Trouble in Mind Study Guide

Trouble in Mind by Alice Childress

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Trouble in Mind is the first professionally produced play written by Alice Childress, a pioneering African-American playwright. Childress directed the first production of the play, which debuted on November 5, 1955, in Greenwich Mews Theatre, New York City, and ran for 91 performances. For *Trouble in Mind*, Childress was awarded an Obie Award in 1956 for best original Off-Broadway production, making her the first African-American woman to win an Obie. Though *Trouble in Mind* was award-winning and a hit with critics and audiences at the time, the production was plagued with problems, including a clash between the original director and cast that prompted Childress to take his place. This is ironic considering *Trouble in Mind* is about the troubled production of a fictional, anti-lynching Broadway play, *Chaos in Belleville*. Wiletta Mayer, the African-American lead of the *Chaos*, as well as the other black actors, must deal with the condescending attitude of their white director, Al Manners. Wiletta stands up to Manners and reveals his racist attitudes but faces severe consequences as a result. *Trouble in Mind* also had script problems.

The original production was also a three-act play with a relatively happy ending, while the published version, discussed in this entry, has only two acts and an ambiguous, though downbeat, close. Childress has said that she was not satisfied with either ending. Childress had a chance to take *Trouble in Mind* to Broadway, but the producers demanded too many changes that Childress felt would have compromised the play. Though *Trouble in Mind* was not seen on Broadway, critics have acnowledged its power. As John O. Killens writes in his essay, "The Literary Genius of Alice Childress," "In this play Childress demonstrated a talent and ability to write humor that had social impact. Even though one laughed throughout the entire presentation, there was, inescapably, the understanding that although one was having an undeniably emotional and profoundly intellectual experience, it was also political."

Author Biography

Childress was born on October 12, 1920 (some sources say 1916), in Charleston, South Carolina. When she was about five years old, her parents separated, and she was sent to live in New York City with her maternal grandmother, Eliza White. Reared in Harlem, White encouraged her granddaughter's creative side. As a child, Childress improvised plays with friends and was a voracious reader. Childress's education ended after her second year of high school when she was forced to support herself upon the deaths of both White and her mother.

In 1941, Childress became involved with the American Negro Theater. Though technically an amateur group, Childress learned every aspect of the theater, from set building to directing, acting, and writing, in her 11 years of involvement. During this time period, Childress held many menial jobs, including an salesperson and domestic, to provide for herself and her daughter, Jean, from her first marriage. These experiences played into her later work, especially her writing.

Childress's first success was as an actress, including an appearance in the original Broadway company of *Anna Lucasta*. In 1949, Childress wrote her first produced play, a one-act entitled *Florence*. Three years later, Childress wrote *Gold Through the Trees*, the first play by an African-American woman to be professionally produced on the American stage. Childress directed the Off-Broadway production of her play *Trouble in Mind* in 1955. These plays led to Childress's growing reputation as a writer, though she continued to act in theater, television, and film for several decades.

In 1957, Childress married her second husband, Nathan Woodward, a musician and music educator. She co-wrote several musical plays with him, ineluding *Young Martin Luther King*. Childress concentrated on theatrical writing in the 1960s, including a two-year appointment at the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study. There she wrote what became her best known play, *The Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*. The play explores an interracial romance set in Charleston during World War I. *The Wedding Band* was presented by the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1972.

While Childress continued to write plays, she also tried her hand at fiction in the 1970s and 1980s. Childress's best known fiction work was her 1973 juvenile novel, *A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich*. Critics have pointed to this book as the first child's novel to deal with urban realism: the 13-year-old main character struggles with heroin addiction. Though the novel earned numerous awards, including the Best Young Adult Novel citation from the American Library Association, it was controversial at the time. Childress also authored the screenplay for the 1977 movie version. Childress wrote another acclaimed juvenile novel in 1982, *Rainbow Jordan*, following her first adult novel *A Short Walk* (1981). The latter explores African-American experience from the turn of the century to the Civil Rights movement.

Over the course of her life, Childress received numerous awards for her many contributions to the arts, including the Harlem School of the Arts Humanitarian Award in

1987. She died of cancer in New York City on August 14, 1994, leaving behind an unfinished novel about two of her great-grandmothers.

Plot Summary

Act I

Trouble in Mind opens inside the entrance of a Broadway theater in New York City. Wiletta Mayer, a middle-aged, African-American actress, bangs on the door and finally lets herself in. She scolds the elderly doorman, Henry, for not letting her in out of the cold, until she sees the stage. While she is enraptured by the sight of the theater, Henry recognizes her from when he was an electrician on a show twenty years ago. When Henry leaves, John Nevins, a young African-American actor, enters. He tries to hide his nervousness. In talking to him, Wiletta realizes that they come from the same place and that she knows his parents. Wiletta gives him career advice about how black people are perceived by white directors and others who run the show. She tells him that he should lie and say he was in the last revival of Porgy and Bess, even though it is untrue. John is skeptical of her counsel.

Millie, another African-American actress, enters. Soon, a young white actress, Judith Sears, and an elderly African-American actor, Sheldon Forrester, join the conversation. John tries to approach Judy several times, but the other actors prevent him, talking about this play and previous productions they have been in. Judy reveals that this is her first play, and she hopes it will educate their audience. The other actors do not disagree outright. Their conversation is interrupted by the appearance of the play's director, Manners, his assistant, Eddie, and Henry. After greetings are exchanged, Manners shows them the sketches for the production's scenic design. He compliments each member of the cast, especially Wiletta, who worked on a movie with him some time ago.

Manners tells the cast about the play and how the production came to be. He say that it is ahead of its time in its depiction of race. The cast has questions about their parts, but Manners insists that they read a scene in the middle of act one. Judy gets up to read, but she is nervous and forgets where downstage is. Manners yells at her. Manners tries to make Wiletta act naturally, but it comes off wrong, and he seems racist. Wiletta becomes very cautious around him. The cast continues with the read. The black actors question words and situations they object to. Manners tries to smooth things over, but does not concede such things are objectional. He has them read from the beginning of act one.

Henry shows up with coffee and doughnuts. Manners becomes angry when Henry does not bring him the proper pastry. His anger and condescending attitude increase when Eddie informs Manners that his ex-wife is on the phone. Manners takes the call while Wiletta tries to make Eddie more comfortable. Judy invites the cast to visit her family's home in Bridgeport. Wiletta and Millie tell her she better ask them before she makes such an invitation because they might not want them there.

