



FABULATION,

OR THE RE-EDUCATION
OF UNDINE

by Lynn Nottage

directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz

SignatureTheatre **STUDY GUIDE**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction: Synopsis and Character Biographies | 3 |
| A CLOSER LOOK: | |
| Interview with Playwright Lynn Nottage | 5 |
| UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY: | |
| What is a Fabulation? | 7 |
| BEHIND THE SCENES: | |
| Interview with Director Lileana Blain-Cruz | 8 |
| Interview with Actor MaYaa Boateng | 9 |
| ABOUT SIGNATURE THEATRE | 10 |



Cherise Boothe. Photo by Monique Carboni.

INTRODUCTION

SYNOPSIS

Fabulation, or The Re-Education of Undine follows successful African-American publicist Undine as she stumbles down the social ladder after her husband steals her hard-earned fortune. Broke and now pregnant, Undine is forced to return to her childhood home in the Brooklyn projects, where she must face the challenges of the life she left behind.



CHARACTERS



Undine Barnes Calles

(Cherise Boothe)

Undine is a successful entrepreneur who runs her own PR company in New York City. She built herself up, creating a new name and identity for herself in her twenties and erasing all evidence of her past. When the play begins, Undine learns that her husband, Hervé, is a con-man who has stolen her fortune. Newly pregnant, broke and unemployed, Undine returns to her parents' home in Brooklyn to try and find stability and build a new life.



Stephie and others

(MaYaa Boateng)

Stephie is Undine's personal assistant at the publicity firm. She is young and self-absorbed but serves as a good assistant to Undine. When she loses her job, Stephanie finds work at a CVS.



Accountant and others

(Dashiell Eaves)

Undine's accountant brings the bad news that Hervé has stolen all her money. As a result, she's no longer able to keep her business open. The accountant has been trying to warn Undine of her situation, but she's been avoiding his calls.

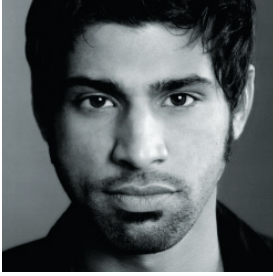


Grandma and others

(Heather Alicia Simms)

Undine's grandmother is sweet but distant. She's become addicted to heroin since Undine left home and encourages Undine to help her secure drugs.

CHARACTERS



Hervé

(Ian Lassiter)

Hervé is Undine's husband, who has absconded with her fortune. The two met at a party and fell in love. Hervé is also the father of Undine's unborn child.

Guy

(Ian Lassiter)

Guy is a former addict who Undine meets in a Narcotics Anonymous group. He works in security, like her family, but hopes to become a firefighter. He is serious, sincere and encouraging of Undine.



Father and others

(J. Bernard Calloway)

Undine's father works as a security guard. He's wary of the world and doesn't have high hopes for the future.



Mother and others

(Nikiya Mathis)

Undine's mother works as a security guard during the day and assumes many domestic responsibilities at night. She wants what's best for her family, but remains in denial about her mother's drug use.



Flow and others

(Marcus Callender)

Flow is Undine's brother. After attending military school, he did a tour of Desert Storm. He now works in security by day and is a spoken word poet and scholar by night. For years he's been working on a spoken word poem detailing the parallels between Brer Rabbit and the African-American experience. Flow is judgmental of Undine's return to her childhood home.

A CLOSER LOOK: INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT LYNN NOTTAGE



Photo by Gregory Costanza.

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THIS INTERVIEW HAS BEEN EDITED AND CONDENSED.

AN INTERVIEW WITH LYNN NOTTAGE

Written by Victoria Myers

October 14th, 2015

Do you find you have a usual process for writing or does it change with every piece?

I find it changes with every piece. I approach each play that I write as a new adventure. I love to travel and I like to go off the beaten path and I think I've used that same philosophy with writing. I don't want to write the play the same way, otherwise I'll get bored.

Are there any other areas of culture that inspire your work?

Definitely. If you come to my house, it's sort of wall to wall art, and sometimes I'll just go into the living room and sit and look at all these fabulous things that artists over the ages have said, and feel inspired and awed and insecure and all of the things you feel when you're in the presence of people who are quite genius artists. Whenever I begin a play, I always make a soundtrack, and that soundtrack is what I write to for the entire play.

What was the first piece of storytelling that inspired you?

I think that the first piece of storytelling that inspired me was my grandmother who was one of the great raconteurs. She was a master storyteller, and from the time I was really young we all sat rapt at her knees. In many ways, I think if she'd been born in another generation she would have been a theatre artist or a writer. She was a woman who I saw graduate from high school and graduate from college, so she really came into her power quite late. But she was a very gifted linguist and a very gifted storyteller. So I think that she's the one who probably pulled me into theatre.

