

# ZOOMAN AND THE SIGN



WRITTEN BY CHARLES FULLER

DIRECTED BY LOU BELLAMY

APRIL 14 THROUGH MAY 7, 2006

**PENUMBRA THEATRE STUDY GUIDE**  
**Zooman and the Sign**

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## PENUMBRA THEATRE STUDY GUIDE

### *Zooman and the Sign*

*By Charles Fuller*

Penumbra Theatre is proud to provide this study guide to enhance your lesson plan. Penumbra creates professional productions that are artistically excellent, thought provoking, relevant, and illuminate the human condition through the prism of the African American experience. The productions encourage and facilitate a culturally diverse and all-inclusive America by using theatre to teach, criticize, comment and model.

We invite you and your class to experience *Zooman and the Sign* which is scheduled to run from April 12 through May 7, 2006. Show times are Wednesday 10am matinee, Thursday 7:30pm, Friday 8:00pm, Saturday 2pm matinee and 8pm, Sunday 2pm matinee and 7:30pm. There are seven "Talk Backs" after the performance where the audience can discuss directly with experts the play, its theme and interpretation. "Talk Backs" are scheduled on April 12, 13, 14, 20, 21, 22 and 27, 2006. There will be a symposium at Macalester College on Wednesday, April 19, 2006 (time and location to be announced), that will continue many of the discussions and questions raised in the study guide. The symposium is free and open to the public - contact the Box Office for more information.

Individual student tickets are \$15 and group rates are available as well. The theatre is located in the Hallie Q. Brown/Martin Luther King Community Center at 270 North Kent Street, in the heart of Saint Paul's Selby-Dale neighborhood. It is very easy to get to and there is a parking lot. Directions and a map are online at [www.penumbratheatre.org](http://www.penumbratheatre.org).

Please contact the Box Office at 651.224.3180 for tickets, more information, requests for classroom presentations, or a copy of the script.

The Penumbra website, [www.penumbratheatre.org](http://www.penumbratheatre.org), has a special section dedicated to educators with updates to this study guide including additional resources and opportunities for students and teachers. We welcome your feedback so the site can be useful as well as easy to use.

If any of your students are interested in theatre, the *Penumbra Summer Institute* is a six-week summer arts program for junior and high school students. Participants discover and explore the wealth of contributions to theatre by African Americans through a curriculum that includes dance, creative writing, literature, history, acting, and performance. Culminating with a final recital, the Summer Institute introduces students to a new paradigm beyond their own perceived boundaries. For more information and to sign up, please contact Sarah Bellamy, Associate Producer, at 651.290.8686 x 283 or at [sarah.bellamy@penumbratheatre.org](mailto:sarah.bellamy@penumbratheatre.org).

Thank you and we look forward to seeing you in the lobby!

## **A Brief Overview on the History of African American Theater** *Penumbra Theatre 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 cannon of work. As Americans established a body of work, however, the issues represented began to reflect dominant political and social trends. 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 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 and 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":

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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'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.

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. 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 29 years, Penumbra has provided a consistently clear message that the African American experience is rich, dynamic and critical to the American

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

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 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 an 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.

As a more multicultural world becomes a reality, Penumbra Theatre is engaging questions of cross-cultural exchange. This year we are producing collaborative work with a Native American playwright and a Filipina director, both of whom bring their life experiences and cultural nuance to bear on the work that Penumbra does. As Lou

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

Bellamy explains, black people “have to be at the table” for these cross-cultural conversations. 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.

**“Gun Violence and Gang Bangers”:  
Galvanizing a Neighborhood  
An Essay by Sarah Bellamy  
*Zooman and the Sign***

“Either they don’t know, don’t show, or don’t care about what’s goin’ on in the ‘hood.”  
--Doughboy, “Boyz in the ‘Hood”

