



BY THE WAY,
MEET VERA STARK

by **Lynn Nottage**
directed by **Kamilah Forbes**

Photo by Monique Carboni.

SignatureTheatre **STUDY GUIDE**

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Jessica Frances Dukes and Jenni Barber. Photo by Joan Marcus.

INTRODUCTION

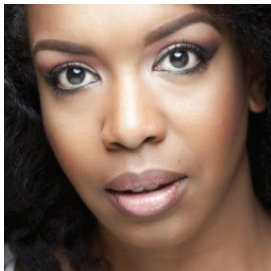
SYNOPSIS

It's the Golden Age of Hollywood, and aspiring starlet Vera Stark works as a maid to Gloria Mitchell, an aging star grasping at her fading career. Worlds collide when Vera lands a trailblazing role in an antebellum epic starring...her boss. While Vera's portrayal of a slave turns out to be groundbreaking, decades later, scholars and film buffs still grapple with the actress' legacy in Hollywood and the impact that race had on her controversial career.



Jessica Frances Dukes. Photo by Joan Marcus.

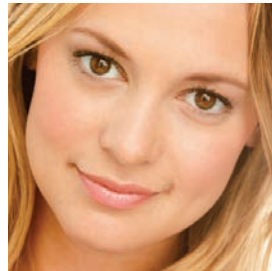
CHARACTERS



Vera Stark

(Jessica Frances Dukes)

When we first meet Vera in 1933, she's working as a maid for Gloria Mitchell and dreaming of performing as an actress. After being discovered at a dinner party, Vera gives one of the most iconic performances by an African-American actress in *The Belle of New Orleans*. Despite the success of the film, Vera struggles as she gets older to keep her career afloat and find demanding, complex roles written for African-American women, eventually vanishing from the spotlight in old age.



Gloria Mitchell

(Jenni Barber)

A star on the rise, Gloria has been building her career up since childhood and has become known as "America's Little Sweetie Pie." She sees Vera as her friend even though she is Vera's employer. Nonetheless, she asserts her power and privilege over Vera, demanding constant assistance and emotional support.



Leroy Barksdale

(Warner Miller)

Leroy is director Maximillian von Oster's "Man Friday," or right-hand man. He's also a skilled jazz musician, playing trumpet and studying music theory and composition.

Herb Forrester

(Warner Miller)

Herb is the facilitator of the 2003 colloquium "Rediscovering Vera Stark, the Legacy of *The Belle of New Orleans*." He identifies as a filmmaker, musician and entrepreneur from Oakland, California.



Lottie McBride

(Heather Alicia Simms)

Vera's roommate, an African-American woman who loves radio soap operas and theatricality. Like Vera, she also aspires to act in films.

Carmen Levy-Green

(Heather Alicia Simms)

Carmen is a panelist participating in the Vera Stark colloquium and a professor of media and gender studies at USVC. She's spent years researching Vera's trajectory and has written about her career in her book *Hollywood Dreams*.

CHARACTERS



Anna Mae Simpkins

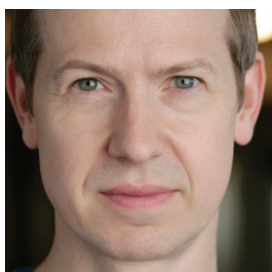
(Carra Patterson)

Vera's other roommate, Anna Mae is a light-skinned African-American woman interested in acting. She spends time hanging around motion picture studios in the hopes of securing an acting job. Anna Mae goes on a date with Maximillian Von Oster, who believes her to be Anna Maria Fernandez of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Afua Assata Ejobo

(Carra Patterson)

Another panelist in the Vera Stark colloquium, Afua is an established vocal black feminist, poet, journalist and performer.



Mr. Slasvick

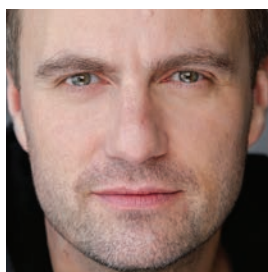
(David Turner)

Mr. Slasvick owns the studio that will be producing *The Belle of New Orleans*. He's concerned by Maximillian von Oster's vision for the film that includes taboo subjects such as female sexuality and race. He tries to pressure Maximillian into rethinking his tragic vision, hoping he'll adjust the film to be more palatable and escapist for those suffering the effects of the Great Depression.