Was there a moment when you felt like, "I'm a playwright"?

We keep circling back to women writing, and I think it's really harder for us to wrap our tongues around that word "playwright." It took me a really long time to embrace the notion of being a playwright. Just because I thought men are playwrights, and women write plays as a hobby. I think, as a result, I didn't embrace the notion of being a playwright until I was older - probably my mid to late 20s - even though I'd gone to graduate school as a playwright and had written plays, I still didn't feel like I was.

Can you speak a little bit more about that? We hear a lot about in childhood, people looking back and thinking things like, "Oh, I didn't see women writing so I thought I'd be an actress." People talk less about what you're talking about, but I think it affects a number of women.

I had already gone to grad school and I was a playwright, but as for when I embraced being a playwright, that took longer for me to feel comfortable even saying it. I think it goes back to having so few role models. When I began writing, the landscape was really different. There weren't plays by African American women getting produced at all.

I feel like there's been a tremendous absence of women of color in all of the mediums. I don't really strive to be successful, I strive to be heard.

And if they were produced, they were produced in smaller theatres, and marginalized. You weren't seeing women getting plays produced on the main stages. If there was a play produced, it was produced on the second stage and it was produced during the shortest month - February - or the end of the season. So to even take ownership of being a playwright was very difficult because I thought, "How am I going to do this? There's no opportunity for me out there."

Something we talk about a lot is the idea of the American Theatre and I feel like no one really knows what we're talking about with that. To you, what is the American Theatre?

I can say what I think the American theatre should strive to be, which I think is a reflection of the beauty and diversity of this culture. I think that we fail to live up to it, but I think that's what American theatre should be: a real reflection of what's happening today. I just wrote this introduction to an Arthur Miller anthology and one of the reasons that



I did the introduction was because I thought it was really important for us, as women, to be in dialogue with that part of the conversation, because Arthur Miller defined what American theatre was in the 20th century. He was someone who understood that you really had to be socially engaged in order to be a writer. I think about all of the writers who we consider to be part of the canon that was so defined by white maleness, and that has to shift in the 21st century.

Do you feel more pressure to succeed, either internal or external, than if you were a male playwright?

I think I have more of a desire to be heard and recognized and acknowledged perhaps than my white male counterparts, just because our voices have been so marginalized, and I feel like there's been a tremendous absence of women of color in all of the mediums. I don't really strive to be successful, I strive to be heard.

Do you feel like you have less room for failure?

I feel like there's always room for failure in one's life. I'll tell you what I was taught: I was taught you have to be twice as good in order to succeed because you are an African American woman. Because if you're just good, you won't be seen, so you really have to strive to be better.

What's something you think people can do to improve gender parity in theatre?

When I was in high school, I was in a creative writing English class and had a wonderful teacher who was incredibly encouraging, but every time I signed my name to one of those papers I got a C or C-. Finally some of us suggested that we hand the papers in anonymously, and every paper that I handed in anonymously I received an A+. That was the biggest life lesson I could ever get: that Lynn Nottage,

I think if we have women in positions of power, those women will reach down and give others a hand up. But I think too often we have men at the helm and they're either oblivious or willfully choose not to see us.

a black girl, was deemed a C student, but when there was no gender or race attached to it I was an A+. I think that's indicative of the problems we face. I think we have to seek parity across all the strata in theatre, which means we need more artistic directors, more general managers, more playwrights, more directors, more people who are in positions of power. I think if we have women in positions of power, those women will reach down and give others a hand up. But I think too often we have men at the helm and they're either oblivious or willfully choose not to see us. I also don't think audiences are playing enough of a role pressuring theatres to put on work that's reflective of the audience. 70% of the tickets are bought by women and I'm always curious why those women don't feel the need to pressure theatres to put plays up to reflect who they are? I think we've been conditioned to think that the plays by men are better and I think we've been conditioned to, when a man speaks, we should sit up and pay attention. And we have to break that pattern.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

WHAT IS A FABULATION?

Fabulation: The act of inventing or relating false or fantastic tales.

A term from literary criticism first popularized by literary critic Robert Scholes, fabulation describes a popular form of 20th century novel that defies traditional realism and tends towards magical realism. Fabulations usually blend the distinction between comedy and tragedy, the everyday and the extraordinary, the trivial and the profound.

WHAT INSPIRED LYNN NOTTAGE'S FABULATION, OR THE RE-EDUCATION OF UNDINE?

Lynn drew inspiration from Edith Wharton's novel *The Custom of the Country*, written in 1913. The novel follows a young midwestern woman named Undine Spragg as she attempts to climb the ladder of New York society life.



Cherise Boothe, J. Bernard Calloway, Nikiya Mathis and Marcus Callender. Photo by Monique Carboni.



Nikiya Mathis, Cherise Boothe and MaYaa Boateng. Photo by Monique Carboni.