In 1991 twenty-three year old John Singleton shocked audiences with his portrayal of three friends growing up in the Compton neighborhood of Los Angeles, California. Singleton’s deft direction of the film “Boyz in the ‘Hood” humanized the characters in a drama that had been getting wide exposure by the news media. Gang violence in East and South Central Los Angeles had been on the national news docket for some time when the film opened in theaters. Singleton’s effort marked a first, however, as it portrayed characters with aspirations for college, making definite strides toward securing a successful, safe future, often in spite of the shadier elements of the neighborhood. Singleton’s “ ‘hood” was more than a poverty-stricken wasteland caught in the crossfire of gang violence. Neighborhood revitalization efforts, spurned on largely by the dominant father figure in the film, Furious Styles (played by Laurence Fishburne), provided a backdrop of political activism instead of apathy. In spite, or perhaps because of the lack of concern for the people of the South Central neighborhood by larger society, Furious suggested that the people take the initiative into their own hands. “They want us to kill ourselves,” he cautioned, pointing out the liquor and gun stores on every corner. The indifference of the Los Angeles Police Department was particularly made salient as Furious defended his home from potential robbery and waits with his young son on the porch nearly an hour for the squad car to show up. Singleton sets up a dichotomy

between survival and revitalization efforts on one side of the spectrum and a monumental lack of respect for life reflected in the “glamour” of gang violence on the other. The tragedy of Ricky’s death in the end delivers a powerful blow to any hope for success or survival. Ricky (played by Morris Chestnut) was an innocent, a sacrificial lamb. The question worming itself through the minds of the audience then became, why was this beacon snuffed out at its brightest moment? For what reason was this dazzling life taken and to what end?

Charles Fuller’s *Zooman and the Sign* raises a similar question as it depicts a family coming to terms with the death of their little girl. Fuller’s play locates the problem in not so specific an area as Singleton’s film, thereby widening the possibility of context. Both Fuller’s Jinny Tate and Singleton’s Ricky Baker are innocents, but as metaphors these characters signal different points of crisis within the black community. Ricky’s murder illustrates the systematic disappearance of inner-city black male youth either due to gang violence or imprisonment. Ricky leaves behind a baby, who will be raised without its father, creating a gap as generation after generation of young men go missing. Jinny’s death illustrates the senselessness of accidental violence. Jinny’s death leaves a hole within the hearts of her parents and family, and rouses them to action. Lou Bellamy, Penumbra Theatre’s Founder and Artistic Director, chose to revisit the play nearly 23 years after having produced it before in 1983. “The issues are still on the table,” Bellamy explains. Certainly, we need not look to Compton or East L.A. to find the tragedy of gang violence.

Recently, the Twin Cities was shaken by the 2002 slaying of Tyesha Edwards, hit by a stray bullet in her living room as the eleven year old did her homework. The local

news media responded with a flurry of print articles and television spots, many of which illustrated the outrage of community leaders and called for community action to stop gang violence. That was three years ago. This summer Minneapolis police have responded to crime scenes in which five children have been caught in the crossfire of gang-motivated shootings.<sup>5</sup> The most recent victim, three year old Davion Boney, was shot in his hand at a Walgreen's store on West Broadway in Minneapolis.

The Minneapolis *Star Tribune* reports that this year police have already received “258 [reports of ]people being shot as of Wednesday [August 10, 2005]. There have also been 2,602 "shots fired" calls to police dispatchers, . . . St. Paul has logged 755 "shots fired" calls.”<sup>6</sup> Obviously, the issue is most certainly still on the table.

Responding the rise in gang violence, directors, screen-writers and playwrights have been focusing in on the issue of gang violence for two decades now, but Fuller and Singleton were among the first to bring the issue to the fore in their mediums. Audiences responded passionately to their work. Charles Fuller won an Obie Award in 1980 for *Zooman and the Sign*. John Singleton received two Oscar nominations for “Boyz in the Hood,” one for Best Original Screenplay and the other for Best Director, no small feat in Hollywood for a twenty-three year old African American filmmaker. His success generated space for other film artists to explore the issues. Two years later Albert Hughes produced “Menace II Society,” which focused in on the violence in the Los Angeles Watts community. “Higher Learning,” “Dangerous Minds,” “Juice” and “South Central” would follow. But what place does art have in fighting gang violence? In spite of all the accolades for the work of influential artists like Singleton and Fuller, the violence

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<sup>5</sup> See David Chanen’s “Innocents under the gun” published in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* August 12, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

continues, and in fact it seems as though we as a nation have become even further desensitized to it.

