultural system of metaphor and symbolism and becomes another tool for communicating meaning. The artist is impotent to reclaim or control the artistic product. So to reiterate, the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret, comment and in so doing effect change. The nature of the audience is to observe, interpret, and claim.

### **Perpetual Motion: The Circle of Art and Culture**

The manipulation, possible misunderstanding and absorption of the artistic product by the culture, is both a fulfillment and a violation of the artist. The only way for the artist to regain agency or engage his or her artistic product from this point on is to produce more art in response to the culture. This is how art is perpetual and how culture and art continually constitute one another. It stimulates growth in both arenas and so keeps a society from stagnating.

## **Summary**

To review, an artist responds to cultural stimuli through the manipulation of symbols that the culture uses to communicate meaning. The artistic product is a blend of the system of meaning specific to a culture and the artist's interpretation of that system. The art produced is the artist's commentary. The audience functions as an agent of translation as it claims the artistic product for itself and alters it in order to access it. The culture absorbs the art and the artist no longer can change or access his or her artistic product now that it has entered the social realm of the symbolic. The artist can only create more art, using the tools of the cultural symbolic, a system that has already been altered by its absorption of the original artistic product. Thus art and culture are constitutive of one another.

**A Brief Overview on the History of African American Theatre**  
*Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide*

Aspects of the dramatic performing arts can be found in cultures around the world. Globally speaking, American Theater is a relatively new tradition. As theater has evolved from the African roots of Greek tragedy to Shakespearean epics, American stages have produced a wide range of plays, largely influenced by the diverse peoples inhabiting this nation. In its early years, American Theater reflected the lives of its proponents, namely white, property-owning, Christian men. Ironically, even as America established itself as a sovereign nation, the drama of the day came largely from Europe, which boasted a large canon of work. As Americans established a canon of their own dominant political and social trends were addressed by the work. One of the nation's most successful and fraught enterprises was racialized slavery in the American South. Depicted on white stages, black characters often fit into stereotypical characters which would haunt American stages for decades to come. Some of the most prevalent of those were the Sambo, the Uncle, the Mammy and the Jezebel. These stereotypes would be reflected over and over again in the theater, usually depicted by white actors in blackface.

Minstrelsy, a tradition born out of the plantation culture of the antebellum South, was very popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. White entertainers would do comedic impressions of, or parody, the stories, songs and dance, jokes and music of black slaves for white audiences. Minstrelsy was a very lucrative form of theater for many years. White audiences filled houses to laugh at representations of happy, contented and dim-witted slaves. The tradition would continue long into the mid-1900s. For many years, (largely due to the audience expectations created by these white performers) the only work black performers could find was to perform in minstrel shows, *in blackface*. It reinforces the notion that the depictions of blackness and black people on white stages was not real. Even black actors had to “perform” white ideas of blackness by darkening their skin, wearing silly costumes and miming white actors' depictions of stereotypes.

One of the first theater companies to offer some kind of contradiction to these stereotypes was established in 1821 in New York City and was called The African Grove Theater. It was founded by William Henry Brown and James Hewlett, both who had traveled by ship throughout the Caribbean, where story-telling, performance, dance and

music were essential to the culture and survival of the slaves working on sugar cane and tobacco plantations, salt flats and mines. The company performed tragedies and comedies from Shakespeare to American playwrights. Eventually, the need for work that came from within the African American experience proved itself. Two years after it opened, the first play written and produced by an African American was presented there in 1823. The play, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, by Brown, played to mixed (though predominately black) audiences that year. However, many whites were adamantly opposed to the existence of such a theater and frequent police raids, harassment and threats forced Brown and Hewlett to relocate the theater several times throughout the lower East side of Manhattan. Eventually, the white opposition won out over the tenacity of the black actors, directors and producers of The African Grove Theater Company and it closed its doors permanently.<sup>1</sup>

In Hollywood, some of America's most revered epic films depict the early stereotypes created in the theater and in the 1920s and 30s. Black artists, writers and musicians began responding to the racist depictions and creating their own artistic representations of black life and philosophy. This period of burgeoning talent and new work is known as The Harlem Renaissance. In 1923, the first serious play written by a black playwright was produced on Broadway. It was called *The Chip Woman's Fortune* by Willis Richardson.<sup>2</sup> Still, the prevalent trend was for white artists and producers to pull from black narrative, song and dance and parody it for audiences. Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer were particularly concerned with white representations of blackness in the theater. Read below, Langston Hughes' famous poem "Notes on Commercial Theater":

You've taken my blues and gone --  
You sing 'em on Broadway  
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,  
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies  
And you fixed 'em  
So they don't sound like me.  
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see Bernard L. Peterson Jr.'s "Introduction: The Origin and Development of the Black American Playwright from the Antebellum Period to World War II," *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers: A Biographical Directory and Catalog of Plays, Films, and Broadcasting Scripts*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 1-21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

You also took my spirituals and gone  
You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones  
All kinds of Swing Mikados  
And in everything but what's about me --  
But someday somebody'll  
Stand up and talk about me --  
Black and beautiful --  
And sing about me,  
And put on plays about me!  
I reckon it'll be  
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.<sup>3</sup>

This poem echoes one of the founding tenets of another critical moment in black theater history, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. It was during this period that some of the most celebrated black writers responded vociferously to the racism American citizens were struggling against in the Civil Rights Movement. Self-representation became a major focus of the movement—art was created by, for, and about black people. Artists such as LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Nikki Giovanni, Harold Cruse, Ray Durem, Adrienne Kennedy, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez all produced seminal work during this period of time. In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry's famous play *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in New York City. It was the first time a play written by a black playwright, directed by a black director (Lloyd Richards) and written about black people was presented at this level. The next twenty years saw an eruption of African American theater companies springing up around the country, one of which was Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director Lou Bellamy, Penumbra addressed issues of racial tension and misrepresentation between what were visibly separate black and white Americas. Over the last 30 years, Penumbra has provided a consistently clear message that the African American experience is rich, dynamic and critical to the American theater canon. While visiting the Twin Cities, playwright August Wilson said of Penumbra:

It was with the indomitable spirit associated with pioneers and visionaries that Lou Bellamy took a handful of actors over [sic] twenty years ago and challenged them not only to believe in themselves but to have a belief larger than anyone's disbelief. When I walked through the doors of Penumbra Theatre [sic], I did not know that I would find life-long friends and supporters that would encourage and enable my art. I did not know I would have my first

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<sup>3</sup> Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. (New York: Vintage, 1995) 215.

professional production, a musical satire called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. I did not know then what Penumbra Theatre would come to mean to me and that there would come a time when Penumbra would produce more of my plays than any other theatre in the world. And that their production of *The Piano Lesson* would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work. I only knew that I was excited to be in a black theater that had real lights, assigned seats and a set that was not a hodgepodge of found and borrowed props as had been my experience with all the black theater I had known. We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of PTC enlarged that possibility. And its corresponding success provokes the community to a higher expectation of itself. I became a playwright because I saw where my chosen profession was being sanctioned by a group of black men and women who were willing to invest their lives and their talent in assuming a responsibility for our presence in the world and the conduct of our industry as black Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Through artistically excellent theater, Penumbra has sought to plumb the depths of the human experience by presenting culturally specific and historically accurate depictions of African Americans. Sadly, many of the black theater companies founded during the BAM have closed over the years, largely due to lack of funding, managerial problems and poor attendance. Penumbra's survival is a testament to all the people who believe in its power for social change. Our artists, administration, audiences and community have consistently buoyed us up and kept this important institution afloat on the occasionally stormy seas of non-profit arts administration. Today, because of our growth and the changing world, Penumbra is widely regarded as a pioneer of cross-cultural dialogue. Our template of finding the universal through the specificity of human experience has become a model for teaching, arts application and criticism. We are nationally and internationally recognized as a preeminent African American theater company.

Lou Bellamy explains that black people not only “have to be at the table” to engage in cross-cultural conversations, but host such debates as well. In an America that increasingly more often accepts oversimplified answers, we seek out nuance and enjoy disturbing the veneer. At Penumbra, we provide the table at which artists and audiences alike may sit down and rigorously engage one another with complicated questions. We are proud to have these artists in our midst and excited to produce work that circumvents a hackneyed black / white binary.

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<sup>4</sup> August Wilson, excerpted from a speech given at Penumbra Theatre Company, 1997.

## Synopsis

### *Blue*

**SETTING:** A small town in South Carolina. The Clark family is the wealthiest African America family in the city. They are the proprietors of the town's only African American funeral home.