Edith Wharton.

BEHIND THE SCENES: INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR LILEANA BLAIN-CRUZ

How did you get your start in theater?

I was an English major. I loved reading and I loved stories. I grew up between New York and Miami, and my parents would take us to see things. We'd go to museums, we'd go to dance shows, we'd participate in lots of different things. I always had an interest in the arts, but I didn't really know theater until I got into college. It was directing a production of Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* that really motivated me to think about directing as a career for myself. [That experience] so deeply affected my notion of community and who gets to be on stage. Visual art and music and movement synthesizing into a powerful dialogue and celebration of these seven black women and this community. For me, thinking about theater as a communal space, a space that allows for conversation, a space that is about the synthesis of all of these art forms, came to me in relationship to that production. I think it's informed how I think about making work and how I want to continue making work.



Photo by Gregory Costanzo.

You mentioned above that you were an English major in college. What is unique about theater as an art form that drew you to pursuing a career as a director?

I love theater, and I love theater because it's a communal artform. It's something that you cannot make alone – you need other people to make it happen. Even if it's just one person, you need that audience. If it's an ensemble piece, building that family, building that sense of joy and playfulness is an important part of my process. It's a reaffirming of our connectedness. I like to start rehearsals with breathing, which is so interesting because there's a theme of breath, holding in breath and anxiety, that happens inside of the play. It's nice for me to start the day with everybody in the room – cast, designers, whoever is there with us, stage management – to just breath together and then dance! I like to dance, and I like to play music, and I actually think that music is another form that is part of theater but is also a way that connects people together. Like song – it reverberates through our bodies, it echoes, it's a connecting force.

You've spoken about first reading *Fabulation* as a college student. How did the play affect you then, and how has your understanding changed through this process?

It's interesting, when I was in college, I read *Fabulation* for the first time and I was like, "what is this play?" I was discovering plays, truly, as an artform and I was an English major, so I was reading it in relationship to themes, in relationship to structure. Those things still stay true, but as a director now, it becomes even more alive and dense and complicated. The structure's not only just about shifts in time and space and relationships, but it's about how Undine's journey is about shifts in her own perception. You watch that happen on both the macro-scale and the micro-scale and that's very powerful.

What has your experience been like working with Lynn Nottage?

Lynn Nottage is an amazing human being. You think about the amount of work that she's done and the scale of work that she's done and she's so humble, kind and giving as a

If it's an ensemble piece, building that family, building that sense of joy and playfulness is an important part of my process. It's a reaffirming of our connectedness.

playwright, artist and collaborator. I've always appreciated her generosity in the rehearsal room, her encouragement of the actors and her advocacy for these very real, very funny but very truthful people that she's put in this beautiful play for us.

How would you describe *Fabulation*, or the *Re-Education of Undine*?

Fabulation is about Undine Barnes, an African-American PR executive, who, at the top of the play, is at the top of her game until she discovers that her husband ran away with all her money. And you watch her go through all of these crazy ups and downs as she returns to her native Brooklyn home and tries to figure out what her life is going to be. I think there's a lot to say in the title – it contains so much. It's an incredible journey. It's about the truth that we make for ourselves, the lies that we tell ourselves and what happens when those two come crashing into each other. It's a story about America. It's a story about race, and class and family, and who you are and where you come from and how you reconcile with those two things. I think it paints that picture so excitingly and wondrously and with buoyancy and humor. I'm excited for everyone to see it!

BEHIND THE SCENES: INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR MAYAA BOATENG



How did you get your start in theater?

I fell into theater pretty young. My mother was constantly looking for positive outlets for my brothers and me. My passion and outlet was the theater. I auditioned for and got into a performing arts middle school, and then after middle school I auditioned for and got into an arts high school in Washington, D.C. (Duke Ellington School of the Arts). After this, I just never stopped.

You get to play multiple characters in *Fabulation*. As an actor, how do you prepare for multiple roles at once? What's particularly exciting or challenging about playing multiple roles?

Playing multiple roles is so dope. It's both challenging and exciting at the same time. Challenging because you want to be specific about how the characters differentiate, you don't want to be general, and this takes a lot of work and focus. Exciting because you can really let yourself go and have fun. It's not often we get to play a number of characters in one show. As an actor, I prepare for multiple roles by asking myself 3 questions: How does this character sound? How does this character physically move through the world? What does this character care about?

Can you tell us a bit about the rehearsal process? What has it been like working with your fellow castmates and director Lileana Blain-Cruz?

This rehearsal process has been one of the best! We have an amazing leader and director in Lileana Blain-Cruz. Her leadership allows for a wonderful collaboration in the room, making everyone comfortable to take risks and bring our fullest selves and varied talents. We also do dance circles to warm up, which I personally LOVE. Additionally, our cast feels to me like what a true ensemble should feel like: supportive and playful and inspiring each other to be better.