Brad Donovan

(David Turner)

Brad Donovan is the host of the 1970s talk show, "The Brad Donovan Show." He interviewed Vera in the 1970s in one of her last public appearances.



Maximillian Von Oster

(Manoel Felciano)

The director of *The Belle of New Orleans*. He's interested in capturing what he believes to be the gritty "truth" that cinema has otherwise glossed over, particularly of the African-American experience.

Peter Rhys-Davis

(Manoel Felciano)

A famous English musician who is a guest on Brad Donovan's talk show with Vera.

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



Jessica Frances Dukes. Photo by Joan Marcus.



Lynn Nottage. Photo by Lindsey Augusta Mercer.

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: Golden Age Hollywood

The 1930s is often considered the “Golden Age” of American Cinema. Movies from the turn of the century through the 1920s experimented with form and modes of storytelling, starting with silent films and moving into “talkies” in the late 1920s. By the 1930s, silent films had largely disappeared from theatres. The Academy Awards was established in 1929 and began awarding filmmakers, designers and performers for achievements in cinema.

Throughout the Golden Age of Hollywood, roles for African-American performers were few and far between. Nearly all movies were written and directed by white men, with minor roles for actors of color steeped in racial stereotype and stigma. While Hollywood has made efforts to increase diversity both behind and in front of the camera over the past 80 or so years, we still see the effects of these stories and their influences on representation today.

FAMOUS GOLDEN AGE FILMS

King Kong (1933)

written by James Creelman and Ruth Rose, directed by Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack

Show Boat (1936)

written by Oscar Hammerstein II, directed by James Whale

The Wizard of Oz (1939)

written by Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson and Edgar Allen Woolf, directed by Victor Fleming

Gone with the Wind (1939)

written by Sidney Howard, directed by Victory Fleming

PRE-CODE MOVIES

“Pre-code” refers to films produced in Hollywood during the period after “talkies” became popular in the late 1920s and before the Motion Picture Production Code, or the “Hays Code,” was widely implemented in 1934. The Hays Code was conceived by William H. Hays, a powerful Presbyterian figurehead who chaired the Republican National Committee between 1918-1921, who sought to clean up the film industry after a series of scandals. First drafted in 1930, the Code prohibited the inclusion of profanity, nudity, illegal drugs, and miscegenation, among other obscenities, intended to protect the morality of the industry and its consumers. Before the Code was universally enforced, films included sexual themes, references to homosexuality, and interracial relationships, and often featured strong women or sympathetic gangsters. After the Code was put into effect, such explicit and nuanced portrayals were outlawed for decades.



Jenni Barber. Photo by Joan Marcus.



Theresa Harris and Marlene Dietrich in *The Flame of New Orleans* (1941).

AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN REPRESENTATION AT THE ACADEMY AWARDS



Hattie McDaniel with her Academy Award (1940).

1939
THE FIRST BLACK WOMAN TO WIN AN ACADEMY AWARD FOR BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS WAS **HATTIE McDANIEL** FOR *GONE WITH THE WIND*.

“I was thinking about doing this play right now and, in particular, thinking about fake news. bell hooks said long ago that American media is primarily where our pedagogy is done, and this moment in time where our play takes place in the early 1930s is the moment when many of the stereotypes that stick with us today were invented. When I wrote this play, I was really interested in how those stereotypes were formed and how we as African-Americans aided and abetted those stereotypes. Those stereotypes continue to this day and this is a conversation that continues to this day and I’m excited to have it.”

- Lynn Nottage

1990
THE SECOND BLACK WOMAN TO WIN AN ACADEMY AWARD FOR BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS WAS **WHOOPI GOLDBERG** FOR *GHOST*.

2001
THE FIRST BLACK WOMAN TO WIN AN ACADEMY AWARD FOR BEST ACTRESS WAS **HALLE BERRY** FOR *MONSTER’S BALL*.

“I didn’t look down on [the movies], I looked down [on]...the kind of roles they were giving us. I had no interest. And I certainly was not going to do the kind of roles I had seen them give to other Negro actresses.”