**ACT I:** The late seventies. Peggy Clark has spent the day shopping and unwinds listening to the albums of her favorite musician Blue Williams. Her 12-year-old son Rueben listens with her and the two share a quiet moment together before their weekly family dinner. Rueben's bother Sam Clark III, a 17-year-old most interested in girls and defying his parent's expectations, brings home LaTonya Dinkins, a girl from the other side of the tracks whom his mother disapproves of. A tense family dinner ensues, with Peggy picking on LaTonya and Peggy's mother-in-law complaining about the pretentiousness of the food they are eating. Peggy warms up to LaTonya after discovering she is also a Blue Williams fan. LaTonya becomes Peggy's pet project, despite the fact that she and Sam have broken up, until LaTonya runs away with Blue after attending one of his concerts, an act that Peggy cannot forgive. Act I closes with the Clark family being featured in *Ebony* magazine, the height of Peggy's social ambitions.

**ACT II:** Fifteen years later. An adult Ruben Clark returns to his parent's home for a celebration commemorating the opening of their new funeral home. This time it is Rueben who has the antagonist relationship with his mother, whom he is convinced thinks of him as a failed musician. Sam III has accepted many of his family's expectations and is running the family business alongside of his father Sam Jr. After the ceremony, LaTonya Dinkins arrives at the house and forces a family confrontation, revealing a secret that has been buried for over 20 years.

**EPILOGUE:** A few years later. Rueben Clark has finally accepted his family and himself. He is a successful record producer and the play closes with Rueben recording the first Blue Williams album in several years.

**Dramaturgical Notes**  
**By May Mahala, August Wilson Dramaturgical Fellow**

Issues of class, wealth, and fame bubble to the surface in this play which is part comedy, part kitchen sink drama, and a whole lot of good music thrown in for good measure. The play chronicles Peggy Clark's social ambitions and her two sons struggle to reconcile their family's expectations of them with their own personal and artistic goals. At times, the Clark family seems obsessed with appearances and fairly shallow. However, as the play progresses, you see that this family has a deep acceptance and love for themselves as they really are, and they are able to let go of some of the social pretentiousness that Peggy in particular feels the need to project.

*Blue* was written by Charles Randolph-Wright and premiered at the Arena Stage in Washington D.C. in 2000 with the legendary Phyllcia Rashad in the role of Peggy and Michael McElroy as the title character Blue Williams. Nona Hendryx, who rose to fame as part of Patti Labelle and the Bluebells and who is a Grammy award winner composed the music for *Blue* and co-wrote the lyrics along with Randolph-Wright.

The play depicts some autobiographical material from the life of Charles Randolph-Wright, who grew up as part of a successful South Carolina family in the funereal business. Randolph-Wright is a member of the Wright Family Foundation, whose mission is to preserve and record the Wright family's contribution to York County, inspire other African American families to do the same, and preserve and maintain African American cemeteries.

Black middle and upper class experiences are sometime depicted less frequently than African Americans struggling with poverty and working class experiences in film, television, and on stage. *Blue* depicts both successful musicians and successful businessmen and as such Penumbra Theatre Company's production on this work works well to reveal the myriad experiences and manifestations of black culture and black identity present within this country.

**Contextual Essay**  
**by Sarah Bellamy, Education Director**

**PROLOGUE**

*Blue* tells many stories. It is about more than unrequited love. Within the larger production, each story has its own through-line, its own context, and spotlights different issues.

This romantic comedy is extended to a much deeper level when presented at Penumbra Theatre Company. By virtue of our mission, to illuminate the human condition through the prism of the African American experience, our staging of any play interacts with and challenges the history of stereotypical representations of black people that have cycled through American culture. These depictions, and our counter-images, have created a tapestry of powerfully evocative and emotionally charged cultural metaphors in which Americans encounter, consider, and avoid talking about, our very particular racial history and its impact on our contemporary lives.

For this essay, I have chosen to focus my inquiry on three generations of black women represented in *Blue*. Through them I am able to consider the debilitating intersections of race, class and gender oppression as they merge in representations of black femininity. Each woman embodies a different perspective, a different approach to forging bonds of love, kinship and community. By situating their stories within an historically informed black American context, it is possible to highlight the creative ingenuity and strength of spirit that black women have maintained, contributing enormous sustenance to their families, and the larger black community, since our entrée into this country.

This essay is in celebration of that spirit.

Sarah Bellamy  
January 2007

## A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Throughout this paper I will use the terms “we,” “us” and “our” to describe a culturally specific group affiliation that is at once personal, familial, communal and national. Each level is interrelated and each has its own experience, none of which can be taken out of context of the larger historical framework of American history.

The academy often makes the traditional choice to attempt to subsume the first person quality of a piece of writing to the thoughts it engenders. This pedagogy runs counter to the experience of “marked” individuals (that is race-marked, gender-marked or Otherwise distinct from the elite white, heterosexual, Christian able-bodied male). We speak from and through the material of our bodies, through our corporeality, and let this experience inform ideology. It is necessary to understand that all human beings have a point of view from which they speak, informed by a culturally relevant and specific identity. To ignore this fact is to assume that there is an absolute or “true” experience of humanity that is knowable, isolated and univocal. In an increasingly more global context, we know that is impossible. To speak from a communally grounded perspective is to join in the hum of humanity, to celebrate the harmony of all of our voices, and marvel at the music it makes.

**The Heart of the Matter: Black Women at the Center of *Blue***  
**by Sarah Bellamy, Education Director**

**Introduction: Unbinding Utterance**

At first glance, *Blue* is a romantic comedy about love lost. It is the tale of one woman, Peggy Clark, reconciling her past with her present. At closer examination, however, and placed within the proper context for evaluation and interpretation, *Blue* becomes a meditation on the manifestations of race and racism within black culture, particularly as it pertains to black women. These institutions mediate our sense of identity, our relationships with one another and to our family and community. Peggy Clark, on the surface a flighty, control obsessed and rather melodramatic woman emerges instead a powerful representation of the experience of internalized racism and the appraisal of black womanhood by an oppressive society. We have had to find other ways to communicate without social distortion. Society has done a lot of speaking for, and about, black women and our American experience. Most of these liturgies are composed well beyond the scope of our control and do not invite our participation. Subsequently, we find ourselves continually challenged as to the validity of our experience and the credibility of our voices. Our creativity in response to this experience has opened alternate channels of communication that are often masked. If assessed superficially, much of the meaning is missed.

In this way, the form mirrors the content. The masking of such complicated issues within a romantic comedy is similar to the dissemination of meaning across many planes, a strategy for communication, education and cultural preservation used by black people for centuries. This masking technique speaks to a black aesthetic that, even unconsciously, engages an archive of collective ancestral wisdom from which black Americans periodically glean relevant mechanisms for survival. Contextually speaking, *Blue* is no different. What seems to be a solely a comedy about a female groupie superficially in love with an aging rhythm and blues musician is in fact much more than that. It is the story of familial intervention, a coming to terms with the negative

manifestations of one woman having subscribed too long to externally defined, racist notions of success.

### **Imaging Family: Articulations of Status Through Race and Class**

One of the most telling symptoms of Peggy's alienation is her near manic need to control the external appearance of her family in the public sphere. This is evidenced in the clothes she buys (we are privy to her reputation in the community vis-à-vis the younger, less educated and poorer LaTonya), her encounter at a department store in which she buys not one, but two fur coats, in an attempt to empower herself in response to an unpleasant situation with a racist store clerk. This does not solve Peggy's problem; though it does spite and silence the contemptible clerk, it reveals more about Peggy's insecurities than demonstrate her power. Peggy is imprisoned by her image. Through her conspicuous and tidy supervision of this image, she imagines to have agency in determining how people will receive her. Peggy finds herself challenged daily by intersecting tropes of race, gender, and class status. She attempts to circumnavigate each in different ways, employing various "coping mechanisms," symptomatic of a very serious problem: namely, the racism she has internalized and allowed to control her life.

The fictional town of Kent, South Carolina is a deeply economically stratified, an environment not unique to the American South, wherein race is articulated largely through class. This affords the more wealthy black families a place at the table, so to speak, within the culture of the Carolinas, worthy, in other words, of inclusion into a world of prosperity wherein demarcations of race and ethnicity are blurred by the weight of one's purse. In this context, poverty is a powerfully defining force, even as it pertains to whiteness, it can make whiteness visible, i.e. "white trash."<sup>5</sup> The poor are under-educated; their worldview and cultural experience is almost exclusively localized. They are moored to the land like so many ships, dwarfed by fields vast as oceans within a strongly agricultural economy. Here tobacco, cotton, and sugar are staple crops with a long, violent history. Then there are the shipyards, the fishermen along the coastal

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<sup>5</sup> See *White Trash: Race and Class in America*. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds. (New York and London: Routledge, 1997). *White Trash* is a collection of reflective essays on the experience of race as determined by economic poverty experienced by (largely) rural white Americans.

regions; the industrial underbelly of the Southern belle society. The division between the working and upper classes is stark and reinforced repeatedly, like traffic lights along a road. Upward mobility is slow and plodding. This is the economic presence surrounding pristinely manicured communities. The entire society has been built by and through the interlocking, oppressive systems of racism, economic disparity, and the denial of slavery as the determinant factor for the current sociopolitical context.