Manners turns the conversation to the script. He asks the cast to explain to him what is going on. When they do, he has Wiletta sing the song at the end of act one. She knows

the song and performs it well. Manners demands to know what she is thinking about. She tells him that she knows what he wants, but he is not satisfied with this answer. Manners makes her play a word association game that makes Wiletta uncomfortable. Manners leads Judy offstage to take about her role. Immediately, the black cast members tell John to not get too close to Judy. While talking about racial topics, they say accusatory things to each other. John, Sheldon, and Millie leave, and Wiletta is left alone. Henry comes in and tries to comfort her. He is still mad about what Manners did to him earlier. As Henry talks about Ireland and the problems there, he grows incresingly indignant. Wiletta shares his anger. She says she will be an actress no matter what is thrown in her path.

Act II

Three mornings later, Manners and Eddie are rehearsing with a new addition, white actor Bill O'Wray. O'Wray plays Renard, the father figure in the play, and is passionately reading a long-winded speech from the play. When he is done, Bill seems unsure of himself. Bill offers suggestions to Manners about the play. Manners goes on about his personal problems, then asks a favor of Bill. He tells Bill to stop leaving at lunch hour because it looks like he does not want to eat with the black members of the cast. Bill tells Manners that he does not want to eat with them, not because he is prejudice, but because he does not want people to stare at him.

Wiletta enters. She tries to tell Manners about problems she has with the script. Manners is dismissive of her concerns. He compliments her everytime she tries to say something. Wiletta finally gets out that she thinks the third act might not seem a natural outcome after the first, but Manners tells her not to think. When the rest of the cast joins them, Judy looks more sophisticated and John acts more like Manners. Manners starts rehearsal at the beginning of act three. Wiletta has a hard time focusing on her lines. The play soon reaches a dramatic climax, as John's character goes out to be lynched and Wiletta's character lets him go. Manners acts like the consummate director.

When they reach the end of the scene, Sheldon reveals that he has not read the whole play, just the parts that he is in. Manners fills him in on the ending. He also compliments all the actors on their work, except Wiletta. Manners asks her if she will let him help her. Wiletta tells him that he will not listen to her suggestions, though he does pay attention to the others' thoughts. Manners explains that she must lose herself in the part by relating, but Wiletta does not understand why Job, John's character, does not get away. John tries to intercede, but he acts just like Manners. Manners will not listen to Wiletta, and the cast falls into a bit of infighting.

Manners attempts to control his cast. He asks them to imagine a lynching. He is surprised when Sheldon says that he has seen one. Sheldon relates the story. Manners and Bill are affected by the story, and the former calls for lunch. The cast decides to go together. Wiletta still tries to make her point about the script, but Manners dismisses her concerns again. Some of the cast leaves, and Wiletta says she will catch up them later.

Lights flicker to indicate the passage of time, and when the lights come up again, the stage is empty. The cast, save Wiletta, enters. To one side, Manners and Eddie chide Bill for making what could be seen as a racist joke. Wiletta arrives just as Manners begins rehearsal. She tells him she wants to talk to him after rehearsal, but Manners is noncommittal. They begin to read act three. Wiletta ignores Manners's order to keep John on his knees. She challenges Manners about the play: she does not believe her character would send her son out to a lynch mob. Though others try to silence her, she asks Manners if he would do it to his son. He ignores the question and justifies his position. Wiletta accuses him of prejudice and keeps trying to ask him her question. Manners finally answers her in an angry outburst. He says that he and his son could not be compared to her and John's character.

Manners and Eddie quickly leave, and the cast is in disarray. The cast is both accusatory and supportive of what Wiletta said. Sheldon is on her side, but he tells her to apologize to in an effort to keep their jobs. Wiletta is firm in her conviction that the play is a lie. Judy and Bill are resentful of what the black actors say about whites. Finally, Eddie comes in and informs that rehearsal is over. He will call them about tomorrow's rehearsal. The cast, except Wiletta, leave. Henry sees that Wiletta is upset and tries to calm her. She says that she will show up at rehearsal tomorrow, no matter what, so that Manners has to fire her in person. At Henry's urging, she recites something on stage: Psalm 133.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Trouble in Mind is Alice Childress' two-act play about the production of a Broadway play called *Chaos in Belleville,* which runs into trouble when some of the cast members do not agree with its perspective on racial issues and stereotypes.

The play is set in a Broadway theater in New York City, on a Monday morning in the autumn of 1957. The staging includes miscellaneous props belonging to the last production at the theater. As the curtain rises, a middle-aged Negro woman, named Wiletta Mayer, bangs repeatedly on the door of the theater. Finally, the theater's doorman, an elderly man named Henry, lets her in.

Wiletta's initial irritation at the locked theater door gives way to awe at being in the theater again. Henry recalls seeing Wiletta in a stage production twenty years ago. She is flattered, until Henry reveals that he had only been the electrician for the show, not an adoring fan. Wiletta and Henry talk about the old days in the theater for a little while, until Henry leaves to get coffee. Wiletta moves downstage and sings a few bars from a song for sentimental reasons.

A young Negro actor, named John Nevins, soon joins Wiletta. Wiletta can sense that John is nervous about appearing in the play and engages him in conversation to make him feel more at ease. Ultimately, Wiletta discovers that she and John both come from Newport News, Virginia, and that she knows John's mother.

Feeling a bit protective of John now that she feels that she knows him, Wiletta attempts to give John some advice on being a Negro actor in a play produced by white people. John is leery of Wiletta's advice, especially when she tells him to bypass the question of theater experience by telling everyone that he had acted as one of the children in the last run of *Porgy and Bess,* a statement that is not true.

Another cast member, a very stylish, thirty-five-year old Negro woman named Millie Davis, who enters dramatically in a mink coat, soon joins Wiletta and John. Wiletta and Millie know each other from past productions and enter into some gentle barbed comments about each other's abilities.

Two more cast members, Judy Sears and Sheldon Forrester, arrive to join the others. Judith is a somewhat napve, young white girl from Connecticut acting in her first Broadway production. Sheldon is an elderly Negro man whose career in the theater has been long but sporadic.

Judy's role in this play will be the character of Miss Renard, a southern girl conflicted about her upbringing in contrast to the treatment of Negroes today. Judy reveals that her parents do not approve of her choice of acting in New York City. It is especially important that the play is a success, so that she is not forced to return to Connecticut.

Judy also hopes that the play will help educate people on the situation of the treatment of Negroes in America.

The play's director, Al Manners, arrives with his assistant, Eddie Fenton, and Henry, the theater doorman, in tow. Al is cordial but brief in his greeting, assuming that the cast has had time to become acquainted. The cast is very pleased to see the sketches for the stage design, which Al shares with them. Finally, Al acknowledges Wiletta. He had worked with her on a production, quite a while ago.