- Mildred Washington



(left) Jenni Barber and Carra Patterson. Photo by Joan Marcus. (right) Theresa Harris and Bette Davis in *Jezebel* (1938).

“RATHER THAN SEEING BLACK FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS ACCURATELY AS LABORERS, THE MAMMY MYTH PORTRAYS THEM AS UNWAVERING IN THEIR COMMITMENT TO THE WHITE DOMESTIC SPHERE. IN THIS ROLE, MAMMY SERVES TO STABILIZE THE RACIAL AND GENDER ORDER, AND THEREFORE, THE ORDER OF THE STATE.”

-Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*

The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (the “Hays Code”)

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

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

PARTICULAR APPLICATIONS

I Crimes Against the Law

These shall never be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice or to inspire others with a desire for imitation.

1. Murder
 - a. The technique of murder must be presented in a way that will not inspire imitation.
 - b. Brutal killings are not to be presented in detail.
 - c. Revenge in modern times shall not be justified.
2. Methods of Crime should not be explicitly presented.
 - a. Theft, robbery, safe-cracking, and dynamiting of trains, mines, buildings, etc., should not be detailed in method.
 - b. Arson must be subject to the same safeguards.
 - c. The use of firearms should be restricted to essentials.
 - d. Methods of smuggling should not be presented.
3. Illegal drug traffic must never be presented.
4. The use of liquor in American life, when not required by the plot or for proper characterization will not be shown.

II Sex

The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing.

1. Adultery, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively.
2. Scenes of Passion
 - a. They should not be introduced when not essential to the plot.
 - b. Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown.

- c. In general, passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser element.
3. Seduction or Rape
 - a. They should never be more than suggested, and only when essential for the plot, and even then never shown by explicit method.
 - b. They are never the proper subject for comedy.
 4. Sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden.
 5. White-slavery shall not be treated.
 6. Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden.
 7. Sex hygiene and venereal diseases are not subjects for motion pictures.
 8. Scenes of actual child birth, in fact or in silhouette, are never to be presented.
 9. Children's sex organs are never to be exposed.

III Vulgarity

The treatment of low, disgusting, unpleasant, though not necessarily evil, subjects should be subject always to the dictates of good taste and a regard for the sensibilities of the audience.

IV Obscenity

Obscenity in word, gesture, reference, song, joke, or by suggestion (even when likely to be understood only by part of the audience) is forbidden.

V Profanity

Pointed profanity (this includes the words, God, Lord, Jesus, Christ – unless used reverently – Hell, S.O.B., damn, Gawd), or every other profane or vulgar expression, however used, is forbidden.

VI Costume

1. Complete nudity is never permitted. This includes nudity in fact or in silhouette, or any lecherous or licentious notice thereof by other characters in the picture.
2. Undressing scenes should be avoided, and never used save where essential to the plot.
3. Indecent or undue exposure is forbidden.
4. Dancing costumes intended to permit undue exposure or indecent movements in the dance are forbidden.

VII Dances

1. Dances suggesting or representing sexual actions or indecent passion are forbidden.
2. Dances which emphasize indecent movements are to be regarded as obscene.

VIII Religion

1. No film or episode may throw ridicule on any religious faith.
2. Ministers of religion in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains.
3. Ceremonies of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled.

IX Locations

The treatment of bedrooms must be governed by good taste and delicacy.

X National Feelings

1. The use of the Flag shall be consistently respectful.
2. The history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be represented fairly.

XI Titles

Salacious, indecent, or obscene titles shall not be used.

Inspiration for Vera Stark



top: Barbara Stanwyck and Theresa Harris in *Babyface* (1933).
bottom: Jessica Frances Dukes and Jenni Barber. Photo by Joan Marcus.