The middle and upper-middle class black community of Kent is carefully encrypted with codes of conduct, aesthetic judgments, and standards by which moral character are assessed. Almost all of this is navigated superficially, that is, based on how it appears versus how it lives and moves within the community. Class differentiates the experience of race between the upper classes and the poor, so it is the visibility of affluence that “empowers” black people in Kent.

This is the context in which marriage places Peggy Clark. Having traveled to Kent with Samuel from Chicago where she was a fashion model, Peggy is ill-equipped to deal with the sealed, antagonistically ordered society of affluent black folks she encounters. Peggy has unseated several young ladies queued up behind the area’s most eligible bachelor, her first offense to the order of this society. To go outside the community is to reject the most valuable embodiment of their achievement; the cultivated debutantes represent an arrival at a place of economic and racial success. More than likely the young women were groomed largely to be paired with the sons of other affluent families in Kent.

Hence, young Mrs. Samuel Clark Jr. arrived already gossiped about. We can deduce that the stoic, watchful society women of Kent likely considered her fast, impure, common; all of the criticisms she heaps upon LaTonya upon their initial introduction. Peggy likely experienced the same or similar judgments. Like LaTonya, Peggy was determined to prove that she was worthy. Rather than attempt to fit into the pristine world of debutante society that had already rejected her, she flaunted her exoticism; in contrast to the morally upright, severe society she was urbane, worldly, wild, and bold enough not

to apologize. Ironically, though, Peggy's determination to remove herself from comparison to the ideal woman in Kent society only anchors her further to this society and the gradient by which it would deem her unworthy of inclusion. As long as she continues to shape herself in opposition to this world, it will hold a strange and sickening power over her. Unless she comes to terms with herself and finds self-worth, she will spend the rest of her life in Kent desperate to maintain an impossible image; to keep her secrets, her failures and the resounding criticism such missteps would invite at bay. The more vociferously Peggy declares her cultured superiority, the more mired in the colloquial context and its gradients for assessment she becomes.

It is not difficult, then, to understand why Peggy is so fiercely protective of the image her family projects. Both she and her husband are well aware of their place within society, each has accepted the duty of maintaining a particular public persona. This responsibility is taken quite seriously, extending beyond the immediate family, through the generations of Clarks and their legacy in Kent. In this way, the Clarks have laid claim to a legacy within the region that does not necessarily require them to reconcile that legacy with the history of black people in the area vis-à-vis the system of plantation slavery. It is the tenuous negotiation of this balance that keeps the Clark family rooted to, yet isolated from, the black community in Kent.

Peggy's life is mediated by codes that delineate her status within Kent. She is a beautiful woman. Her days are spent shopping at the most exclusive department stores. She and her husband live in a well-appointed home, and are one of the most respected couples in their community. The American Express card, the fur coats, the snippets of other languages Peggy adds to conversation, the ever-revolving furniture, are symbols meant to mark her class status and arrival into the upper echelon of society. In the context of the South in the seventies, a black woman with an American Express card signifies a certain level of financial security and by extension social standing. Peggy alludes to a time when this would not have been possible. Coming from within that context, purchasing something with an American Express card, even if it is credit and not outright

cash, elevates her to a level of status that suggests she has overcome some of the prejudices and exclusions of the past. These are all important markers of their status.

Still, however special the experience of using such elite routes of exchange may be, it remains that she is buying on credit and worries about what her husband will say, so much so that she encourages her son to keep the purchases a secret. She overextends herself to maintain an illusion of wealth and success, potentially at the expense of the family's financial security. In this way, she is truly articulating her place as a member of the upper-middle class, not the upper class, that, in a capitalist society, encourages people to strive for an image of wealth that is standardized by the very rich but not realistic for anyone else.

The pressure Peggy experiences is symptomatic of a larger dilemma. The affluent black populace in Kent has encrypted itself with externally defined codes of wealth and success that decontextualizes American wealth accumulation from the original system that kick-started our national economy, namely plantation slavery. This *economy of individualism* runs counter to the historic experience of black Americans. Upward social mobility can come at a price for the middle-class black family. While most black Americans find themselves (for better and for worse) “enmeshed” in extended family and kinship networks, “and draw on them for positive support,” these alliances along genealogy and racial category are threatened by negotiations of “economic and social mobility factors.”<sup>6</sup> Investing in a system that is deliberately void of an historical context, and accountability to the entirety of that history, requires the surrender of cultural continuity, group connectivity and communal support. Adhering to such a system is thus experienced as both isolating and alienating.

Joe Feagin and Yanick St. John found in one sociological study on the impact of race and class on contemporary black families that focus group participants were conscious of an ideological and practical breakdown in the ties binding black American

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<sup>6</sup> Feagin, Joe R. and Yanick St. John. *Double Burden: Black Women and Every Day Racism*. (Armonk and London: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1998) 151.

families. Respondents alluded to a “gradual weakening” of extended family and kinship networks within the contemporary black community due, they suggested, to an increasingly more common “identification with dominant values of individualism,” versus what Feagin and St. John call “traditional communalism.”<sup>7</sup> The impact of the American system of capitalism and its use of race to determine access to resources, to determine the level at which non-whites can participate in the sociopolitical and cultural currents that govern the society, cannot be underestimated. The weakening of the care and kinship bonds between members of the Clark family is evidenced through Peggy’s engagement with a capitalist society that values individual wealth over communal health. Within a context of racially stratified, capitalist patriarchy, the black female experience and her relationships with her family have been used over and over again as a mechanism for assessing the barometric pressure of our American society. Much of Peggy’s behavior evidenced in the first act is antithetical to a healthy identity grounded within a black aesthetic and moral ethic.

The trouble between Peggy and Tillie represents an intergenerational debate as to the validity of importing external evaluations of success. In the conflicts between these two women, one can feel the pressure to conform to such a program in a rapidly globalizing world. What Tillie Clark regards as too posh, overtly flamboyant or irregular, Peggy sees as the epitome of *the now*. Every Friday Peggy ‘visits another country’ when she serves the family meal, admittedly to unsettle her mother-in-law. Peggy intends to make Tillie feel dated and ignorant to the ways of the world. The fact that this challenge happens in the Clark home, so deeply embedded within upper-crust Kent society, is significant. Peggy’s cultural appropriation can be read as an attempt to free herself from the pressures of family and community legacy which she cannot reconcile with an externally defined notion of success. She cannot respond to the oppression of racism in a literal, immediate way, so she lashes out at her family, at the metaphorical “Mother” representative of the living past. In so doing, she violently decontextualizes her black female experience from the systems of support engendered by an affiliation to a group enriched by contextual meaning and cultural nuance. Tillie, as part of the old order,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

regards Peggy's flamboyance as an assault upon standard social mores, a set code of ethics. It is seen as highfaluting. She constantly criticizes her daughter-in-law for putting on airs. Again one generation's assault upon its elder is observable in a struggle for autonomy and place within society.

By placing Tillie and Peggy on opposite ends of a generational spectrum, time is ordered along an evolutionary track. The past is thus linked to a sense of stagnation or underdevelopment which, juxtaposed against the experience of younger generations, marks an illusion of "progress." This is symptomatic of the dominant culture as well. This notion of progress relies on an idea that history can be split into phases, or finite periods. Breaking history, and hence time, into finite periods makes invisible the influence of past events on the contemporary world. It allows for time to be experienced as a sense of progress, so that *a movement forward* can be read only in terms of *what has past*, signifying a resolution or end to an event that becomes encapsulated, and thus frozen, in time. This process allows for a false sense of resolution to contexts of conflict. It enables societies to live purely in *the now*; but the experience is fraught because the past does have a bearing on the present experiences of humans within a society and their future as well. There is no way to determine a collective consciousness without acknowledging the fact of history. This means that the idea of a nation is impossible without history. America is a fantastic example of an attempt to have our cake and eat it too; our patriotism betrays a *national* identity, but we are unwilling to deal with the fact of slavery in building that nation. So we break the history of this country into periods of time that can be assessed, acknowledged and then placed on the shelf to collect dust, attempting to maintain a sense of collectivity as a nation outside of the history that binds us all together.

Peggy's emphasis on elements of culture outside the American context betrays the fact that some black Americans also feel an intense shame around our racial history and the fact of slavery. Peggy's search for "culture" outside of her own suggests that she is uncomfortable with the cultural context in which she finds herself, and, in this case rightly so. The upper middle-class society of Kent has

managed to almost completely isolate itself from the working class folks in an attempt to lessen the racial oppression they feel. In so doing, they critically divide the community in response to external definitions of value; they turn their backs on a history of communal support that mirrors Peggy's rejection of Tillie, most obviously demonstrated by the scene in which the Clarks plan for a family portrait.