Is there a specific theme you keep finding yourself drawn to in *Fabulation*?

So many themes resonate for me in this play, but particularly the theme of creating narrative. There are characters in the play that have created and adopted narratives about themselves, perhaps for survival? It's an exciting question for me and challenges me to look in my own world and ask: as humans, do we create narratives around ourselves? If so, how and why?

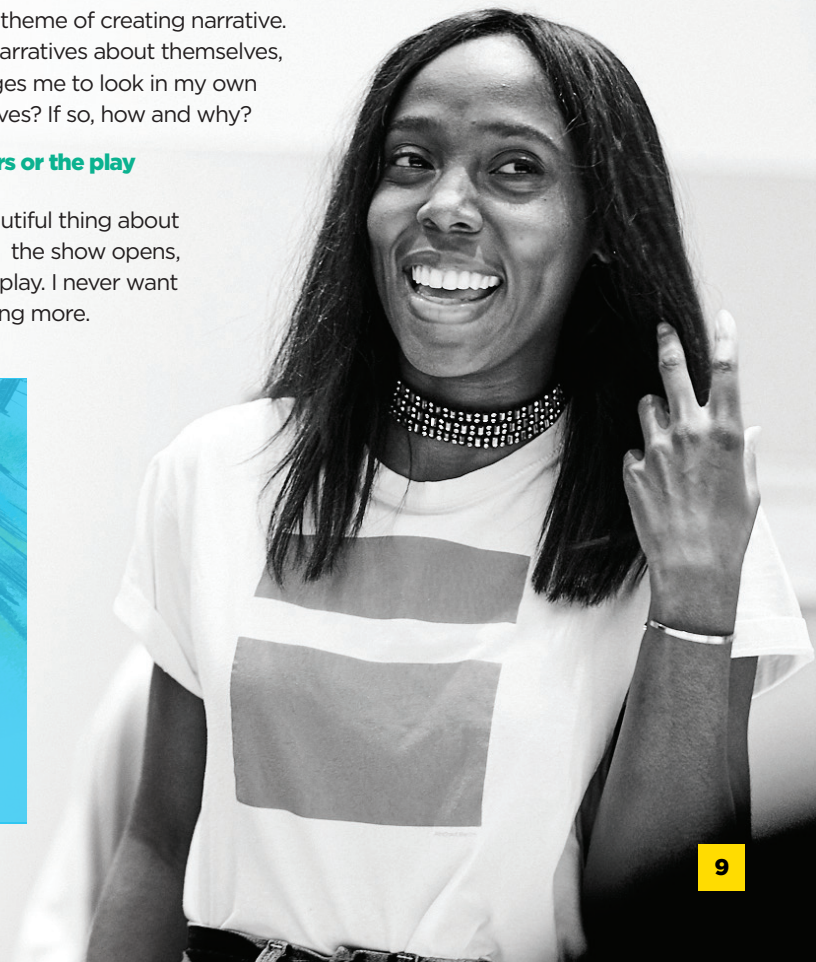
Have you made any surprising discoveries about your characters or the play during the rehearsal period?

Each day I return to the script I discover more and more. The beautiful thing about theater is that it's a constant exploration and process. Even when the show opens, I am still learning new things about my characters and about the play. I never want to feel "fixed" and "settled," but rather open and curious to learning more.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR ASPIRING THEATER MAKERS?

My advice to aspiring theater makers: learn to embrace trying new, challenging things, even if it scares you. It's okay to feel fear, but that can't be the thing that stops you from following your dreams. Someone once said to me, "the desire to do the thing you love must be greater than the fear." I never forgot this.

above: MaYaa Boateng and Cherise Boothe, photo by Monique Carboni.
right: MaYaa Boateng, photo by Gregory Costanzo.



ABOUT SIGNATURE

Signature Theatre celebrates playwrights and gives them an artistic home.



The Pershing Square Signature Center. Photo © David Sundberg / Esto.

Signature makes an extended commitment to a playwright's body of work. By producing a series of plays by each resident writer, Signature delivers an intimate and immersive journey into the playwright's singular vision. In 2014, Signature became the first New York City company to receive the Regional Theater Tony Award®.

Signature serves its mission at The Pershing Square Signature Center, a three-theatre facility on West 42nd Street designed by Frank Gehry Architects to host Signature's three distinct playwrights' residencies and

foster a cultural community. At the Center, Signature continues its original Playwright-in-Residence model as Residency 1, a year-long intensive exploration of a single writer's body of work. Residency 5, the only program of its kind, was launched at the Center to support multiple playwrights as they build bodies of work by guaranteeing each writer three productions over a five-year period. The Legacy Program, launched during Signature's 10th Anniversary, invites writers from both residencies back for productions of premiere or earlier plays.



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