Theresa Harris

Born: December 31, 1906 (Houston, TX)

Died: October 8, 1985 (Inglewood, CA)

NOTABLE FILMS

Thunderbolt (1929)

Baby Face (1933)

Professional Sweetheart (1933)

Jezebel (1938)

Born in Houston to former sharecroppers, Harris moved with her family to Southern California as a young child. She studied at UCLA's and Zoellner's Conservatories of Music and soon after joined the Lafayette Players, a black musical comedy troupe. In 1929, she made her Hollywood debut in *Thunderbolt*, in which she was a featured singer. Harris was featured in more than 80 films during her career, performing alongside the likes of Ginger Rogers, Clark Gable, and Barbara Stanwyck, yet she remained uncredited for most. She was known to be outspoken about race and Hollywood, and she was quoted saying, "I never had the chance to rise above the role of maid in Hollywood movies. My color was against me anyway you looked at it." Despite her lobbying the Screen Actors' Guild for fuller roles for black actors, she was routinely unsuccessful. She frequently collaborated with RKO producer Val Lewton, who was known for casting black actors in non-stereotypical roles. In the 1950s, she retired from acting and married a doctor. She passed away from unknown causes in 1985.

"I never felt the chance to rise above the role of maid in Hollywood movies. My color was against me. The fact that I was not 'hot' stamped me as either an uppity 'Negress' or relegated me to the eternal role of stooge or servant. I can sing but so can hundreds of other girls. My ambitions are to be an actress. Hollywood had no parts for me."

- Theresa Harris, 1937, as told to Fay Jackson and the Associated Negro Press during publicity for *Bargain With Bullets*

Mildred Washington

Born: March 16, 1905 (Houston, TX)

Died: September 7, 1933 (Los Angeles, CA)

NOTABLE FILMS

Hearts in Dixie (1929)

Torch Singer (1933)

Born in Houston, Washington moved to Los Angeles with her family and attended Los Angeles High School, where she graduated at the top of her class. She attended both UCLA and Columbia University for a short period before dedicating herself to performing. A skilled dancer, Washington frequently headlined Sebastian's Cotton Club, a popular prohibition-era jazz club in Culver City. She soon became a stage director for the club, a position she held until her untimely death. Celebrated for her curvaceous figure, bubbly energy, and poise, Washington was cast in small roles in several Hollywood films. In 1929, she co-starred in *Hearts in Dixie*, one of the first major motion pictures to feature a predominantly black ensemble. She is best known for her role in *Torch Singer*, playing against Claudette Colbert as her maid and confidant. In 1933, Washington was injured during an earthquake, which in turn led to appendicitis and peritonitis. She passed away due to complications from surgery at 28.



left: Mildred Washington and Nancy Carroll in *The Shopworn Angel* (1928). right: Jessica Frances Dukes and Jenni Barber. Photo by Joan Marcus.

Inspiration for Vera Stark

Nina Mae McKinney

Born: June 12, 1912 (Lancaster, SC)

Died: May 3, 1967 (New York, NY)

NOTABLE FILMS

Hallelujah! (1929)

Pie, Pie Blackbird (1932)

Sanders of the River (1935)

Pinky (1949)

Born Nannie Mayme McKinney and raised by her aunt, McKinney left South Carolina for New York City as a part of the Great Migration. At 15, McKinney left school and followed her parents to New York. She first appeared onstage in Lew Leslie's *Blackbirds* of 1928, in the chorus supporting Adelaide Hall and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. Silent film director King Vidor was impressed with McKinney's performance and hired her to star in his first film with sound, the musical *Hallelujah!* McKinney signed a five-year contract with MGM, making her the first black actor to sign a long-term contract with a major studio. However, the invocation of the Motion Picture Production Code, or the "Hays Code," prevented McKinney from finding much significant work in film. Hoping to escape legalized American racism, she moved to Paris in 1932 and spent much of the next eight years working on stage and screen in Europe, where she was heralded as the "Black Garbo." In 1935, she starred alongside Paul Robeson in *Sanders of the River*, a film directed in London by Alexander Korda. McKinney and Robeson were both promised that the film, which was set partially in Africa, would portray the Africans in a positive light; however, the film was heavily edited to diminish McKinney's and Robeson's roles and elevate the portrayal of the British Empire. In the same year, McKinney married jazz musician James Monroe; they divorced in 1938. After the German invasion of Poland in 1939, McKinney returned to the United States. She continued her Hollywood career acting in several "race films." In the 1960s, McKinney returned to New York City, where she died after a heart attack in 1967.