It should come as no surprise that Peggy's divorce from a healthy, communally grounded identity materializes in a photograph; the most literal manifestation of social image. As the family squabbles over Sam's hair (another indication of internalized racism), Peggy suddenly decides to her exclude Tillie, the paternal grandmother and matriarch of the family, from the family portrait. Within a white American context such an act might be read solely as an attempt to get back at Tillie, motivated out of malice or spite. It would not be read as a very dramatic and hurtful symptom of an illness from which Peggy suffers, reflected also in the larger community of Kent's black elite. It is a direct indication of the image to which she ascribes, one of that is affluent, nuclear and ironically not "too black." This image is to don the cover of one of the most widely distributed black magazines in America, *Ebony*. The commentary regarding the dissemination of such unrealistic and unrealizable goals into the black community by way of the magazine's readership is profound. Peggy's assault upon the past vis-à-vis her mother-in-law has serious implications on the members of Clark family. The ties that bind them together begin to erode. As these bonds wither, each member of the family is further isolated, further disenfranchised.

For Peggy to subsume herself, her desire, and the health of her family within a capitalist, racist framework suggests a major psychic fracture on a fundamental level; an alienation from the self—most readily understood amongst African Americans as internalized racism. In truth, ultimately, it is the redirection of externally oppressive forces into the self, in order to manifest conflict that is seemingly self-derivative and self-referential and therefore solvable, controllable, finite. Race, though, is never "done."

Neither is “class” or “gender.” These are *identities*, pathways through which human beings experience reality in relation to, and because of, the social world.

### **Divide and Conquer Don’t Make Sense Here: Resuscitating Bonds of Blackness in a Racist, Capitalist Environment**

*Blue* is set in the early seventies. The black family was deeply fraught in the social and political context at this time. The Civil Rights Movement had ushered in much linguistic if not legal change, and the pressure surrounding the Black Power Movement was contending with a larger, antiwar initiative. Racially specific civic protest began to be subsumed within a generalized culture of protest, that itself was subsumed and further generalized by free-love, mind-altering drugs and the entrancing music of Jimmy Hendrix and Janis Joplin. Circulating at the same time, was a paper Senator Daniel P. Moynihan published on the black family that dispensed racist stereotypical assumptions about black life, culture and family so tenacious we still are forced to contend with them today. The essay, entitled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” was particularly damaging for black women and our relationship to our children as seen through the eyes of dominant society.

Moynihan purported to demonstrate the pathological nature of matriarchal families within the black community; “black female-headed families [were regarded as] a serious retardant to the progress of African American communities.”<sup>8</sup> This report was nearly exclusively responsible for the resurgence in media representations of an old, familiar stereotype from the antebellum South, the *Mammy*, only this time, she did not don a handkerchief and collect watermelons. This time Mammy resurfaced as a Welfare Mother who collected babies and government checks. The criminalization of poverty merged with the racialization of class and set the only credible parameters for defining for black womanhood and black family and kinship ties within the dominant American context for decades. The definitions of an ideal American woman or family, have historically involved the devaluation of black femininity and families through racist

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<sup>8</sup> This document, now known as The Moynihan Report, was originally published as “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1965). It is quoted here by Feagin and St. John; *ibid*, 153.

misrepresentations disguised as “data.” This is why adhering to externally defined determinations of success can be poisonous for the black community. Our adherence to such systems of value allows for the circulation of the stereotypes they engender to continue.

While upward mobility within the black community can be an isolating experience, Feagin and St. John point out that “middle-class African Americans have larger networks of kin and fictive kin than low-income African Americans.” It may be true that both states of extreme poverty and extravagant wealth are isolating, but the more moderate experience of accumulation within the American, capitalist framework is one of community for many. Black people experience family quite differently than Moynihan and many whites imagine. The unique quality of such a balance between personal wealth and communal health is emphasized by the fact that the capitalist order is not communally responsible. Yet black Americans have managed to work within this framework, albeit often at a different pace or via nontraditional routes, to create security for their families and communities, and regard this as indicative of personal success, in spite of a system that does not value such culturally associative connectivity or responsibility.

Black Americans are heir to a long tradition of communal reinforcement. The NAACP was founded on the tenets that supporting one another was beneficial to the advancement of all. The Underground Railroad, education initiatives such as “each one, teach one,” and the order of black Catholic nuns known as the Oblate Sisters of Providence, all subscribe to an internally instigated effort toward communal health. Feagin and St. John regard intergenerational connectivity as a system of cooperation that runs counter to the dictates of dominant society that identify success as individual wealth versus communal health. Instead, in this model, the two are co-constitutive of one another; “individualism means successful cooperation,” and “togetherness and helping are critical to individual advancement.”<sup>9</sup> There is a “built-in mutual aid system for the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 152.

welfare of its members and the maintenance of the family as a whole.”<sup>10</sup> This runs absolutely counter to Moynihan’s assessment of black culture and kinship networks, that, decontextualized and assessed within a vacuous space of white noise in which the experience of slavery and its direct assault on the black family is ignored, was obviously intended to promote and preserve the racist, capitalist system that is threatened by these allegiances of support and sustenance.

Feagin and St. John find evidence that “today, relative to whites and even to some ethnic groups of color, [black Americans show] a higher level of multigenerational households, fosterage of kin and nonkin children, care for dependent family members, respect for elders, religiosity, and sacrificial efforts for the upward mobility of [the members of the community].”<sup>11</sup> If contemporary black Americans are made aware of this history, it seems impossible to extricate oneself from the network of subsistence black Americans have created and smacks of a violent, self-imposed exile.

Indeed, Peggy experiences a grave sense of isolation. She assesses “the look” of her family against a commitment by dominant society to the represent the black community through a lens of impoverishment. Rather than draw upon the ancestral wisdom of communal support available to a grounded black community, Peggy finds herself striving for an ideal that is defined for white Americans and is actually outlined in reference to the degradation and exclusion of non-whites. Still, her “choice” to do so cannot be read outside of a communal context; the affluent black culture in Kent act as a kind of filter that determines the criteria for judging success. By adhering to determinations of family and its organization as dictated by the dominant culture, Peggy attempts to squeeze a square peg in a round hole, so to speak. It simply doesn’t fit. Try as she may to map the idea of a “perfect” nuclear family onto her own, the cultural umbilical cord binding them all continually impedes her. Why doesn’t the nuclear family

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>11</sup> Feagin and St. John are quoting research garnered by Robert Staples and Leonor Boulton Johnson; they quote from *Black Families at the Crossroads: Challenges and Prospects* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2005) pp. 194-5.

model, independent of community, make sense for black Americans? The reason for this is explained by the racialist history of the birth of an American economy.

Within the US economy of racialized slavery, money and power were not available to black people as commodities. Instead, black *people* were *objects* for sale within an economy of flesh. Wealth and power, the gradients by which whites measured success, signaled their enslavement. Their labor did not produce fruits they could enjoy. Instead, within an economy of slavery, black notions of value were negotiated around the creative ingenuity of the people to survive and maintain a sense of collective, cultural continuity. Already we see the creation of an alternate system of value with its own code of ethics, morality and justice that runs parallel and largely in opposition to the dominant track. What was valuable in this economy to black people was not material goods outside of the self; rather true value is placed on the self *itself*, and how this *self*, bound within a prison of its own flesh in an absurd and illogical context of human bondage, can reach out, relate to and form coalition with other *selves*, thereby mutually constituting one another as *subjects* instead of objects outside of a framework that would suggest there is no *self* to recognize, no humanity to speak of at all. This is the tradition from which black folks come. This is most essentially articulates our spirit of service to one another and our communities.

Surviving the violence of this system meant that value had to be placed elsewhere, just as selfhood had to be conceived elsewhere. Family and spirituality emerged as critically constitutive aspects of the black American experience and identity and have remained so. Black American networks of family and community can be read as antithetically related to white cultural scripts that promote a capitalist economy.

Most whites, including public commentators and politicians, do not understand the deep need that most blacks share for family relationships, their altruism toward kith and kin, or their nonchalance toward the acquisition of power.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 158-9.

This is because of a dogged resolve to disassociate contemporary American lives with an historical past that includes slavery. Capitalistic materialism is foreign to traditional black family orders because these kin relationships and communities have roots within an economy of slavery in which nothing was owned, and even selfhood was ritualistically challenged. After the Civil War, many black Americans were forced to abandon what meager items they had managed to collect, leaving behind anything that could not be carried. Subsequently, much of the non-oral cultural records were looted, burned, or destroyed, indeterminately assessed for value within a framework that did not understand the cultural meaning of such objects as quilts, dolls, drums and other musical instruments.