Al is anxious to get to work on this avant-garde play about a play addressing race relations and is irritated, when Judy cannot find her place downstage. This situation creates tension among the cast. Wiletta is unable to give the proper script reading, due to Al's unorthodox directing style. There are some heated words between the two. Al wants the actors to understand the essence and emotions of a particular scene before they memorize lines so that their performances will be more authentic.

Rehearsals continue, but Wiletta is now cautious in her approach to the material. The Negro actors question some of the dialogue and offensive word choices. Al is flustered, not having expected any resistance from the players.

Henry's arrival with coffee for the cast is a welcome reprieve from the tension. However, Al is soon irritated again, because Henry did not buy the correct pastry. His preference is a Danish, while the rest of the group is satisfied with jelly doughnuts. Al's anger increases even more, when Eddie is unable to deflect a phone call from Al's ex-wife. Al is forced to leave the stage to speak to her.

Wiletta senses that she and Eddie are kindred spirits who easily raise Al's wrath, and she tries to calm Eddie by asking him about his theater experience. Judy also senses that the group is tense and extends an invitation to her parents' home in Connecticut for a barbecue someday. Wiletta and Millie advise Judy that she should talk to her parents before issuing invitations that include Negro people visiting the home of white people in Connecticut.

Al finally returns to the rehearsal, complaining about the latest financial demands placed on him for their seven-year-old son. Returning to the rehearsal, Al asks the actors what they would know about the play at this point only from the scenes which had been addressed this morning. When Al is confident that the actors understand the impact of what they are rehearsing, he asks Wiletta to improvise on the next scene.

Wiletta beautifully performs part of her lines by singing a very moving song, which impresses the hard-nosed Al. Wiletta is unable to provide a satisfactory explanation for her motivations during her delivery, and she and Al once again argue about theory and style. Al tries to engage Wiletta in a word association game to open up her thinking, but she does not cooperate. Al stomps offstage, demanding that Judy join him in discussing her role.

After Al and Judy leave the stage, Millie advises John not to get too close to Judy, toward whom he has been showing some personal interest. Millie tells John that Judy

lives in a world that is not ready to accept interracial relationships. This spurs discussion among the actors about whether or not they conduct their professional lives in stereotypically Negro behavior, as expected by most White people.

John is visibly upset by this line of conversation and leaves the theater to take a break. Millie and Wiletta are fixed in their position about breaking Negro stereotypes, but Sheldon prefers to not make waves and do what he needs to in order to keep this job. Millie and Sheldon also leave the theater. Henry, who commiserates with her, because he still stings from Al's attack about the jelly doughnuts, joins Wiletta.

Wiletta and Henry sense that they are both fighters. Henry reveals that he comes from a fighting Irish family, and he launches into the topic of the turmoil overtaking Ireland. Ultimately, Wiletta tells Henry that she is an actress and will work at her craft, regardless of the obstacles.

Act 1 Analysis

The play is set in 1957, during the first years of the Civil Rights movement in America. Therefore, the topic was especially relevant for the time. Historically, Rosa Parks, refused to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, resulting in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which brought the city's bus line to its knees. This incident is mentioned in the play, and the Negro actors take special pride in this historic event.

By writing this play, Childress can also be viewed as a key figure in the Civil Rights movement by bringing the topic of racial inequality to an even broader audience than those most directly affected in the Southern states.

The author creates her characters with different stages of development and awareness of racial issues, depending on their ages. Sheldon, the oldest member of the cast, naturally has the most reservations about making any waves and resigns himself to acting any stereotype and any derogatory dialogue, in order to keep his job. Millie and Wiletta know the stereotypical expectations of them in their dramatic roles, but are increasingly resistant to doing so.

Millie seems to be able to adapt to what is necessary, but Wiletta has reached her breaking point after years of denigration. John, a young actor just starting in the business, does not feel the restrictions of behaving in a stereotypical Negro manner when interacting with the white people associated with the play.

Childress uses the very effective technique of using a play within a play to deliver her message of racism and inequality, because the reader is privy to the thoughts and motivations of the actors as real people and not simply as characters.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

It is now Thursday morning, three days after the first act, and the actor Bill O'Wray is on the theater stage pretending to address an imaginary audience. Bill will play the strong, white southern man, the father of Judy's character. This is Bill's first day of rehearsal with the cast, because he also has a commitment to performing in a soap opera and could not get away.

Al snaps at Eddie, whose nervousness around Al makes him miss cues for Bill's performance. In spite of the tensions, Bill delivers a wonderful performance. Yet, he feels unsure of himself. Bill is also unsure about the possibility of offending someone with a reference to an Arab in his monologue. Al dismisses Bill's sensitivity, reminding Bill that he has the ultimate responsibility for the play's success or failure.

Al reveals that he has borrowed money and fronted some of his own savings to produce this play, so it is critical that it succeed. Al also asks Bill to eat lunch with the Negro actors occasionally, so that no hard feelings will occur. It is true that Bill does not want to eat lunch with them. The is not that Bill is prejudiced, but rather that he cannot bear to have people watch him eat. Al understands, but asks Bill to try to socialize with the actors a little bit more for the sake of cast unity.

Wiletta arrives a little late this morning and tries to tell Al that she is still struggling with her part in the play, because her actions between the first and the third acts do not seem authentic. Al advises Wiletta to not overanalyze her part, and just act it.

Millie arrives soon after and is stunningly dressed, showing off a new watch her husband has given her. John comes in now. Both Al and Bill share the fact that the show's producer feels that John is so talented that someone will try to steal him away from the show. John is elated, but tries to stay low key so that the other actors are not offended.

Al is anxious to begin the rehearsal. Wiletta assumes her position and begins explaining her character's situation in the new manner Al requires. At this point in the play, a lynch mob is hunting down John's character, Job. Wiletta, playing Job's mother, and Millie's character are wracked with despair, wondering about Job's fate.

Judy's character offers to have her father put Job in the town jail to protect him from the lynch mob. Job arrives home, and Wiletta agrees to let Job go to the jailhouse for protection.

Wiletta protests that her character would not behave in that way and wants the script to be edited to be more authentic. According to Wiletta, a mother would never send her own child away from her in the direction of a lynch mob, regardless of what others are saying about protecting him.

Al does not agree and overrides Wiletta on the issue, further stretching their already strained relationship. The rest of the actors add their opinions on the subject. The spats that occur make it clear that there are still racial divisions, even among the cast members. Al explodes in an angry outburst in an attempt to gain order. He tries to get the actors focused on the upcoming scene by asking them to imagine an actual lynching. Sheldon offers up the fact that he had witnessed a lynching as a young boy and shares the horrific experience with the group.