Heather Alicia Simms and Jessica Frances Dukes. Photo by Joan Marcus.



above: Jessica Frances Dukes and Warner Miller. Photo by Joan Marcus. background: Nina Mae McKinney in *Sanders of the River* (1935).



Nina Mae McKinney in *Hallelujah!* (1929).

“You just tell me one Negro girl who’s made movies who didn’t play a maid or a whore. I don’t know any.”

- Nina Mae McKinney

BEHIND THE SCENES: INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR KAMILAH FORBES



Photo by Lindsey August Mercer.

How did you first become interested in directing? What were some of your first projects?

I first became interested in directing in high school. I was very involved in theatre in my high school in Chicago and my parents took me to theatre. I was fascinated with creating magic, the use of storytelling, lights, set and costumes and how all of that came together. One of my early mentors is a director by the name of Stan Lathan. Stan is a film, television and theatre director and ironically one of the first black directors in television, but he's had a longstanding career since the 60s. He's not only my mentor, but I also look at him as a pioneer in the field. I think as we have this conversation about media representation around people of color it's apropos with Stan being one of my mentors. His daughter, Sanaa Lathan, also played the first Vera Stark in the Second Stage production.

What's exciting about revisiting *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* in 2019?

I think there has been a consistent conversation about the representation of African-American woman in media, and this play has that conversation through the lens of comedy and historical narrative. We are talking about a period piece in the 1930s, and it's having a conversation about representation in media throughout several different decades over the last 100 years. I think we're still a long way off from true equity and representation in media. It's interesting that this play looks at the real issues that were happening in the 30s, and still rings absolutely true today.

Can you talk to us about your experience with Lynn Nottage?

I absolutely love and adore Lynn Nottage. I think she's the voice of this generation in theatre. I admire her because not

only is she an artist, but she's very much a committed activist. She uses her art as a platform to have very serious, real conversations that are happening in this world. In this play you get to see Lynn's humor, because she's very funny, but a lot of people don't know that. People know Lynn for *Ruined* and *Intimate Apparel* and *Sweat*, which are all amazing pieces of art. *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* is extremely funny, and we get to see that humor side of Lynn. She's extremely collaborative and generous in the room, but also, she knows the world of her plays so intimately. She knows her characters so intimately because they're all aspects of her own humor and her own world.

I worked with Lynn first when I directed a children's musical that she wrote. We did a workshop of it and it was the cutest thing ever, but also the smartest thing ever. That's the beauty, I think, about Lynn Nottage. Even amongst her musicals, her children's musicals and her comedy there's always a layer of in-depth social commentary and wit, all at the same time. You get a little medicine with your sugar.

I think we're still a long way off from true equity and representation in media. It's interesting that this play looks at the real issues that were happening in the 30s, and still rings absolutely true today.

In addition to theatre, you've also worked in film and television, and currently serve as the Executive Producer of the *Apollo*. What's particularly special about returning to theatre?

I absolutely love theatre. I work in a lot of different mediums: in film, in television, in music, but theatre is my home base. Theatre is my core, so even when I'm working in television and film, I'm always somehow looking at it from, "where's the narrative arc," looking at it with a dramaturgical eye. To be working in theatre again, it just feels like home.

There's also a film component in *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*. What was your experience of shooting a scene from *The Belle of New Orleans*?

The film in *Vera Stark* was really enjoyable for me, and I think that's what I loved about this project - that it tells a story on so many different sensory levels. The film is also a period film, so not only are we shooting a film, but there were other specifications. There were a lot of conversations that had to be had around what the style would look like. How do we make sure that we're lighting in the way that they would light in the 30s, which was with these various giant lights? We're also sound mixing in the way of the 1930s. In the 1930s, we were just coming out of the silent film

era, so there were a lot of theatre actors in these films. The idea of nuance was something that wasn't quite explored fully at that time; it wasn't part of the style. We had to take all of that into consideration around style, aesthetics and approach around shooting the film. But it was an exciting process for sure.

What drew you to directing *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*?