Our bonds and connections, even today, must be read historically, especially in response to the restriction of wealth and the impediment of accumulation. Culturally speaking, our systems of value emphasize elements of life that might seem naïve or illogical outside of the relevant historical context. This is why the decontextualization of our experience from history is so debilitating for black Americans and our communities. Without being privy to the interplay of culture and history, we cannot defend our families, cannot resituate the complex creation of systems of support so that they reflect the true genius and will to survive, as opposed to codependency or pathogenic behavior Moynihan suggested. Without understanding our history, contemporary black Americans will not know (though they may sense or feel) that a hug is revolutionary act. It is the physical manifestation of a bond between a people serially divided, hand over fist, as quickly as money could change hands for their sale.

John Blassingame points out that there was no legal existence of family in slavery.<sup>13</sup> Yet it was the experience of family, recreated as often as the sale of relations required, that was the foremost stopgap mechanism for the slave to “survive on the plantation without becoming totally dependent on and submissive to [the] master.” Cast in this light, bonds of family and kinship are revolutionary, emancipatory, and

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<sup>13</sup> Blassingame, John. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1979).

subversive.<sup>14</sup> The nuclear family as a normal image of success within the dominant culture must be reassessed within a context in which race and class dynamics are at play. “Materialistic values lead to the development of a certain type of nuclear family, which in turn appears to reinforce materialism. The smaller a family unit, the larger each share of the rewards and the greater the potential for wealth accumulation.”<sup>15</sup>

Even though wealth and power have remained largely inaccessible to black Americans historically, the dominant culture refuses, as Moynihan’s report proves, to read our nonchalance toward the acquisition of material possessions as a direct challenge to the dominant order of things. Capitalism is entirely dependent upon the idea of “more for me.” It pokes and prods at a self-conscious sense of *lack* in individuals, encouraging them to believe that the sense of shame or deficiency can be alleviated through the desire for, and acquisition of, something external. By placing emphasis on the health and happiness of our families, our communities, our joy, our healing, black Americans affirm and strengthen one another. Many black Americans feel a deep frustration with the idea of “rugged individualism” or the “bootstrap mentality” because it relies on a system that denies the economic foundation of this country, namely slavery. Naturally black folks would be skeptical within that context of any economy that encourages isolation, individualism or division from communal relationships. Such relationships have historically been the major contribution to our survival as a people.

Not everyone sees the value in this process, however. Many white Americans read these alternative systems of value as evidence in support of black poverty or our exclusion from full participation in the socioeconomic governances of this country. Whites make this assessment based on the notion that black people have “opted out” or taken “the easy road,” suggesting a pathogenic reliance on a moralistic and benevolent society. In fact, our cautious engagement with capitalism is nothing short of an ontological resistance and alternate system of value that frustrates this kind of economy

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<sup>14</sup> Blassingame, John. (Ibid., 151). Quoted here by Feagin and St. John, *ibid.*, 157.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

at its core. Our creative kinship networks within this context can be read as political rebellions against the dominant culture.

*Blue* examines a family that has tragically sacrificed this powerful and affirming system in order to “pass” as exemplar of an ideal that belongs to an oppressive, dominant society. This has severe consequences both on personal identity and connective bonds between family members. For example, the fact that Sam and Peggy choose to remain silent about the paternity of their son Reuben speaks to social standard for normalcy and success as defined by the capitalist order outside the historical black experience of family. Within this context, an admission to the child’s true paternity necessarily casts doubt on the adoptive paternal relationship that exists. There is no balance to be struck between the biology of genealogy and the experience of fatherhood for the two are regarded as mutually exclusive. This is a fundamentally cultural difference.

“Culture is adaptive and a mechanism for human survival and actualization, and thus it dictates that a group not adopt values and conceptions that do not harmonize with its requirements.”<sup>16</sup> It does not make sense, in light of our historical experience in this country, for black Americans to understand family in this way. Instead, we have all *taken care* to take care of one another, especially after slavery did its best to destroy relationships between families. Black people created family networks out of whatever remnants of community were left within the American plantation slave system. In this way, the introduction of new characters into the Clark household throughout the progression of the play can be read as a healing act; a move away from a normative, dominant standardization of family that does not fit within black culture and annihilates any attempt at cultural continuity or communal resilience. By the end of the play Tillie, Blue, LaTonya and Blue Jr. have been inducted into a family that has liberated itself from the oppressive forces that would suggest a family should look a particular way, relate to and be related to one another in a particular order. They define family outside of the dominant culture and find a path toward healing.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 155.

## **Singing Alongside Our Sisters: Black Women and Self-Recovery**

The world often feels too big, too oppressive for one individual to take on. So we begin in places where we believe we can effect change. We start within our own communities, with our families, our children, ourselves. If we do not fit smoothly within the categories that supposedly make up our character, there is no system of support outside of our communities to help us negotiate the discrepancies within mainstream culture. Yet many black women continue to seek validation there. Why would we imagine that a context demanding our adherence to racist depictions of our own lives could offer a safe cultural space to unpack the complexities of our experiences in a truthful, open manner? It is to our families, our communities (schools, churches or social clubs) that we must turn for affirmation and support. It is through them that we find the mirror reminding us that the quest to fit into an oversimplified and impoverished cultural landscape stewarded by racism, and sexism is to hate ourselves. Assessing our worth within such a context is a violence that is most insidious, most unkind. One truly devastating consequence of not having come to terms—as a nation—with our racial past, is that generation after generation of black women are not given the support, knowledge and confidence to adequately recognize and so begin to dismantle the manifestations of internalized racism within us, like second skeletons.

Often though, our efforts are often undermined because we use the very tools of oppression to guide our quest toward self-knowledge and empowerment. In *Blue*, Peggy Clark falls prey to this trap. As the immanent theorist Audre Lorde wrote, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”<sup>17</sup> We become critical of our families and by extension our ancestors and the choices they made. By allowing others to decontextualize these choices, we strip-mine expressions of agency by our ancestors and can no longer see the creative ingenuity and resistance evident there. We empower others

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<sup>17</sup> Lorde wrote, “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable. . . For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” (Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House: Comments at ‘The Personal and the Political’ Panel (Second Sex Conference, October 29, 1979),” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (ed. C. Moraga and G. Anzaldúa; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), 98-9.

to assess our worth and our success depends instead on how successfully we've managed to convince ourselves that we look, feel, and live like the dominant society says we should.

The only way for black women to undo what has been done to us, and to invite those who benefit from this process to see beyond their accountability (a feat in and of itself) to their own imprisonment vis-à-vis the racist environment by which we are all bound, is to speak clearly, openly and bravely about our own experiences. "There is a story that must be told, told well and believed by most white men, women and children for the meaning of whiteness and of the United States as a "white republic" to be sustained."<sup>18</sup> It is only through the telling of our own tales, in the untying of our own tongues, that we can silence the haunting whispers of ancient archetypes.

Some might ask, "why should *we* do the work?" To you all I say, I hear you sister. I *hear* you. But I also must insist that we simply cannot afford *not to*. In the name of having survived in spite of a system that would drain us of everything and anything we had, and then, after sucking the marrow from our bones, take aim at our loved ones, we have accomplished immeasurable feats of strength and shown unparalleled creativity. In the name of protecting our loved ones, we were undaunted, courageous, fierce. Why shouldn't we focus that same power on ourselves? Why shouldn't we do the work to protect our own hearts, and the hearts of our girlchildren, from the monsters we stalk in the name of others? We must go to the site of cultivation and plant new seeds. We must trust that some of the earth there is good and will receive what we give, and that by nature of it being soil will respond naturally to give back bountifully.

We cannot afford to keep our heads down and lose ourselves in the jumble of our own daily lives. These are forces that have taken not only our lives from us, but our humanity, our sexuality, our motherhood, our girlhood, our cultural connection, our ancestral wisdom, our strength and energy and bodies and have tried too for our souls. We owe it to no one but ourselves to find the path toward connectivity, toward coalition.

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<sup>18</sup> Feagin, Joe and Yanick St. John, *ibid.*, 14.

It is more than evident that no one but us will do that, nor should we want anyone else to. For if we are truly tired of having others speak for and about us, we need to speak for ourselves. Behind all of the clamor and chaos, it really is that simple.

Telling your story, having your story be received, welcomed, protected by a community, “testifying,” is powerful healing. There is a core of women, a spiritual-flesh-sensibility of women, that does this telling already. Among them are Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Angela Davis; there are playwrights Rebecca Rice, Laurie Carlos, Ntzoke Shange and Suzan Lori Parks. There are doctors and dentists and lawyers and judges who get this, get it in their bones and have fought tooth and nail to get past the pain just enough to accomplish the success their positions reflect now. To their ranks we must usher in those who are further disenfranchised because of lack of access to proper health care, education, support, those who are isolated, afraid, unconsciously surviving their daily lives without joy, without pride. There are so very, very many lost. Just because we have arrived with all of “the stuff,” all the trinkets of capitalism that purport to measure success, does not mean that we are finished. We know, within our hearts and because of our history, that these things do not measure our success, nor do they speak to what we find communally and personally valuable. As long as we let others wallow in the poverty of self-doubt from which we’ve pulled ourselves, their pain and their presence will continue to mar our moments of triumph with guilt. The gradient by which a minority culture is judged by dominant society is tempered by those who are most disenfranchised; the neurologist will be forever and always locked in tandem with the crack-addicted prostitute when she walks into a room full of strangers who do not give her a chance to speak, to say “I” by way of explanation.