Al is visibly moved by Sheldon's recounting, and he calls for a lunch break, so that he and the actors can collect themselves. The actors decide to lunch together today, led by Judy, who knows about a new Italian restaurant nearby. Wiletta is not willing to let her issues with her character slip by, and she addresses Al with more salient points about her character's motivations. Al summarily dismisses, Wiletta who does not go to lunch with the rest of the actors.

The stage lights flicker and swirl to show that some time has passed. The cast, with the exception of Wiletta, returns from lunch. Wiletta returns alone and asks to see Al after rehearsals. Al will not acknowledge her request, preferring to launch into rehearsals.

John's character, Job, begins to speak on voting rights for Negroes. Wiletta's character bids John's character to his knees to ask for God's mercy. John tries to rise, but Al wants the character to remain on his knees. Finally, Wiletta tells John to stand. She says that the scene is not authentic, because a mother would not send her child away from her at any cost, in this type of situation.

Wiletta and Al argue once more over Wiletta's character's motivations about the relationship between a parent and a child. When pushed by Wiletta to answer whether or not Al would send his own son out to be murdered, Al responds that his situation with his son cannot ever be compared to the relationship of the mother and the son in the play.

Al has reached the end of his patience and storms offstage, with Eddie following closely. Sheldon advises Wiletta to apologize to Al, but she refuses. Judy offers the suggestion that they discuss the situation in a quiet place. However, Bill feels that the issue is between Al and Wiletta, and the others should stay out. The gravity of the situation sinks into Bill, who wants to quit the play. However, Millie advises him on the union rules requiring him to finish at least one performance before resigning.

Eddie reappears to announce that rehearsal is cancelled, and the cast will be notified about tomorrow's schedule. All the cast members, with the exception of Wiletta, leave the theater to go get coffee and talk. Henry reappears and senses that Wiletta is in distress. She tells Henry that she will stick to her principles and return tomorrow so that Al has to fire her personally.

Act 2 Analysis

In addition to the stereotypical Negro roles to which the characters take offense, Childress portrays the white characters as stereotypes too. Bill claims to not be prejudiced, but does not socialize with the Negro cast members. Judy is a liberal, white girl from New England, whose enthusiasm for racial equality is napve and uninformed. Al claims to not be prejudiced, but enjoys a racially offensive joke with Bill and Eddie at lunch. Al's true feelings are revealed, when he yells at Wiletta that his relationship with his own son can in no way be compared to that of the relationship of the mother and son in *Chaos in Belleville.* It is clear at that moment that Al lacks the compassion to fully delve into the issues which Wiletta raises, and the actors lose all respect for him.

Childress also addresses the theme of prejudice in the mention of some actors being "named." This refers to the McCarthy hearings at the time, and the blackballing of those in the entertainment industry that were thought to be Communists or Communist sympathizers. Sheldon lets it slip that the cast is fortunate to have Al with them, because he could be stuck in Hollywood in the middle of a huge investigation. Eddie quickly revises the word "investigation" to "production." However, it is evident that Al has escaped to New York to evade scrutiny at the hearings. The fact that Al has also had to front his own money to produce the play alludes to the lack of support from typical funding sources, due to the Communist witch-hunt controversy.

Characters

Millie Davis

Millie is a thirty-five-year-old African-American actress. She is married and says she does not need to work. She displays more wealth than the other African-American characters; she wears a mink coat and an expensive watch. Like Wiletta, she is conscious of how she acts and what she says around whites, and she tries to guide John's behavior. Millie also does not like the kind of roles she must play because of her race. She says at one point that she did not tell her relatives about the last production because she repeated but one stereotypical line over and over again. Though Millie expresses her objections about a couple of things, she is not willing to put her job on the line for such matters.

Sheldon Forrester

Sheldon is an elderly African-American character actor and aspiring songwriter. Like Millie and Wiletta, he is conscious about how he acts and what he says around the white people involved in the production. He also tries to advise John about his interactions with whites, especially Judy. Sheldon, more than Millie and Wiletta, wants everyone to get along and not fight amongst themselves. But he also questions certain aspects of Chaos in Belleville in a non-confrontational manner. Sheldon is the only character to have really seen a lynching, a central event in the play. When Wiletta speaks out, Sheldon is only somewhat supportive of her.

Henry

Of Irish descent, Henry is the 78-year-old doorman at the theater where the rehearsals are taking place. Henry knows Wiletta from when he worked as an electrician at shows, and obviously admires her talent. He has hearing problems, which lead to a misunderstanding with Manners, but Henry always tries to fix problems. Henry is fully supportive of Wiletta at the end of each act when she tries to deal with her situation. He relates the oppression of the Irish by the English to Wiletta's dilemmas. Henry is Wiletta's only consistent ally.

Al Manners

Manners, who is white, is the director of Chaos in Belleville. He wants to remain in control of the production at all times, but he is callous toward the feelings and beliefs of all the actors, especially Wiletta. Manners's self-assuredness is shaken several times, until he finally bursts out in anger when Wiletta compares herself to him. Though Manners will probably continue to direct the production, he has lost the trust of those who work for him.

Wiletta Mayer

Wiletta is the central character in Trouble in Mind. She is a middle-aged African-American actress, and she plays the lead in the play, Chaos in Belleville. Wiletta was a singer at one time in her career, and Henry, the doorman, knows her from a production he worked on 20 years earlier; Wiletta also appeared in a movie directed by Manners some time ago. Though Wiletta loves acting, she knows that whites, especially directors and producers, have certain expectations of blacks as actors. She tries to advise John at the beginning of the play on how best to get along, though he does not really want to believe her. By the middle of Trouble in Mind, Wiletta has not taken her own advice. She speaks out against what she perceives as racist problems with the script, and later, the director's demeaning attitude towards her. Wiletta realizes that she has lost her job by her actions at the end of the play. However, these actions lead to the revelation that Manners is racist, despite his claims to the contrary.

John Nevins

John is an idealistic young African-American actor, making his Broadway debut in Chaos in Belleville. Though he and Wiletta come from the same hometown, Newport News, Virginia, John is more educated than Wiletta, and usually feels superior to her. He does not like most of the advice she gives him about how to act around whites in show business, though the other, more experienced black actors echo what Wiletta has said. John seems somewhat attracted to Judy, and the other African-American actors try to keep them separated. Instead of listening to the counsel of his elders, by Act II, John is imitating Manners in speech and mannerisms. However, when Manners reveals that he does not think of blacks and whites as comparable, John realizes the error of his ways and supports Wiletta.

