

THE HOT WING KING

by Katori Hall

directed by Steve H. Broadnax III



SignatureTheatre

STUDY GUIDE

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The cast of *The Hot Wing King*. Photo by Monique Carboni.

INTRODUCTION



SYNOPSIS

Ready, set, fry! It's time for the annual "Hot Wang Festival" in Memphis, Tennessee, and Cordell Crutchfield knows he has the wings that'll make him king. Supported by his beau Dwayne and their culinary clique, The New Wing Order, Cordell is marinating and firing up his frying pan in a bid to reclaim the crispy crown. When Dwayne takes in his troubled nephew however, it becomes a recipe for disaster. Suddenly, a first place trophy isn't the only thing Cordell risks losing.

CHARACTERS



Cordell
Toussaint
Jeanlouis

Cordell is the head chef of the New Wing Order and has a dream of opening a hot wing place. Cordell recently emerged from the closet to co-habitate with Dwayne. In a not so former life, Cordell had a wife and two kids.



Dwayne
Korey
Jackson

Dwayne might not be the head chef, but he is the head of the household; he holds Cordell and everyone else down. Dwayne has been a mentor to his struggling nephew, Everett, for years. He holds resentment towards Cordell for taking so long to legitimize their relationship.



Isom
Sheldon
Best

Isom is Cordell and Dwayne's friend and a relatively new addition to the New Wing Order. The three met in church. Isom's favorite playlists include gospel and trap.



Big Charles
Nicco
Annan

Big Charles is an old friend of Cordell and Dwayne. He met the two in the barber shop where he works. Big Charles is observant and laid back; he serves as the rock of their friend group.



Everett
Cecil
Blutcher

Everett aka EJ is Dwayne's nephew. He's a high schooler who loves basketball, but he's recently found himself in some difficult situations and is in need of guidance and a new home.



TJ
Eric
B. Robinson Jr.

TJ is Everett's father. A long-time dealer who is "about that life," he struggles with teaching his son how to be a man. He also struggles with Everett's strong bond with Dwayne and is unsure if Cordell and Dwayne can be good father figures to his son.



Nicco Annan, Korey Jackson, Toussaint Jeanlouis. Photo by Monique Carboni.

A CLOSER LOOK: INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR STEVE H. BROADNAX III

You and Katori have had a special collaboration on this play. How did you meet and start discussing the idea that later became *The Hot Wing King*?

I smile when I think about Katori. She is my southern sister. She's from Memphis, Tennessee and I'm around the corner from Little Rock, Arkansas, so we're both from the South and voices from the South. I met her when I directed a production of *The Mountaintop* at the Peoples' Light Theatre in Pennsylvania. She came out and we had breakfast at McDonald's (she had a breakfast McMuffin). Katori was telling me about her family, we were just communicating about being from the South and Southern, and she told me a story about her brother and I said "you know what, that's your next play!" And she was like, "Really?" and I was like, "yeah, that's your next play. Write it write it." And she was like, "mmm ok I'm gonna write a coupla scenes and Imma send it to you," and I was like, "all right." Now, this was over a three-year process. I would just periodically email her, "Hey Katori, what about that play?" you know what I mean, "hey Katori, don't forget, I think that play would be a great idea," and then one day she gave me a call and was like, "hey Steve, I finished the play and it's called *The Hot Wing King*. Would you come and direct it for me?"

What has your experience been like as a director on this play?

To direct Black men as a man of color, and to direct a story about same-gender loving men as a Black same-gender loving man, has been an honor. Katori always talks about subverting stereotypes outside of what we normally see and don't. So many people have seen the show and gone, "I never thought men could be in a relationship, taking care of a teenager, be a mentor, be a good influence and have morals and ethics and love each other." I think it's historic, what Katori is doing. I've never seen it before on the stage or on TV, so it's an honor to be a part of this process.

What has been your experience leading this incredible cast?

Oh, it's been a privilege. These guys, I always thank them for their service, because this is a service, what they're doing, and thank them for their courage to really live truthfully in these given circumstances and use themselves fully. I'm a highly collaborative director, so I really believe in all things being equal. The actor knows the most because they're living in it. I really count and lean on their lived experiences, and it's been an honor that they've trusted me and given their hearts. Katori and I would always say, "this play cost," and it cost a lot at times in rehearsals. I knew these guys would just open up their hearts to the story and their performances, so it has been an honor to collaborate with these men.

“

I think it's historic, what Katori is doing. I've never seen it before on the stage or on TV, so it's an honor to be a part of this process.

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What was your favorite scene to direct?

I actually have two. The Luther Vandross moment when they are all dancing - to get in rehearsal and have fun and dance with these men was amazing. I loved the kitchen moments, too. Those were actually the most challenging because they're actually cooking onstage. To stage and have composition of men in a kitchen actually cooking hot wings for real was challenging, but when I see it onstage, I smile and go, "That's real stuff. That's authentic." And to smell the smells of chicken and bacon in the theatre and see these men's love for each other and love for food is amazing.