Instead of being angry or enraged by this enforced connectivity, let us regard it as gift unbeknownst to those who burden us with it. We know we embody vastly different experiences and life paths; we know also that the dominant culture does not see difference between us. Let us, black women, *forgive each other* for that. Let us see one another in what could be a gorgeously empowering dance of mirrors. May we have the

courage to rummage around for the humanity, the similarity of experience, the pain and pleasure of our shared experience, even if our affiliation to one another is instigated by external forces. Let us look upon one another and smile, for we recognize one another, and in so doing, see ourselves. Let us not be afraid to let that force change us, redistribute our sense of value, open us, as it did for the Clarks.

Within a specifically black American context that values family and kinship as essential components of selfhood, Peggy's adoption of LaTonya can be read as an attempt at self-recovery, a gesture toward healing oneself through the care, education and investment in another. This makes sense when regarded with nuance as to the historical experience of black Americans. It is a logical, empowering, co-constitutive, reparative relationship. At Penumbra, an environment steeped in this particular empiricism and borne out of respect for the culture, this relationship is given a more dynamic, contextualized space to blossom. Another theatre unaware of the history, or uninterested in the creation of socially responsible art, might read the relationship between these two women entirely superficially, as merely a navigation between two women competing for the attention and affection of a man. In reality, Peggy's recognition of potential in LaTonya is an important affirmation and intergenerational rite of passage amongst black women. Even if this element was illuminated by a staging that was decontextualized and unspecific to the cultural experience, more often than not the relationship would have been read as a "top-down" kind of scenario, and the contribution or healing LaTonya affords Peggy might be missed. Blue, the man, is merely a conduit for each of these women to find themselves through each other. What they are searching out is joy, their own feminine strength, their sexual prowess and enjoyment, and through that their selves embodied in their flesh once again in pleasure. They seek *jouissance*.<sup>19</sup> Blue is actually the opposite of sadness and melancholy. Blue is abounding, boundless joy. It is love itself, manifested in the self. It is self-recovery.

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<sup>19</sup> For an explanation on the feminine notion of *jouissance*, see Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. (*Ethique de la difference sexuelle*, 1984). Trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

## **Conclusion: Resuscitating Bonds within a Racist, Capitalist Environment**

Traditional sociology and anthropology have quested to find the effect of racism and gender on the disenfranchised. More recently, however, the academy has reassessed its tendency to locate conversations about the experience of race and gender on females of color. Largely due to contributions to the field made by black and Asian women, Latinas and native women, the conversation has begun to shift back toward the script-writers themselves; in essence, those who benefit most profoundly from the hierarchic, racist patriarchy in which we find ourselves living. These folks—white, property-owning, Christian, straight, able-bodied men—are finally being spotlighted as potential victims of the very system that places them at the “top of the food chain.”

To begin to unpack how the privileged are actually impoverished vis-à-vis our oppressive American context we must consider our history of relating to one another through the lens of what most powerfully describes our differences, the uniquely American brand of racialized slavery. The persistent denial by white Americans to face this history is at the root of our inability to liberate ourselves as a nation.

The metaphorical erasure of slavery in representations of a well-cultivated and idyllic antebellum world *sans* pain, anguish or sometimes without black people at all, is an impulsive and fearful response to the potential for social change after the Civil War. Regarded within a context of defeat and concession, there is a fundamental lack of interest, a lack of nuance and nearly no rigor on the part of whites to understand American history in its full breadth and to engage that history with the daily lives of contemporary white individuals and their collective, dominant culture. This mirrors the literal and metaphorical erasure of the body of evidence that black Americans represent as a collective, cultural force and as race-marked individuals. From the media to the education system, in portraiture, caricature, literature, music, cinema and the theatre, black Americans have been replaced, quieted, whitewashed by white people, white culture and what whites deem worthy or relevant.

And so black folks speak in a different language; we murmur and hum. We sing in subterfuge. We harmonize the proof of our resilience in rebellious joy and call it “the blues.” This musical current that unites us, the improvisational draw on the ancestral archive, is a jazz that runs concurrently throughout and between intersecting points of our experiences of Otherness.<sup>20</sup>

It is this music, this *hum*, that combats the deafening silence, or white noise, surrounding the American experience with race. External representations of our history, our knowledge and our experiences force black women to contend with the question as to whether or not we fit in the world. We turn the microscopic lens toward our own hearts and ask what is wrong with us. Rather than critically examining the careful interplay of race, gender and class dynamics within the cultural landscape of this country, we inspect the recesses of our own psyches for fractures, pathogens, ill-will or self-sabotage. It is not to say that these things do not exist. It is to insist that they must be identified, assessed and treated within a context that creates and sustains them. This means that we cannot do this work alone; we cannot shoulder the entire burden. We need coalition and conversation with those who benefit from this system that does such damage to generation after generation of Americans. In service of our own spirits, we must find a way to rouse those who sit comfortably complacent within this system. Even this is not enough. We must do more than point out their privilege within this system; we need to help them see the blueprint of the system itself, the structure that holds it all together. It is our civic (and vis-à-vis a black ethos, our *personal*) responsibility to mutually engender for one another the kind of moment of enlightenment Toni Morrison describes here,

It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl—the glide and flick of the golden scales, the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills; the castles at the bottom, surrounded by pebbles and tiny, intricate fronds of green; the barely disturbed water, the flecks of waste and food, the tranquil bubbles traveling to the

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<sup>20</sup> Otherness speaks to an experience of difference as described by race, class, gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, ability, etcetera. These categorical definitions are engaged as “other” in a normative context, defined by the very abnormality it points to as “other.” These definitions guide inclusion and exclusion into groups of belonging, participation within the sociopolitical strata governing a society, and access to the resources therein.

surface—and suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world.<sup>21</sup>

This experience prompted a necessary and empowering realization, namely that “the subject of the dream is the dreamer.” Morrison came to realize that the massive archive of information and data about black people was in fact an attempt to define whiteness and white identity. By articulating blackness, by filling the idea of blackness with more and more bits, a white identity was being demarcated, fashioned in opposition to racist manifestations of blackness.<sup>22</sup> This point is critical because it implicates whites not just in the creation of stereotypes and the resultant privileges they sustain and reinforce, but it invites white people to the table by presenting a placemat already waiting. White Americans have just as much at stake in the conversation about our peculiar history with race and representation in this country. What Morrison’s experience shows is that white identities (read: self-knowledge) are inextricably linked to the articulation of black identity. This implicates and has the potential to empower all of us, if only we are brave enough to recognize the other within ourselves.

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<sup>21</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1992). 17.

<sup>22</sup> In *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), Valentine Mudimbe investigates constitution of one identity through the negation of another; locked into a univocal Hegelian dialectic, blackness becomes the canvass upon which whiteness is painted; it stands as a kind of “blank darkness.” Also see Christopher Miller’s *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985) in which o “The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive;” Morrison writes, “an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this.” (ibid.)



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## **Direction Team**

### *Blue*

Directing a play means finding ways to extend the symbolic and metaphorical presence of a script for the stage. To do this, a director must integrate the different elements necessary for a theatrical production into a seamless whole. For example, a director must decide how to use the sound design to magnify a moment of tension onstage, or help an actor communicate emotion better for an audience. It means working on each aspect of the play in detail while being aware of the entire arc of the production itself.

The director also makes the decision to highlight some aspects of the story and not others, this way emphasizing topical issues or themes the playwright suggests to create a larger context for the play, to situate it properly. Each director brings a different perspective to the play. This is why a different story can be told with the same words, even the same actors. One director may choose to play up the tension between two characters while another may choose to emphasize the social and historical context of the play. The director makes the artistic product whole, balanced and sets the spotlight on what he or she finds most interesting or powerful about a script.

## **Director**

### **Lou Bellamy**

I am fond of *Blue* because it is both entertaining and thought-provoking. It is a love story at its heart, but it is also a story about people. As Penumbra patrons know, when we explore human relationships we necessarily examine the condition of our shared American culture. On our stage and in our theater, no individual is without a story, a perspective. This is the portal through which all of us enter the social strata where we engage one another in delicate plays of power and privilege, navigating a cultural landscape that we've created together.