For me, with any project that I take on, whether it's a project that I'm directing or a project that I'm producing, I always have to check in with my core, and my core always asks the questions, "why this? why now?" If I can't answer that, then it's not a project for me. Period. It's not a project I'm interested in producing and/or directing. But there was a very real conversation about why this play now. I think in theatre we're having a major conversation about diversity around our leadership, and in film and television. So, it felt very palpable. I think how I approach it is then having that conversation first with my designers about: this is the conversation that I want to have with the audience and how do we attack that from a design perspective? For the set design, I was very interested in making sure that Vera Stark, this nameless, faceless actress that has fallen into obscurity, is always at the center of our conversation and our story. We see Vera all the time. We had robust conversation with the actors about this idea of media and representation today, and how we grapple with that at the table, so that informs our work as actors and how we're interpreting the script.

What do you want audiences to take away from this show?

What I want audiences to take away from this show is: who really controls the narrative? I think that's a big question that Lynn's asking. Who controls the narrative? Is it the actors, directors, the writers, the producers? Is it the Hollywood system? Who really controls the narrative?



Theatre is my core, so even when I'm working in television and film, I'm always somehow looking at it from, "where's the narrative arc," looking at it with a dramaturgical eye. To be working in theatre again, it just feels like home.



David Turner, Jessica Frances Dukes, and Jenni Barber. Photo by Joan Marcus.



INTERVIEW WITH COSTUME DESIGNER DEDE AYITE

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

My unofficial start in theatre was starring as Scrooge in a 6th grade production of *A Christmas Carol* (I also made my own top hat). Before that, I used to put together mini dance pieces with family friends. I have always had a deep love for clothes and the ability for a piece of clothing to transform the way one feels. Of course, I didn't know how to put words to that feeling growing up, but I truly am fascinated by the stories we can tell through clothes.

When reading a script, how do you begin to think about the design for the show? How do your conversations with the director, writer, and/or other designers factor into your process?

When I first read a script, I allow myself to simply go on the journey established by the playwright. This is important, as it allows me to have a visceral response to the material. I might then jot down things that stuck with me or feelings that were evoked as I was reading. Next comes the meeting with the director to talk about the world of the play, who the people are, what they are doing and their trajectory through the play. It's important for me to understand the purpose in doing a piece and what questions we want to ask the audience. Usually the entire team is part of this conversation.

What type of research did you do before starting your designs for *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*? Are there particular places you turn to for inspiration?

Because this piece has several different time periods, I did tons of research and used whatever resources were available to me. Looking through research books, watching movies, magazines, online platforms as well as photographs from museums were essential. It's always extremely fun to go down a rabbit hole and rediscover different silhouettes and see how people lived in the 20s, 30s and 70s.

There are a few different scenes in *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* that are filmed, rather than performed live. How did designing for a scene that would be captured on film differ from designing for a live theatre performance?

The starting point for me is always the same, I have to gain insight into who the character is. The lovely and amazing assistant costume designer, Kara Branch, and I then pulled and fit the pieces onto the actors. Because the camera chooses what the audience sees, I'm constantly checking the monitor to make sure things are in the right place and that there is continuity with our shots.

By the Way, Meet Vera Stark spans seven decades and has scenes that take place (or show video footage from) the 1930s, 1970s, and 2000s. What was it like designing for different time periods within one play?

It really has been a joy! Researching all the various time periods above and then making choices based on the various characters/people in the show has been a ton of fun. We've gotten to create real people on stage that hopefully add depth and layers to the beautiful work the actors are doing on stage.

Since the play jumps in time, how did you approach weaving together the characters and story lines through costumes?

I thought a lot about the wants and needs of each character, how they saw themselves and what they were trying to attain. This informs the choices I make for a character at the beginning of their journey and then perhaps 30, 40 years later. How has life impacted them? What happens to them physically and mentally? The use of color, patterns and silhouette truly informs a lot of each character and their particular journey.

Do you have any advice for students, particularly ones who may be interested in design?

Do it! See as much theatre as you can and try to experience a variety of art. Learning how to express oneself, whether it's through drawing, painting or creating clothing pieces, is vital.



above: Jenni Barber. below: Jessica Frances Dukes. Photos by Joan Marcus.



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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