BillO'Wray

Bill is a middle-aged white actor. He is perpetually worried when he is not acting, but delivers his lines in the play with power. Bill does not want to lunch with the African-American actors because he says the stares they draw makes it hard for him to eat. Bill says several additional things that could be interpreted as racist and is defensive about his actions.

Judy Sears

Judy is a young white actress. Though she is a graduate of the Yale School of Drama, she is naive, and Chaos in Belleville is her first job. Judy often speaks lovingly of her mother and father, who live in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and invites the whole cast to visit them there. She believes doing this play will be educational and hopes that it will help ease racism, but she also is conscious of how her character seems smug. When the African-American actors feel resentment and anger, Judy tries to be supportive, but she

feels as though they are lashing out at her personally. A sensitive woman, Judy espouses the belief that people are all the same and that racism is wrong.

Themes

Race and Racism

Every aspect of Trouble in Mind is touched by race and/or racism. Each African-American character discusses his or her experience as a black actor in a business dominated by whites. In the beginning, Millie, Wiletta, and Sheldon try to guide John, the neophyte, about how to behave around their white counterparts. Sheldon and Millie advocate getting along and not getting too close Wiletta does as well, until the end of the play when she can no longer tolerate the condescending attitude of the white director, Manners. But in their collective advice, the actors also reveal their true feelings about the play they are rehearsing for, Chaos on Belleville. As with many of the productions they have appeared in, they feel their roles are stereotypical and the script awful. Yet they take these jobs because they need the work.

For their part, the white people involved with the production vary in their reactions to the black actors. Bill O'Wray, an actor, says he is not prejudiced, but he does not want to eat lunch with them. Judy, the young actress, is idealistic about race relations and believes the performance will play a positive role in addressing racial concerns. Yet when the black actors discuss the problems they have dealing with whites, Judy resents what they are saying. Manners also claims to not be racist, but he will not listen to Wiletta's concerns about the plays. He also treats his black actors differently than his white actors. When Wiletta finally pushes Manners too far, he reveals in an outburst that she should not compare herself to him, presumably because of her race. The complexities of race and racism drive the plot and define characters in Trouble in Mind.

Sexism

While racism is explored in an explicit manner, sexism is much more implicit in the text of Trouble in Mind. In the beginning of the play, for example, John is not completely comfortable with the advice Wiletta gives him. It is partially due to racial concerns, but also because of what she is telling him. Most of the sexism, however, is focused on the character of Manners, the white director. He treats the female cast members differently than their male counterparts. For example, Manners invades Judy's space moments after meeting her in a way that makes her uncomfortable. He does not do the same thing with any of the male characters. Similarly, when Manners finds out Judy attended drama school at Yale, he calls her names when he wants to put her in her place. This shows his discomfort with her being perhaps better educated than him.

Manners is more demeaning in his actions towards Wiletta. When he throws a piece of paper on the ground, he makes her pick it up. He will not let Judy, John, nor Sheldon do it. Manners tells the cast that he did this as a trick to get them thinking about acting, though Wiletta does not see it that way. Further, Manners never lets Wiletta express her opinion. Each time she tries to raise a concern about the script, he tells her not to think

or compliments her to change the subject or says the problem is with her, not the script. Manners also does the same thing to Millie. When Wiletta finally forces the issue, Manners reveals his true feelings about her: in his mind, she cannot be compared to him. As a black woman, Manners cannot see Wiletta as his equal.

Peer Pressure

The African-American characters in Trouble in Mind put pressure on each other to act in certain ways. From the beginning, Wiletta, Millie, and Sheldon try to curb John's behavior so that they can all get along with the white director and actors. Sheldon and Millie physically keep him from Judy when she is first introduced. Sheldon also repeatedly says that he wants peace and harmony among the black actors in front of the others. He believes this will help them keep their jobs now and get jobs in the future. Before the situation with Wiletta and Manners blows up completely, Sheldon does his part to maintain such an amity. The other black actors also jump in on occasion. Even after the blow-up, Sheldon wants Wiletta to apologize to Manners. He believes such an apology will smooth things over. Wiletta will not bow to such pressure to conform, and she is left alone with Henry at the end of the play.

Style

Setting

Trouble in Mind takes place in New York City in fall of 1957. By the author's own estimation, the play is a drama-comedy. All of the action is confined to the stage of a Broadway theater where the rehearsals for Chaos in Belleville take place. The stage is littered with props from previous productions, including tables and benches where the characters sit. Because the play is set in a Broadway theater, some of the black actors, especially Sheldon, feel that they must act the way they believe white people want them to. It is clearly a white man's theater.

Play within a Play

Trouble in Mind focuses on the rehearsals for a Broadway play, Chaos in Belleville. In Chaos, Job (played by John) is a young man living in the South who has been called up for military service. He wants to vote, and his actions in this matter lead to a lynch mob coming after him. His family work as sharecroppers. His mother Ruby (played by Wiletta) sends him to his death, believing a lynch mob will show him mercy. Sheldon plays Job's father, Sam, while Millie's character is named Petunia. Some members of this family work for the white Renard (played by Bill O'Wray) and his daughter Carrie (played by Judy). Renard and his daughter treat the blacks as lessers, like children who need the guidance of whites. Renard offers to house Job in jail to protect him, and Ruby lets him go, which ultimately leads to Job's death. Though ostensibly an anti-lynching play, the racist undertones of Chaos offend the black actors. Because they need the work, however, they quietly put up with things like the demeaning language and action, until Wiletta cannot take it anymore and speaks her mind. The white characters, especially Judy and Manners, believe Chaos will do good and hopefully change their audience's feelings about race. The divergent attitudes towards the play within the play show how far apart both sides really are.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are used in several different ways in Trouble in Mind. Many of the black actors feel that the characters they portray in Chaos in Belleville are stereotypical. These characters are naive and child-like, wearing cheap clothes and using cliched language. Sheldon's character Sam just sits and whittles a stick in several scenes. Ruby does not protect her son but listens to the advice of Renard and his daughter. Only Job seems strong and more original, but he is murdered by the end of Chaos. The white characters in Chaos are also cliched. Bill's character Renard is the benevolent father and guardian of the sharecroppers. Judy's Carrie tries to be their friend and help them. She puts herself at some risk by doing this, but no harm comes to her.

On several occasions in Trouble in Mind, the black actors accuse each of other of being stereotypical "Uncle Toms" and "Jemimas." Early in the play, for example, Wiletta advises John to always laugh and pretend to be happy in front of the white director. When John says that this behavior seems "Tommish," Wiletta admits it is, but that being a "yes man" is necessary for survival. Indeed, for much of the play, most of the black actors act this way. Critics have also noted that Childress's characterizations of whites are somewhat stereotypical. They especially point to Judy, as a stereotypical idealistic young white Northern liberal.