This is just one tale of a young woman who fell and lost love. That tale, realized to its full breadth, is the journey of a black woman faced with a choice to jump headfirst into the uncertainty of love and the irregularity of a musician's lifestyle in heady Chicago, or to settle herself into the secure predictability of an upper-middle class family life in a conservative Southern town. We cannot tell the story of her heartbreak without acknowledging how her race, class and gender have shaped her experience, helped to inform her choices, guided the way she operates within, and protects herself from, the world. That is the work we do at Penumbra. We'll tell you a good story; it will be entertaining, even romantic (hey—we're opening on Valentine's Day weekend!). Yet being a patron of Penumbra means that you are committed to seeing the life experience that informs the characters in our shows. So as you watch these characters interact, as you see them bump into one another in their clumsy attempts to love each other, remember that they represent individuals living within a certain, specific social context. These things matter and must be brought to bear on any representation on our stage.

We hope that you will do the work to meet Peggy Clark halfway. Think about how who you are, and your life experience shapes the way you see her; how it informs your analysis of her situation, shapes the way you judge her choices, her foibles, her love.

**Assistant Director  
Harry Waters Jr.**

*Blue* is the story of a successful black family in South Carolina that owns a thriving Funeral Home business. They face reality in unexpected moments as they listen, embrace as well as create the music of their lives. What does this all mean? I always like to assume that complicated, convoluted statements have simple explanations. This is one of those situations – just like the people in this play.

While examining the many issues and storylines in this refreshing approach to storytelling, one is peripherally reminded of the themes of music and song within other plays presented here at Penumbra Theater Company. August Wilson, as a playwright and a poet, brought to light the search that African Americans must make to find and sing their own songs in order to be free. This quest for the individual as well as collective song continues in many contemporary ways. Charles Randolph-Wright has revealed, in a very personal way, the challenges with singing (and hearing) all the songs, which are sometimes too hard to bear. Within the story of *Blue*, there are revealed secrets, painful truths and recaptured love for this complicated family. Surrounding it all are the songs and music of the decades that speak to and for them in many ways. They have to listen to them being sung again and again and again, while not truly hearing them until years later.

To be a member of the generation that remembers the issue songs of the late 60's and early 70's sung to inspire a societal change, is to live in the memory of those love songs that made your heart beat and your head swim. Connecting to the lyrics of yearning, passion as well as bitter tears, we (and some of you today) understood that the heart is at the center of that search for our own particular song. We still wonder at who sings it and how we hear it. Those songs can make us dance, usually, cry, unfortunately, and sometimes laugh. Whatever the emotion, it is something that connects deep in our collective as a people. It is something we must embrace. Those from other cultures as well connect to the universality of the music and how it can speak to them. Searching for love, happiness, solutions to pain are all a part of this life. Music helps to get through it all.

Randolph-Wright has had the courage to construct the pain of living by using the music. The outside appearances are as shallow at the *Ebony* Fashion Fair photo shoots might have been in the early 1970's. Those days were important but they were also created with the idea of instilling pride in a people who were transforming America and its values. The hierarchy of beauty based on a certain skin color as well as the preference of hair styles was touted by members of a new class structure. This was created by successful black families who felt they had arrived in different areas of the country. But we could not

escape the fact of who we were – and are. Differences of opinion on social appearances were embedded from decades of denial in mainstream America. Dancing outside of those borders was dangerous. The deeper the music went, the core of the people wanted to be more distant. The emerging truths always popped up though, much as the truth pops up here in the story of this family.

You will get to see the creation of a new voice, a new relationship and a new story when you leave after this production. Listening to the music around us is sometimes soothing, comforting and when it is necessary, healing. Sometimes it happens when we listen and sometimes when we sing. As this family finds a way to create new music, look to your history and rediscover your songs, and sing them – loudly and with your family, whoever and wherever they may be. Find that strength as you face daily reality with the music of your life.

**An Interview with the Director: Lou Bellamy**  
*Blue*

*This interview was conducted in January 2007 at Penumbra Theatre Company  
by the August Wilson Dramaturgical Fellow, May Mahala,*

MAHALA: This season seems to focus on either musicals or plays about musicians. Can you talk about that choice and how this play fits into your vision for this season?

BELLAMY: Yes, all the plays refer to music or have some sort of music in them. There are people like Amiri Baraka who say that the primary language of black people is music. The music is always there. What I have tried to do this season is highlight and acknowledge that music. Penumbra is typically known for hard hitting, serious drama and this season I wanted to show that we can reflect other aspects of black culture such as humor and music which are also part of the totality of the culture.

MAHALA: Peggy, the main character in this play is very concerned about appearances and social clout. Do you think this play says anything about how class operates as a social factor within the black community?

BELLAMY: It certainly does, and it's very complicated. In black theatre history you have plays like Abram Hill's *Strivers Row* that comment on the black middle class, and there are a lot of plays that have been written prompting the black middle class to accept social responsibility and not to forget the straights from which they came. This play is perceptive in that the money the family has is made from being in the funeral business. I think this is unique to the black community, that some of the most well off people are funeral owners, it's a comment on what's going on in the community. August Wilson said, "there's more people dying than getting saved." The kind of money that Sam makes as the funeral owner allows him to marry Peggy, who is a kind of trophy wife. She comes from the big city and has her own ideas of class and culture which she brings to this small town in South Carolina.

MAHALA: What do you think this play says about family?

BELLAMY: What happens inside the family and what the family allows to be shown on the outside are two different things. *Blue* symbolizes the dirty past that is swept under the rug, but he is also the spice that gives them life. I think this play explores public persona versus private persona. It also depicts the way wealth and values are passed down from generation to generation and opens a discussion about whether or not those values are synonymous with integrity. I think for the most part, the characters in this play do have integrity. These are very responsible people, although some

of them have acted irresponsibly. For example Blue acknowledges his illegitimate son and Sam Jr., although he is the patriarch of the family is also a very doting husband who allows his wife to do basically anything she wants. The characters are very human and empathetic.

MAHALA: What are your hopes for this production?

BELLAMY: Everything we do at Penumbra is a slice of black life, a little prism that highlights one portion of the life. I hope we can have a little fun, because this is a fun piece and also examine how this play interacts with class, wealth, and family. In terms of the musical component of the play, I think of the blues as a way of life, a tinge of blue is always there is black culture, and it cast a different hue upon life. I hope that this production reflects that.

## **Design Statements**

### *Blue*

The creative design team is responsible for making the text on the page into a literal reality onstage. Through the use of elements of sound, lighting, set and costumes, the designers create an atmosphere for the actors to use. Designers use methods such as color, temperature, or volume to help them as they work. Each of these methods can create a feeling onstage based on the tools the designer uses.

In production, the design elements come together with the text, the actors and the direction, to create a three dimensional world. Penumbra Theatre is guided by an Ensemble Aesthetic, which means that no element is more important than another. This is Penumbra's ethical approach to art, in which every voice is unique, necessary and communally rooted. This approach also creates artistic balance and excellence. The audience often does not realize that any of the elements were at one time separate. They are totally bound; the result is something greater than the sum of each of its parts. The result feels magical, feels real.

It is not magic, though. A lot of work goes into creating a production. Here you can read about the intent of the designers, how they arrived at their concepts and what challenges and methods they used to make their part of the play come to life.

**Sound Design Summary**  
**By Martin B. Gwinup, Sound Designer**  
*Blue*

*Blue* proved to be a challenging production from a sound design perspective. There are the typical sound design components; practical sounds such as car honks, trumpet playing; ambient sounds like crowds and outside noises; and transitions. We also have to transport the audience from the late 70's to the early 90's and then to the late 90's. In addition to all of that which must support the story and the intensity of the moment, there is the music and singing of Blue. Through most of the play *Blue* is a presence and no one is aware of him (although some characters do inadvertently interact with him) but he is a presence which, in his own way, comments on the situation and the action. Most of the time the music is motivated by live action on stage (a record or CD playing). This is one of the many exciting things about this production. As a sound designer I get to explore different ideas to support this aspect of the play and help make it understandable to the audience. I look forward to these types of challenges in productions I work on. They help me stretch and learn about myself and different approaches to live performance.

The technical challenge in this production is the desire to have the actor playing Blue to sing live at times and then segue to a recording and back again. This is a big challenge to pull off. We will help that situation by mic'ing the actor so his live voice is coming out of the same speakers as the recorded voice. Utilizing this technique will hopefully help to make it believable. All of Blue's music will be recorded which will require a fair amount of studio time. Making this work will be just as difficult for the actors it will be for me and the board operator. However having worked at Penumbra on a number of productions, I have always found the actors here to be supportive, professionals, and hard working. Everyone working on the play strives for the same goal, to create the best possible production for the audience bringing each individual's expertise into the whole and respecting each others contribution. That is collaboration. I hope you enjoy the production.

**Set Design Summary**  
**By Chad Van Kekerix, Set Designer**  
*Blue*

The set design for *Blue* was a complex and involved process. Like watching a character evolve through the course of a play, the setting for *Blue* must also transform in a variety of different ways. It must journey through time, morph into different locations and be staged in a very unique theatrical space.