“To direct Black men as a man of color, and to direct a story about same-gender loving men as a Black same-gender loving man, has been an honor.”

What do you find most exciting about *The Hot Wing King*?

What excites me is to get an opportunity to share the capacity of men of color to be able to love and breaking the stereotypes and archetypes that are often put out here of Black men. I think you get an opportunity to see them enjoy and love in community, and I'm excited to share that with people.

Which wing is your favorite?

Which wing? For real, shout out to the props department! The wings that they eat on stage are all real, so the props department has made all of them. The lemon pepper dry is AMAZING, we all run backstage after the show every day to get the leftovers of the wings.



Eric B. Robinson Jr. Photo by Monique Carboni.



Cecil Blutchter and Toussaint Jeanlouis. Photo by Monique Carboni.



Toussaint Jeanlouis and Sheldon Best. Photo by Monique Carboni.

A CLOSER LOOK: INTERVIEW WITH CECIL BLUTCHER (EVERETT AKA EJ)

Did you always know you wanted to be an actor? How did you get your start in theatre?

I didn't always know I wanted to be an actor. Growing up, Denzel Washington was my favorite actor to watch, and his performance in *Training Day* made me feel a range of emotions that a singular performance had never given me before. I didn't have any sense of craft or anything of the sort, but I knew I wanted to make people feel things like that. He said he went to theatre school, so I decided that theatre would be the best way to learn how to act.

What initially drew you towards the role of Everett? How did you go about preparing for the part?

I was initially drawn to Everett's heart and the full range of his personality. Not including his trauma past and its effects, much of the preparation was centered on trying to capture the regionalism within the dialect and reinforcing his point of view as a young athlete. A lot of the work was inspired from listening to music and studying interviews of some of my favorite artists from Memphis.

Can you tell us a bit about the rehearsal process? What has it been like to work with your fellow actors and director Steve Broadnax?

This process was a joy. I've worked with Steve before, so there's definitely a familiarity which made it a lot easier to connect with my castmates and develop real relationships.

Steve Broadnax was actually your professor at Penn State. What's it like making the transition to professional work with one of your professors?

Steve Broadnax is the reason I went to Penn State. I owe so much to him. While I have been working professionally in the three years since I left school, it is great to get back in the room with him again. This is our third post-grad collaboration. There's a sense of familiarity, and we have a shared language that gives the work a unique synergy that I love.

Is there a specific theme you keep finding yourself drawn to in *The Hot Wing King*?

Family, love, and community. These themes are constantly rearing their heads within the process and the production.

I like to think of inspiration as being readily available, you just have to be open to receive it.

Have you made any surprising discoveries about your character or the play over the course of rehearsal?

I would say that a lot of things clicked for me once I got really specific with confronting the trauma Everett has faced in his life. Not playing into it, but rather really understanding it and truly believing that it happened. A lot of Everett's actions are in response to trying to deal with this event, so until I was able to get specific with it I was consistently bumping up into problems and road blocks.

Do you have a favorite moment in the show?

My favorite moment right now would have to be the Luther song "Never Too Much," even though I'm not there for it. My mother is a huge Luther Vandross fan and it just takes me back to my childhood.

As a performer, how do you keep yourself inspired between productions?

Because I work with other mediums, finding inspiration is a bit different for me because it's constantly flowing. As a songwriter and producer, I'm constantly inspired by sounds even while working as an actor. So, music is always gonna be a huge motivator for me. First and foremost as a fan, and then as a creator. I like to think of inspiration as being readily available, you just have to be open to receive it.



Cecil Blütcher and Korey Jackson. Photo by Monique Carboni.

Do you have any advice for students who may be interested in pursuing a career in the arts?

I would say put your blinders on, build your tribe right now, and trust yourself. Also don't be afraid to big yourself up. Don't wait for people to give you your flowers. Give them to yourself. Speak success and prosperity over your life. There's gonna be plenty of people who are going to tell you what you can't do. I would suggest focusing all of your time and energy on telling/reminding yourself that you can.



Cecil Blütcher. Photo by Anita Shevett.



BEHIND THE SCENES: INTERVIEW WITH PROPS MASTER CASSIE DORLAND



How did you get your start in theatre? What drew you to props design?

I started doing theatre in high school. I had played sports all of grade school and junior high, and I was planning to play basketball and soccer in high school, but I missed basketball conditioning and the tryouts freshman year because my grandfather passed away. I was looking for another activity and knew many of my friends had a great time acting in the Fall musical. I auditioned for the one act with them but didn't get cast. I worked on the crew for the show instead, and pretty immediately realized that technical theatre was something I wanted to do. I was focused on scenic and lighting design in college. At our school, the scenic designer was also responsible for the props, so I had a little exposure already. Then, at the end of college, I spent two summers working in the prop shop at a summer stock festival. It was one of the first times that I saw props treated as its own department.