Just five years after Singleton rocked audiences with “Boyz in the Hood,” a comedy called “Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking your Juice in the Hood” hit theaters. A parody on the filmic representation of gang violence, the Wayans brothers (most famous for their highly successful television show “In Living Color”) created an acceptable space for audiences to laugh at the situational violence portrayed in the earlier films. It is possible that the themes were just too heavy, and the success of The Wayans brothers’ film may have helped people laugh to keep from crying. However, the film was most popular amongst teenagers who laughed at the marijuana smoking, gun-toting, low-rider driving “gangstas” illustrated in the film. Simultaneously, the rise of “gangsta rap” began to dominate the hip-hop scene, creating a new genre of violent, flashy and overtly sexual music that encouraged many American teenagers to emulate the rap stars who claimed to be “gangstas.” After the media storm surrounding the 1996 murders of rappers Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G., record labels actually began to capitalize on the “street credibility” of their artists. 50 Cent, for example, whose commercial marketing lauds claims that the New York rapper has been shot something like nine times. Video games also began reflecting this market, with the creation of story-based games such as “Grand Theft Auto” which localize violence in fictional neighborhoods called “San Andreas” and “Vice City.” The wild success of this kind of marketing reflects a cultural notion that there are “zones” of violence, certain neighborhoods that are sectioned off and regarded as inherently deviant and doomed.

In spite of our growing lack of sensitivity to gang violence, stories that illuminate

the humanity behind the newspaper article or television report still have a place. Instead of allowing Americans to dumb down their awareness, or look away from the statistics, these artistic representations of the lives of some Americans demand recognition for the people counted in the death register.

*Staging Zooman and the Sign* at Penumbra Theatre represents both a moment of pause and a moment of recognition. There are many folks within the black community who wish to distance themselves from such stories. Their lives, the lives of their children and their future plans are secure and they often feel as if they cannot relate to others who live in the heart of the turmoil. There are many white folks who feel as though they cannot relate, as though gun violence is symptomatic of people of color. Remounting the play more than two decades after its first production at Penumbra allows us to get a comparative sense of the situation of gang and gun violence in the Twin Cities metro area. It is no longer a black and white issue. In fact, some of the folks hit the hardest by gang violence have been members of the growing Latino and Asian communities in Minneapolis and St. Paul where gang violence is becoming increasingly more visible. With popularity of white rap artists like Eminem, the “soldiers of the thug-life” are no longer monochromatic. Nor, interestingly, do they fall into a particular economic bracket. While gang violence is most prevalent in depressed areas, gun violence has proved to be a problem even in the homes of the wealthiest and middle class people. School shootings in Columbine, Cold Spring and Red Lake have driven home the fact that teenage violence is something with which the nation must deal.

In the wake of the recent shootings in the Twin Cities area, it is important for us to think of ourselves as part of a community. When twelve year old Carisa Opdahl heard of

the stray bullet that hit young Davion Boney in the hand, the *Star Tribune* quoted her as saying, “Why don't they stay in their own neighborhoods and hurt people?”<sup>7</sup> Carisa herself was injured by the fragments of a stray bullet earlier this summer. Still, the kind of thinking she expresses must be counter-balanced with stories that make us aware that everyone involved is human. It is this sentiment to which Furious Styles was responding in “Boyz in the ‘Hood.” It is the same thinking that rules the marketing of Grand Theft Auto by localizing violence in particular zones. If they stay in their neighborhoods, we will all be safe. Who are the “us” and “them” in this scenario, though? When children are being critically wounded by gunfire, how dare we settle ourselves into camps and hunker down as though we can wait it out? Twenty three years later the issues raised by Charles Fuller’s play *Zooman and the Sign* are still at our doorsteps. Neighborhood development or gentrification does not solve the problems of which violence and criminal behavior are symptoms. It simply moves the problems elsewhere, making room for folks with money and opportunity to raise families without being reminded of those who do not have access to the same things.

The artistic representation of these stories reminds us to pay attention, to be outraged, to be active and concerned. Another child does not have to die for us to wake up. The sign is already posted, if only we could learn to read.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



**SARAH BELLAMY (Dramaturgy)** In addition to working as the Associate Producer, Sarah runs Penumbra Theatre's Summer Institute Program and teaches the creative writing classes for the program. She is a graduate of Sarah Lawrence College where she studied creative writing and postcolonial theory. She holds an M.A. from The University of Chicago in Caribbean colonial history from 1400-1800. Sarah has composed contextual essays that accompany each of our 2005-06 Season shows available on Penumbra's website. Students interested in the Summer Institute Program can check the website for further information.