When approaching a script, it is necessary to first look at the essential elements within the play that the scenery needs to reinforce. For *Blue*, this meant establishing a set that encompassed a well-appointed South Carolina living room in the late 1970's, the same living room in the early 1990's, a dining room, a front porch, a funeral parlor, a recording studio, etc. It also means identifying the characters that inhabit these spaces and how they leave their mark on it.

While the script is told from Reuben's point of view, the scenery is actually influenced by that of his mother, Peggy. With Peggy, perception is reality. She has a need to put on a façade to mask the ghosts of her past, perhaps filling a void in her present. Keeping this in mind, I knew I wanted a grand, curved staircase to emphasize her strength and anchor the set, while appearing to climb and over-shadow. I wanted the space to be very detail oriented, with a strong point of view, even if it was the wrong point of view for the shell of the house. I felt the space needed to be indicative of an old home, handed down from a previous generation, perhaps that of Tillie, the Mother-in Law. Hoping to eradicate the presence of the previous matriarch, I envisioned Peggy incorporating trendy and contemporary elements to a traditional structure.

Another key element in the script is that of the Jazz singer, alive in Peggy's mind and her memories, and how that character influences the mood of the set. I wanted those moments to transform the essence of the set into a sultry, jazz club feel.

With the spatial limitations on the stage at Penumbra, the location requirements necessary to set the scene, the transformations needing to take place, and the progression through time, *Blue* is proving to be quite the scenic challenge. From the 18' high walls, to the grass outside the front stoop, it has even resulted in permanently altering the construction of the stage itself.





**Lighting Design Summary**  
**By Mark Dougherty, Lighting Designer**  
*Blue*

The look, feel, and mood of *Blue* is the result of close collaboration with both the director and design team. By working directly with the other designers, I've created color that both blends and contrasts the color of the production as a whole. My first step is the technical process: I've picked specifically where each of the 125 lighting instruments should be placed. Then, taking what I've learned in collaboration with the design team, I transfer our visions onto the stage. By using "gobos" (sampled below) and "gels" (color filters), I can create any mood on stage I wish.

As the Lighting Designer, I carefully integrate movement into each scene and execute synchronized and scripted changes in performance. When designing a show, you are faced with many choices along the way. Lighting can significantly impact the theatrical experience, via large dramatic light cues and through subtle shifts in tone and color that subconsciously relay information to the audience. Communicating the subconscious is what really drives and challenges me as a designer. For a play such as *Blue*, the challenge is how to integrate subtle lighting moods that enhance and not distract from the action. One of the more dramatic choices we've made for *Blue* is using a "follow-spot" for the character of Blue. I will be using side lighting to sculpt and define the bodies and give motion. Side lighting, when used properly, can be really powerful light. Throwing shadow across the face, highlighting an actor, or maybe used in "allies" and the actor walks through those allies.

The scenic design, is a very large house that just so happens to have a porch/upstairs/ dining room/lots of windows/a recording studio/and a funeral home. The sheer size of the acting area was a challenge. But, I decided to try something new and hope you enjoy it.

**Costume Design Summary**  
**By Deidria Whitlock, Costume Designer**  
*Blue*

I begin by reading the script to establish visual images of the characters, place and time. I always choose to read the characters description last. I then speak to the director to establish the actors identity, and personality of each character. Color of the sets with the Scene Designer are discuss he informs me that the set will be light. The lighting Designer and I discuss that when Blue appears his colors will be Blue. Considering the discussions of textures and tones, I then attend rehearsals to develop the character visually for each of the actor's costumes. One of my challenges will be keeping the visual contact between Blue and Peggy, as they connect through Peggy's memory, and the reality of Blue's physical presence as natural as possible. Peggy will of course be very well dressed, because of her modeling experience. She will seem just a bit over the top in this Southern community. The actor's costumes will reflect the 1970's through the 1980's.

## Tools for Teaching

### *Blue*

The following are a series of questions you may use to prompt discussion, critical analysis or dialogue about this play. They may be used either before or after the play, either to guide audiences toward specific issues as they watch or, to stimulate conversation about topical issues afterward.

The Vocabulary of important terms refers to the Contextual Essay.

These questions are intended to meet the state standards for High School Language Arts and Literacy set by the Board of Education. (Grades 9 through 12).

Penumbra Theatre Company also offers Lesson Plans that use the script, the production, and the study guide to investigate specific themes. Each plan can run from approximately 15 to 45 minutes for discussion. Please contact the Education and Outreach Director for more details: [sarah.bellamy@penumbrateatre.org](mailto:sarah.bellamy@penumbrateatre.org)

### **A Feel for the Times – Comprehension Questions**

1. *Blue* begins in the early 1970s. What are three relevant historical events or movements that might influence a family like the Clarks?
2. Explain the situation between Peggy and the store clerk. What do you think happened? What does it mean that Peggy places so much emphasis on the use of her American Express Card?
3. How does the playwright communicate Peggy and LaTonya’s respective experiences with race? Are they different? Are they similar? How does class complicate or inform these experiences?
4. What does Peggy’s use of foreign cuisine say about a global context? In your opinion, what does it say about her personally?

### **Critical Thinking and Analysis – Short Essay Questions**

1. How does Southern black culture and affluence influence the play? In other words, could this play be set in another context?
2. What is the purpose of having the character of Reuben split as a youth and as an adult? Was the playwright trying to signal some sort of fracture or fragmented identity?

3. It has been said that nostalgia is a desire for a memory that doesn't exist. How does *Blue* complicate or support this idea?
4. What is the meaning behind Sam and Reuben following in the footsteps of their fathers in terms of family business? What does this say about blood and genealogy?

### **Language Arts and Theatre – Reflection**

1. How do the following elements of design help to situate this family within a particular socioeconomic, culturally specific moment?

Costumes:

Set Design:

Sound Design:

Hair and Make-up:

2. What do you think would be the most difficult to communicate from a designer's perspective, race or class? Why? What elements might you employ?
3. How might the staging of this show at Penumbra Theatre be different than if it were staged elsewhere?
4. How is music used to contextualize the play and add nuance?

### **Vocabulary – Important Terms**

**Aesthetics:** The philosophical theory and meditation about the concept of beauty and art.

**Capitalism:** Used here as described by Karl Marx; considered capitalism to be an historically specific mode of production (the way in which the productive property is owned and controlled, combined with the corresponding social relations between individuals based on their connection to the process of production) in which capital has become the dominant mode of production.

- Class:** A device used to delineate social status within a society based on wealth, perception of wealth, and notions about who is deserving of wealth. Class also includes meditations on poverty, gender and race within the American context.
- Commodity:** An object of value that can be exchanged within a market for a price.
- Culture:** The defining characteristics of a group in relation to another group within a social sphere. Culture is defined in many ways including but not limited to a group's language, history, religious affiliation, race, gender, sexuality, class, economic status, education, cuisine, collective memory, media representation, legal history, political prowess, and ambassadorial relations.
- Economy:** A system of value in which the exchange of goods, or commodities, creates a market for the creation of more commodities. The negotiation of value within such a framework.
- Epistemology:** The philosophical theory and meditation on human knowledge; the spectrum of what is perceivable, graspable by humans. The cumulative archive of such knowledge.
- Ethics:** The philosophical theory and meditation on morality.
- Hegemony:** Used here as described by Antonio Gramsci; the dominance of one group over other groups, with or without the threat of force, to the extent that cultural perspectives become skewed as to favor the dominant group. The cultural control is naturalized in ways that subtly alter notions of common sense in a given society. It leads to the empowerment of certain cultural beliefs, values, and practices over others and makes deviant or abnormal anything outside of these systems
- Metaphor:** The creation of one element or idea to describe another; the active quest to know one thing through the definition of elements in comparison to it; juxtaposition.
- Morality:** A concept of ethics that deals most essentially with concepts of good and evil.
- Objectification:** The process by which human beings are disassociated from their humanity via social descriptors such as race, class, gender, etc., and treated as metaphorical embodiments of these social identities as opposed to individual, unique human beings.
- Ontology:** The philosophical theory and meditation on the nature of being.

- Otherness:** An experience of difference as described by race, class, gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, ability, etcetera. These categorical definitions are engaged as “other” in a normative context, defined by the very abnormality it points to as “other.” These definitions guide inclusion and exclusion into groups of belonging, participation within the sociopolitical strata governing a society, and access to the resources therein.
- Patriarchy:** The systemic oppression of women by way of exclusion, restriction to resources, objectification, sexual violence, gender descriptions,
- Race:** The categorical separation and distinction of one group of people from other groups based on genealogy, skin color, hair type, geography, nationality, and other socially constructed elements of humanity.
- Stereotype:** A socially constructed image or assumption of a particular group of people that relies on falsehood, caricature, and misrepresentation intended to subordinate, criminalize or make deviant that group of people within a particular social context.
- Subjectivity:** The state of being known to oneself and recognized within society. The ability to speak in the first person. The ability to know and name others vis-à-vis one’s position in the world.