Props has to work with/become an expert in many different mediums and so much of the job is also creatively solving problems and collaborating with other artists. My favorite subjects in school were math and science and working in props allows me to use a lot of those skills in a creative artistic way. My favorite types of props to build involve experimentation and problem solving to create a special effect that usually involves concepts of chemistry, physics, or electricity.

As the props master, what are you responsible for during a show's production?

Let's start with what a prop is! For theatre, a prop is anything that an actor touches/handles but doesn't wear: the furniture, the set dressing, and the practical lights. Imagine that you are moving into a new apartment or house, everything that you bring with you is a prop. There can be a lot of crossover items that I work together with the other departments to make. I'm responsible for sourcing, shopping, building, altering, and creating all of the props for Signature's productions. I'm also responsible for providing the show with all the perishables/consumables it needs for the run and overseeing any repairs that need to happen if a prop breaks during a production.

Every set is kind of like that "new house" for each play; my job starts onstage with the shell of what the set will be. For *The Hot Wing King*, we created Dwayne and Cordell's house onstage. The roof, the walls of the bedroom and kitchen, the kitchen cabinets, the floor for the hallway and living room, and the patio pavers were all installed onstage by our technical director and team of carpenters. My crew and I brought in all of the appliances, piano, furniture, wall art, lamps, and kitchen cookware to make the house look like Dwayne and Cordell live there. We also provided all of the hand props for the actors including the raw chicken Big Charles disjoints and the chicken wings the actors eat.



When reading a script, how do you first start to think about the design for a show? What are you looking out for specifically as a props designer?

I normally read a script 3-4 times before we start rehearsals. My first read is generally to get a feel for the playwright's style and the show's content. My second read, I pay close attention to the location, time, and stage directions for each scene and try to catch all of the hand props that are mentioned or may be needed. I build a props list from this that includes the furniture that the playwright details, but this often changes based on the director and scenic designer's vision for the show. I'm specifically reading to get an idea of who the characters in a show are as people - i.e., what kinds of objects do they mention, is there anything they mention about their life that we don't see onstage. I use that information to make informed design choices about the props and set dressing for the show. I also pay close attention to whether there are any special challenges in a script and start to think about how we could solve them. *The Hot Wing King* involves a lot of raw chicken and cooking, so early on in my process I was working on how to achieve those things while also keeping a safe environment for the actors.

In your role, you work closely with the cast, the director, and your fellow designers. What do your conversations look like early in the process? How do they evolve as you get into rehearsals and early performances?

My process starts with the director and the scenic designer at a design presentation for the artistic and production departments. From those preliminary designs and drawings, I update my props list to include the furniture/sets that the designer has specified and start more conversations with the designer and director about how they are planning to stage certain scenes. I also have discussions with the director and stage management team about what they will need in rehearsal with the actors.

We mainly communicate over phone and email, but once rehearsals start, I normally visit rehearsal at the start and end of every day. We typically have a lot of adds during the rehearsal process once the actors get on their feet and start staging, so there are a lot of things to check in about and clarify how a prop needs to work.

Michael Carnahan, the scenic designer for *The Hot Wing King*, presented color renderings that included a lot of dressing and color information for the world he wanted. We had a meeting at his studio in Brooklyn to discuss the set and furniture. We talked about the wealth and style that these characters would have, and how most of their home would be inspired from modern stores like CB2 and HGTV design shows. From that conversation, I moved into searching and sending him options for the show furniture. We were able to start this rehearsal with almost all of the furniture for the show in the room.



Initial set design model for *The Hot Wing King*.



Nicco Anan, Corey Jackson, and Traussair Jeanlou. Photo by Monique Carboni.

How do you approach researching props for a piece? Once you have an idea of what you're looking for, how do you go about finding those pieces?

Some scenic designers provide a lot of research for the world that they want to create onstage. I use that information and the internet research that I've done while budgeting my props list as a basis for looking for the props. The time period that a show is set in plays a big role in where I look for the props. For a play that takes place in the past, you normally can't find those objects off the shelf in a normal store. I use a lot of eBay, Etsy, Craigslist, and antique stores for those props. Sometimes we also buy a new piece that we are able to alter to look period appropriate, and for props that don't exist in the real world or we can't find in our budget, we build!

The Hot Wing King takes place in the present in Memphis, TN. Most of the furniture we bought brand new from stores or online sources like West Elm, Crate & Barrel, Wayfair, Overstock, Target, Bed Bath & Beyond, Walmart and Home Goods. We do a lot of on foot shopping in addition to online purchasing.