**Tools for Teaching**  
**Language Arts and Theater**  
*Zooman and the Sign*

Exercise in Media Literacy and Composition: Using the internet or newspaper databases, find an article written in the last five years about the killing of a bystander due to gang violence. Read the article. Consider the lives of the people mentioned in the article. Now, using your imagination, write a two-page long scene from the point of view (POV) of a character involved in which your character acknowledges the death. The character can be fictional or based on a person mentioned in the article. Be careful to stay within the point of view of your character. Consider how he or she would think about what happened in relation to his/her neighborhood, school, family, church, community etc.

1. Exercise in Analysis: Write a response to *Zooman and the Sign*. In it, consider the symbolism and imagery of the play. What is the importance of the sign the Tate family hangs? What does Jinny Tate represent?
2. Exercise in Metaphor and Composition: Write a 1-2 paragraph thought-piece on the significance of the name “Zooman.” What do you think the playwright was trying to express by naming the gunman Zooman?

Further questions for consideration and conversation:

- What does it mean that Zooman despises elderly people? What does it signify about his notions of mortality, youth and violence?
- Do you feel any sympathy for Zooman? Can you think of a moment in the play when you witness his humanity?
- Describe the moment when Victor and Zooman encounter one another. How are these boys different? How are they similar? What did you imagine would happen? Were you surprised by the ending?
- What is the significance of replacing the original sign about Jinny with the final sign about Zooman?

**Reference Suggestions**  
*Zooman and the Sign*

*The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation: Street Politics and the Transformation of a New York City Gang*. Eds. David C. Brotherton, Luis Barrios. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

*Gangs and Society: Alternative Perspectives*. Eds. David C. Brotherton, Luis Barrios. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003)

Fuller, Charles. *Zooman and the Sign*. Ed. Paul Carter Harrison. (New York: Grove Press, 1989) 275-329.

Gaines, Donna. *Teenage Wasteland : Suburbia's Dead End Kids* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Rodriguez, Luis J. *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1993).

Shakur, Sanyika. *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member* (Paperback) by New York: Grove Press, 2004

Sikes, Gini. *8 Ball Chicks* (New York: First Anchor Books, Random House 1998).

**Spotlight: An Interview with Artistic Director Lou Bellamy**  
by May Mahala, Dramaturgical Staff

**Mahala:** What prompted you to choose to direct this play this season?

**Bellamy:** I chose the play because we are still suffering from the violence that this play depicts. I read a number of recently written plays on this subject and I still think *Zooman and The Sign* is the best. Charles Fuller is careful to show Zooman as scary but also as human and this is what sets this play apart from others. Fuller takes the time to show that Zooman is afraid and wounded and that is what makes him even scarier, like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*.

**Mahala:** The first time I read the play, it struck me as very much of the 1980's-- I wasn't surprised to learn that it was originally produced in 1980. This was partly because of the fashion that is mentioned in the script but also because of the way that gang issues are talked about, particularly the concern over how early young people become involved in gang and criminal activity. Are you setting this production in the 1980's or are you updating it to reflect the present moment?

**Bellamy:** I am setting it in the present time because these issues are still with us. The play deals with a community that has begun to decay and the people in the neighborhood know it. There is a feeling of incredible vulnerability that is still with us. There are neighborhoods where black folks are scared to come out of their houses. We have to find a way to deal with violence and aggression without becoming violent and aggressive.

**Mahala:** Yes, the play does a nice job in showing that there isn't a consensus about how to react to criminal activity in our neighborhoods, particularly how to handle crime associated with drug dealing. What do you think this play says about accountability and crime prevention?

**Bellamy:** One thing is for sure, there is a tremendous distrust of the police. We used to have neighborhoods where everyone knew each other and there was community accountability. We don't have that so much anymore and the machine that is supposed to protect and serve the black community has historically failed us for the most part. Therefore there is a dilemma about using the police force to ensure our welfare.

**Mahala:** What are some of the directorial challenges of this play?

**Bellamy:** This play is wonderfully constructed and yet at the same time very simple. The family is in terrible grief and I think this is the key to accessing the truth of the play. We need to reveal their grief without becoming melodramatic. The family is buffeted about by violence and economics and in the midst of terrible hardship, they are trying to take a little step in reclaiming some of their agency.

## Costume Designer Statement

By Vernis R. Fowler

### “Cause and Effect”

The marital problems of Rachel and Reuben upset the lives of their children Jinny and Victor. And because of this estrangement, Jinny ends up being in the wrong place at the wrong time resulting in her death.