Historical Context

In the mid-1950s, the United States was a world leader on several fronts. Home to many scientific and technological innovations, America was also one of the principal players in the high stakes arms race with the Soviet Union. The so-called Cold War with the Soviets and their allies continued to escalate throughout the decade. This war deeply affected the American people. Many feared atomic bombs would be used and that there would be world-wide annihilation. Some went as far as to build fall-out shelters in their backyards. Americans also feared Communists and Communism. People like Senator Joseph McCarthy made careers out of accusing people of being Communist spies.

The United States was also the world's economic leader. American consumer demand increased rapidly after World War II, leading to a strong economy and the growth of labor unions. Though labor unions thrived gaining new benefits for their members they were also suspected by some as harboring communists. To feed the growing economy, American industries spent a significant amount of money on research and development for the first time. One industry that exploded in the 1950s was television. At the beginning of the 1950s, less than 20% of American households had televisions, but by 1960, they were found in 90% of American homes. These televisions were black and white, as were nearly all broadcasts by the burgeoning networks. Color television sets were not available until 1954 and were very expensive. The growing economy also led to the expansion of suburbs, a cheap, safe place to live, primarily for white families.

Despite such prosperity and international leadership, the United States was still racially segregated in many facets of society, especially in the South. For the most part, African Americans did not benefit from the consumer boom. The so-called "Jim Crow" laws found in parts of the South dictated that blacks were separated from whites in fundamental ways. There were separate drinking fountains, restaurants, hotels, churches, and seats on the bus. An African American attempting to cross racial lines and eat in a white restaurant could be prosecuted and sent to jail.

By the mid-1950s, these laws were being challenged and the modern civil rights movement was born. Two significant related events occurred in 1955. In Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks was fined for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. A bus boycott was organized, and by 1956, Alabama's segregation laws were ruled unconstitutional. The events in Montgomery led to bus boycotts in other cities in the South. Even more controversial was the desegregation of public schools. Throughout the 1950s, there were a series of law suits that forced the integration of schools from the elementary to the university level. Until this time, the schools that students in many areas attended were based on race. Black schools were almost always poorer than their white counterparts. Indeed, in this time period, all schools faced problems because of a shortage of teachers, an increase in the number of students attending school, and the pressure to turn out better educated students to compete with the Soviets.

The most significant law suit was 1954's Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. The Supreme Court ruled that school segregation was unconstitutional, and schools were ordered to integrate. The actual implementation took nearly 20 years because of the huge public debate and sometimes violent resistance, especially in the South. To ensure its ruling was followed, the Supreme Court and other government officials had to step in repeatedly to force change. African Americans were not the only ones suffering from racial discrimination. In New York City, there were charges that public schools discriminated against Italians and Puerto Ricans.

Critical Overview

Critics of the original production of Trouble in Mind found much to praise. Harry Raymond of The Daily Worker wrote, "Trouble in Mind is a play with an important point of view about the problems of Negro actors in the theatre. She has written about it with a brightness and compassion that sends the audience home with some sound thoughts on one of the major social problems in the field of American culture." The critic of the New York Times agreed with Raymond's sentiment, arguing that "Miss Childress has some witty and penetrating things to say about the dearth of roles for Negro actors in the contemporary theatre, the cut-throat competition for these parts, and the fact that Negro actors often find themselves playing stereotyped roles in which they cannot being themselves to believe." Subsequent critics, like Helen Keyssar in her 1984 essay "Foothills: Precursors of Feminist Drama," take the idea one step further. Keyssar believes that "While Trouble in Mind is most immediately a black social protest play whose context and inspiration is the racial integration movement of the fifties, it is also a play about roles in which female stereotypes are acknowledged and jarred."

Many critics note that Childress's female characters, especially Wiletta, are keys to the success of Trouble in Mind. Others found Wiletta and her stand inspiring. Keyssar writes in "Foothills," that "Trouble in Mind is unabashed in its evocation of empathy for its protagonist Wiletta Mayer." Gayle Austin, in her essay "Black Woman Playwright as Feminist Critic," describes the limited views of African-American women on stage, then points out that Childress has created new images for them. She writes, "Childress, in writing the roles of Wiletta and Millie, has provided some alternative images of black women, three dimensional characters with weaknesses and strengths."

Austin believes the characters are still "fresh" today, though other critics have mixed feelings on the subject. Claire Messud of the Times Literary Supplement reviewed a 1992 London production of Trouble in Mind; she writes, "Trouble in Mind cannot help, in some ways, feeling dated: stereotypes, both black and white, have changed more in the past thirty-five years than in the entire century before that. But, transmogrified, they have not disappeared, and the play is not without resonances and relevance today." Other critics believe Trouble in Mind did transcend time other ways. Sally R. Sommer, writing about the play in a 1979 Village Voice article argues, "Twenty-three years later we can look at the play and see its double cutting edge: It predicts not only the course of social history but the course of black play writing. The best parts of the play, its multi-leveled language and seething, funny role-re-enactments, prefigure the tough black style of the '60s plays naturalistic dramas that hit hard, inset with sermon-like arias for solo performers."

Yet some critics criticized the play for those very aspects. Doris E. Abramson, in her book Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre 1925-59, finds much to praise about the play, but she also argues "Trouble in Mind has interesting characters and dialogue, though both tend to ring false whenever they are saturated with sermonizing." Other critics find the plot of the play to be rather thin. Abramson also faults Childress on several other fronts. She writes, "A reader of the script is very much aware of the author

pulling strings, putting her own words into a number of mouths. This is not, however, to deny the theatrical effectiveness of the play in production." Later in the book, Abramson argues that "It would be better if she did not assault race prejudice at every turn, for she sometimes sacrifices depth of character in the process." Not all critics agree with Abramson's criticisms. Austin believes that the play is complex and works on a number of levels. "Her play-within-a-play structure allows her to demonstrate the way male images portray black women and show both the actor's true and false feelings about the image."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Petrusso explores how the play being rehearsed in Trouble in Mind, entitled Chaos in Belleville, reflects Trouble's tensions and characters, especially Wiletta.

In Alice Childress's Trouble in Mind a racially mixed group of actors and a white director and writer are rehearsing a Broadway play that is ostensibly anti-racism and anti-lynching. The white actors and director believe that Chaos in Belleville will impart a positive message of racial tolerance to its audience; they believe they are doing good work. Most of the black actors do not believe that this is true. These actors play the same kind of stereotypical servant roles in which they are always cast. They took these roles because they needed the work, not because they believe they are imparting any great social message. By looking at the parts of Chaos in Belleville being rehearsed, it becomes obvious that, in many ways, the world depicted in Chaos is not much different than Trouble. Only Wiletta's rebellion and the strength she draws from her defiance is a significant divergence.