There's a lot of food in *The Hot Wing King*! Are all of the wings featured in the show real? How do you set about preparing all the chicken, and how do you have everything ready for shows eight times a week?

Yes there is a lot of food! There are 40 real chicken wings used in each show, which equals 320 chicken wings a week (we started previews using even more at about 400 wings per week). But! There are even more chicken wings in the show that aren't real. The three bags of raw chicken that Big Charles disjoints are all fake, and so are all of the marinated chicken wings on the trays that go into the coolers. In total, there are about 225 fake chicken wings onstage for each show. One of my artisans, Lena Forman, made ten molds of real chicken wings, and then cast a silicone product called Dragon Skin into the molds to create all the faux chicken that is onstage.

Katori Hall's script specifies the different kinds of chicken wings that they eat onstage, Lemon Pepper Wet, Lemon Pepper Dry, Blueberry Birds, Parmesans, Hawt Hawt, Hot!, the Spicy Cajun Alfredo with Bourbon infused Crumbled Bacon, and the marinated chicken wings. We used that as a starting point to research how to make the edible chicken wings. We found recipes for similar versions online, but then needed to tailor them to be both affordable and take minimal time, while still making something an actor can and wants to eat 8 times a week. Antonia Howard, the Props Run Crew member on the show, comes in about two hours before the start of every show to make all of the different types of chicken. She uses two air fryers and a portable tailgating style hot box to cook a variety of fresh and premade chicken wings then add the additional sauces and details for each wing type. She's got a two-page recipe list that she follows to cook everything perfectly for the show.

What was the most fun part of the design process for *The Hot Wing King*? What was most challenging?

The most fun part of the design process for *The Hot Wing King* was developing the chicken wing recipes, and then getting to taste test all of them before showing to Katori, Steve, and the actors. The most challenging was not going to eat hot wings every night after talking about them all day. But actually the most challenging part of this show was figuring out how to have enough space for all of the cooking props that the actors needed plus all the set dressing we wanted to have to show details about the world in which these characters live.

Props Master:
Cassie Dorland

•

Assistant Props Master:
Jessica Ayala

•

Props Artisan & Chicken Caster:
Lena Former

•

Props Artisan & Run Crew:
Antonia Howard



katorihall

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Is there anything in the show that audiences may be surprised to learn is a prop?

I think a big surprise to the audience would be whether some of the food items are real or not. In addition to the fake chicken wings, there are a few other featured foods that are fake. The jugs of milk that Dwayne and EJ drink, and the milk that Isom pours down the sink during TJ's main main challenge are all not full of real milk. Some of the actors are lactose intolerant, and we were also concerned about smell since some of the milk gets spilled over the set. So, we came up with a specific food coloring recipe to mix with water to fill all of those jugs.

You're actually a full-time Signature staff member and design all of our shows! How is your job different from other props designers in the field, who may be jumping around between theatres (and even cities!) working on designs for various productions?

One of the major differences between my job at Signature and other freelance props designers is knowing what shows I'll be working on farther in the future and having the same location to work from every day. I spent many years of my career freelancing and would have many days that I needed to be in three or more theatres at once. You can get a lot done on the train between the Public, Lincoln Center, and Signature, but it can also be stressful and difficult to have urgent tasks in multiple locations at the same time.

Do you have any advice for students interested in a career in the arts?

I think advice is always hard since unfortunately there isn't one magical trick for success in any career. Some thoughts on what has really helped me in my career: always take advantage of the opportunity to learn new skills and make new connections; don't be afraid to ask questions and actively observe/learn from other's work around you, especially if you are an intern; opportunities can come from many different places and some of the best/most important are not always what you thought you wanted or needed - be open to where those take you.



RECIPES



Blueberry Bird - 4 wings

Marinade/sauce:

1 tablespoon olive oil in a warm saucepan--set to 2 on the hot plate

1 tbsp minced garlic

1 tbsp ginger paste

Gently saute garlic and ginger in oil, once fragrant add:

5 cups frozen blueberries

8 tbsp honey

2 tbsp balsamic vinegar

Cook until berries get warm and release juice, then carefully pour into blender and puree. Return the puree to warm pan and reduce until the sauce no longer immediately slides off the spoon. Allow to cool, and store in the fridge.

Thawed from raw, pat dry, s&p, 10 mins @ 360, flip, 3 mins @ 360, sauce, then 2 mins @ 360

Plating:

Zest lime flakes on top

Chili flakes on top



Garlic Parmesan - 4 wings

Marinade/sauce:

Thawed wings, pat dry, s&p, 13 mins @ 360

Sauce:

1 tbsp butter

1 tsp garlic powder

½ tsp oregano

¼ tsp salt

Sauce wings thoroughly, return to fryer for 2 mins @ 360

Plating:

Dust with grated parmesan



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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