A community witnessing the terrorist rampage of a street thug (Zooman) resulting in the death of an innocent child, remains silent out of fear. This silence sets off a chain reaction in this community and other communities throughout the nation as frustration by the lack of witnesses willing to come forward, enrages the father (Reuben) to post a sign outside their front door, that read “THE KILLERS OF OUR DAUGHTER JINNY ARE FREE ON THE STREETS BECAUSE OUR NEIGHBORS WILL NOT IDENTIFY THEM.” The neighbors are outraged because this draws unwanted attention to the neighborhood. But truth be told, one bad apple can spoil the bunch.

Fear and circumstance drives each individual reaction; so who’s right and who’s wrong? Danger of this magnitude lurks in the shadows of every American city.

My approach to Zooman was that of a street thug, a heartless individual—a product of his own circumstance of growing up on the streets alone.

Vernis R. Fowler  
Costume Design



## Scene Designer Statement

By Vicki Smith

The script for *Zooman and the Sign* describes the setting of the play as consisting of three areas: the living room of the Tate house, which is middle-class, fairly modern and comfortably furnished, with a staircase leading upstairs and an exit to the kitchen; a front stoop; and a more abstract area for Zooman, which is described as “a raised platform where the actor should be able to pace”. The sign in the play title appears at the end of Act I; it accuses the neighbors of having seen the murder of the Tate’s daughter Jinny but being too fearful to identify the killers. In the original production, the sign existed in two forms: there was a real sign placed outside by Jinny’s father and a larger projection of the same sign on scrim panels which closed in front of the living room.. When Zooman is shot at the end of the play, he destroys Jinny’s sign; and there is a new sign projected on the scrim which tells the audience Zooman’s real name and says that he will be missed by family and friends.

Although we have kept generally to the same three areas described in the script, we’ve decided to treat the Tate living room in a more abstract, skeletal fashion. Lou’s main interest scenically is in the sign and its effect on the neighborhood, which is the gist of Act II. He wanted to be able to see through the house to the neighborhood behind, and he wanted the sign to loom over and dominate both the house and the neighborhood; in specific, he mentioned the image of a person walking up the living room stairs silhouetted in front of the sign. He also wanted Zooman to enter through the audience and, rather than having a raised platform, to remain at audience level before stepping up to stage level onto the walkway around the house.. During our first production meeting, we evolved the idea of using a raised plexiglass platform supported on steel legs for the living room with a steel-framed back wall made of scrim so it can be more or less transparent depending on how light hits it. The furniture is very minimal, just a sofa, two chairs, a coffee table and a shelf - what Lou described as “islands of warmth”. I’ve tried to make the furnishings as transparent as possible: the sofa has no skirt so we can see under it; the shelf has no back; the table is also plexiglass; the chairs have minimal backs. We’ve done this both to emphasize what’s upstage of the house and also to augment the emotional fragility of the family after the murder of their daughter and the potential for their world to decompose in the face of the increasing violence in the streets. Upstage of the house, we see the neighborhood. Because we’ve treated the living room in such an abstract fashion, I felt we needed to abstract the exterior in some equivalent fashion; so rather than building some sort of three-dimensional neighborhood, we’re using photorealist paintings of row houses. There are two things which really interest me about these photos: first, there are many windows, some open, but all with shades or curtains partially drawn, which seems very fitting for a neighborhood which is refusing to deal with its crisis. Secondly, there are many tree shadows criss-crossing the facades; I’ve heightened the contrast to make the shadows darker so that what are normally simply branch shadows can become a bit more menacing. The areas and under the buildings and platform are all black, so the only color is in the furniture and staircase in the house.

We've handled the sign differently from the original production also. We're using a real sign which the father will place downstage of the house on the "sidewalk"; but, for the larger sign, Lou didn't want to use a projected sign in front of the living room which disappeared when the action started.. He wanted the sign to remain a constant, large physical presence throughout Act II. In our meeting, we thought about using a projected sign behind the scrim living room wall which could change after Zooman's death to the second sign (revealing Zooman's name), or perhaps a light box. The idea I thought was most workable and most interesting was to use a large china silk sign. This will be placed at intermission and will fall to the floor at the end of the play to reveal the second sign. Lou describes this second sign as humanizing Zooman, the thug we've seen throughout the play, who is, or was, still a young man and should not be simply dismissed as a throwaway. China silk, when it falls, is very graceful and lovely; and we're hoping it will add a bit of stillness and sadness to the final reveal of the play.

Vicki Smith  
Scene Design

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