The first part of Chaos in Belleville rehearsed is Act One, Scene Two, on page 15. This reading begins in Trouble in Mind in the middle of act one. When this scene opens, Carrie (played by Judy) asks her father, Renard (read by Eddie for the moment), if their black servants can have a barn dance to celebrate the birthday of Petunia (played by Millie). Renard does not want to have the dance now because there is an election at hand. He asks another black servant, Ruby (played by Wiletta) if she thinks they should. Ruby replies, "Lord, have mercy, Mr. Renard, don't ask me 'cause I don't know nothin'." Carrie begs her father. Her father dismisses Ruby and Petunia to the porch while he talks to his daughter. Carrie pleads with him again, pointing out that she gave her word. Renard finally concedes, not without hesitation, and Carrie informs the women. Carrie goes to lay out her organdy dress, but Ruby insists on doing it for her. Carrie then decides to take a nap, and Petunia gives her blessing.

This scene has several striking parallels to Trouble in Mind. Renard controls the lives of his servants just as Al Manners, the director of Chaos, believes he knows what is right for his cast. The Judge has the last say, like Manners. Both do not get straight answers out of their African-American servants/cast because the men do not really want to hear what they have to say. Renard and Manners are convinced of their superiority, and act accordingly. However, both men are completely out of touch with the reality of the servants/cast. Similarly, Renard's daughter Carrie and Judy both need affirmation and act like naive children to get it. Though Judy fears Manners a bit, she needs attention and to be told what to do. She also wants to do what is right even if it seems racist.

There is more going on beneath the surface for the African-American characters. Millie does not like playing the servant role and tries to undermine Judy at every turn during the reading. Ironically, her character says to Carrie, "you just one of God's golden-haired angels." Millie does not believe this. Also ironic in some ways is the striking parallel is between Wiletta at this stage of Trouble and her character. When Ruby is asked by Renard for her opinion, she denies having one. A few lines later, Manners looks to

Wiletta for an opinion on whether "darkies" is an acceptable phrase considering the context. Like Renard, he does not really want her true opinion on this subject. She tells Manners, "Lord, have mercy, don't ask me, 'cause I don't know." This is the exact line from the script. This causes Wiletta much anxiety and is the beginning of her rebellion against Manners. Indeed, Wiletta's desire to express an opinion on the play is the primary source of dramatic tension by act two.

From this scene, Manners immediately jumps back to the beginning of Chaos in act one, page three. Many of the attitudes and themes of the previous scene are reinforced. It opens with Ruby shelling beans on the back porch and her husband, Sam, played by Sheldon, sitting next to her. Their son, Job, played by John, enters. Job informs his mother that he is going to vote. Sam tries to discourage him, telling him that Renard has said to stay away from that. Job argues that he has been drafted and that another black man told him that "when that happens, a man's sposed to vote and things." Job goes despite his parents' protests and feeble attempts to stop him. Carrie and Renard come out to see what is happening. Renard comments on how black people are worthless, while Carrie says she feels sorry for them. Before the reading ends, Carrie says, "If we're superior we should prove it by our actions."

Like the servants in the play, who blindly follow what their white employer says without thinking for themselves, the older black actors advise John, the young, inexperienced actor, to agree with everything the white director and actors say, no matter what he really thinks. Wiletta especially believes it is the best way to get along, at least at the beginning of the play. But, unlike their Chaos counterparts, Wiletta, Sheldon, and Millie do express their discontent, however subtle. During this reading, Millie's coldness and reactions disturb Judy so much that she cries Carrie would also cry over such a reaction. Like Carrie, Judy is sensitive and empathetic, but does not fully understand what the black actors feel reading this play. Judy and Carrie also ape their parents' attitudes, with no real comprehension. Throughout the play, Judy talks about her close relationship to her parents and their beliefs. She says that her mother believes in integrated education. The Judge, like Manners, is full of himself and sure of his attitudes. This affects what Carrie thinks and says, since she does not display many thoughts that seem original.

The next discussion of Chaos in Belleville is not a full rehearsal but a description of the larger story. Some of the local African-American population will vote for the first time, and there is opposition from whites as well as blacks. In this atmosphere, the Judge does not want to have the barn dance. He, Sam, and Ruby believe that Job is headed for trouble. The focus turns to Ruby for a moment. Her anxieties over her son compel her to sing a well-known song. Wiletta knows the song and gives a moving rendition. It is not enough for Manners that she aced the song and understood what he wanted as a director; he wants to know what she was thinking, so he proceeds to humiliate her while playing a word association game. She sings the song again, and it is a bit better. Manners takes full credit for her "transformation" and dismisses the first effort entirely. Like the Judge, he wants to control everything. Such an attitude flames Wiletta's discontent.

Act two of Trouble in Mind opens with a monologue from Chaos. It is a thundering speech given by Renard, played by the previously absent actor Bill O'Wray. In the speech, directed at other white citizens, Renard advocates a superficial "moderation" and "tolerance" for their black counterparts. He believes that this will ease tensions over voting and demonstrate their superior nature. Just as telling as this speech are the events that take place while it is being given. Eddie, Manners's assistant, is supposed to play applause at key moments. He misses one cue, and at the end of the monologue, Manners tells Eddie that "Inattention aggravates the hell out of me!" Yet, in act two especially, Manners does not pay any attention to Wiletta's concerns about the play or her need to talk about them.

The next piece of Chaos in Belleville rehearsed is the beginning of act three. Menial tasks are attended to while the air is filled with tension. Ruby irons clothes. Petunia anxiously looks out of the window. Sam sits in the corner and whittles a stick. Carrie cries. They all hear an angry lynch mob and wonder if Job is dead or alive. Fearing for her safety Ruby tries to send Carrie home, but Carrie will not hear of it. Instead, Carrie is determined to save Job's life by getting her father and a judge to intercede. Sheldon says a prayer and Job shows up. Ruby tells him he should not have been so adamant about his right to vote. Job says he has done nothing wrong and he will run. Ruby believes he should give himself up to the mob and tell them he has done nothing wrong. Carrie wants to put him in the county jail for safekeeping. Renard shows up and offers his protection; Job takes it with his parents' encouragement. Renard also makes Job admit that he has made a mistake. Job does so indirectly.

The only person capable of action in this scene is Renard. He is the benevolent superior who, while helpful, also wants to ensure his power is absolute. Carrie's determination means nothing because she does nothing. Ruby, Petunia, and Sam are stereotypical, domestic characters, who rely solely on Renard's judgement. Ruby is portrayed as incredibly naive in thinking that the mob would not kill her son because he is innocent, just as she would be supported by her friends. Job also believes he will be safe with the white man, though he will not be. He dies anyway, as revealed when the plot is further summarized for Sheldon who has not read the whole script. Unlike Renard, however, Manners cannot control every one. He cannot get Wiletta under control because he refuses to acknowledge her ideas and her need to express herself. To accomplish this goal, though, Manners does things like "playfully" threatening to spank her when she tries to talk to him. Still, Job goes along with Renard, just as John stops associating with the black actors and starts to act like Manners. Sam and Millie also vocalize their superficial support as well.

After a break for lunch, the cast returns and they back through parts of act three of Chaos. Job says he will still vote. Ruby wants to follow Carrie's suggestion and have Job put in jail for safekeeping. Ruby directs Job to fall on his knees where she prays over him. This is the last moment of Chaos depicted before all hell breaks loose. At this point, Wiletta tries to deliver Ruby's lines, but the sight of John on his knees upsets her. She keeps trying to get him to stand up, which angers Manners greatly. Wiletta seizes this opportunity to tell Manners that she does not believe that Ruby would send her son to the lynch mob. She says that it makes Ruby look like the villain, more than anyone

else. The white audience would be superior because they know what the right course of action should be. This leads to a bitter discussion that reveals Manners to be racist and insensitive. The lesson from Job's death is not the one the white playwright intended.

Unlike the other characters and actors, Wiletta undergoes a big transformation in Trouble in Mind because of Chaos in Belleville. She begins the play as a Ruby, bowing, at least on the surface, to Manners' s status as unquestionable leader. But ultimately, she is Job. She faces Manners's wrath for daring to question him, as Job dares to vote. Job dies by the end of Chaos while Wiletta is probably out of a job. Wiletta is not dead, however, and vows to continue to fight. She will show up the next day so that Manners has to fire her to her face. Like Job, Wiletta's actions are not fully supported by her peers. Sheldon wants Wiletta to apologize to Manners, which could be compared to Job being sent to the lynch mob by his mother. Wiletta chooses to be alone at the end of Trouble in Mind unlike anyone in Chaos in Belleville because she is stronger. The job, while important, does not compare to her victory.

Source: A. Petrusso, for Drama for Students, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Messud reviews a revival production of Childress's play. While noting that many of the playwright's themes seem dated, "the play is not without resonances and relevance today."

"Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of reality... the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations." Thus wrote James Baldwin in 1963, in an open letter to his nephew on the Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation. But he could have been summarizing the theme of Alice Childress's 1956 play, Trouble in Mind, currently enjoying a belated British premiere at London's Tricycle Theatre.

The play takes as its universe a theatre where rehearsals are under way for Chaos in Belleville, itself a play about the South after the Civil War. The characters in the play-within-a-play are familiar stereotypes: the white plantation owner; his liberal but misguided daughter; the faithful mammy; the maid; the good-for-nothing Uncle Tom, whittling a stick; and the rebel son. The storyline of Chaos purports to be a cry against injustice whites recognizing the error of their ways when the rebel black youth is killed but it is the plantation owner who takes credit for the change, so as to keep white reality intact.

Curiously, the actors who play the roles are themselves stereotypes, mid-twentieth-century versions of the characters they portray. There is the older white actor who refuses to eat with the black cast; the wealthy blonde Barbie doll; the conciliatory older actress and the younger, more spirited one; the toadying yes-man actor; and the bright young man, just out of college, looking for and expecting a better life. Their director, the aptly named Al Manners, admirably played by Maurice Roeves, is a white man who believes, "in principle", in black equality, but who fears disruption. "Social change", he argues, "takes time and tact."

The catalyst for discussion about social change is Wiletta Mayer (Carmen Munroe), a woman who, throughout her theatrical career, has toed the line, conformed to type ("Whatever you say", she repeats, and "Don't ask me 'cos I don't know"), but who ultimately refuses to do so when playing the role of the black mammy: demanded by the script to turn her son over to the white authorities, Wiletta refuses the act, the lines, and the part in Chaos in Belleville, if need be. And, as Baldwin warns, heaven and earth shake. The monologue Childress has written for Wiletta is rousing, but it is above all the fire and passion of Munroe's splendid performance that make the production really worth seeing.

The script is strong and involving throughout, with only one truly mawkish moment (when Judy, the well-meaning white girl, turns to John, the young man, and cries, "You are a puppet with strings on. And so am I. Everyone's a stranger and I'm the strangest of all!" before rushing from the stage); and the fine cast do it justice. It cannot be easy to

play humanized stereotypes, as most of them are called upon to do; but, under the direction of Nicolas Kent, they succeed far better than do their characters in Chaos in Belleville.

Trouble in Mind cannot help, in some ways, feeling dated: stereotypes, both black and white, have changed more in the past thirty-five years than in the entire century before that. But, transmogrified, they have not disappeared, and the play is not without resonances and relevance today.

Source: Claire Messud. "Roles of Thunder" in Times Literary Supplement, no. 4673, October 23, 1992, p. 18.

Critical Essay #3

Brown-Guillory discusses Childress's play in this excerpt, touching on the Trouble in Mind,',? history and stage technique.

The theme of rejecting stereotypes and of not compromising one's integrity is further explored in Childress' Trouble in Mind, which was produced at the Greenwich Mews Theatre in New York in 1955. Running for ninety-one performances, Trouble in Mind won for Childress the Obie Award for the best original off-Broadway play of the 1955-1956 season and was subsequently produced twice in 1964 by the BBC in London. When offered a Broadway option, Childress refused because the producer wanted her to make radical script changes. Alice Childress says of her rejection of the Broadway offer, "Most of our problems have not seen the light of day in our works, and much has been pruned from our manuscripts before the public has been allowed a glimpse of a finished work. It is ironical that those who oppose us are in a position to dictate the quality of our contributions" [Abramson].

Childress' Trouble in Mind needed "pruning" because it is a satiric drama about white writers, producers, and directors who, because they are ignorant of blacks, support or defend inaccurate portraits. Childress insists in this drama that blacks must maintain their integrity and identity in the theater, refusing to accept roles that characterize them as exotic or half-human creatures, regardless of the monetary losses.

Making use of the play-within-a-play, Trouble in Mind is set on a Broadway stage where the characters rehearse Chaos in Belleville, a play written by a white about blacks. Wiletta Mayer, a veteran black actress, offends the sensibilities of the white director when she asserts that no black mother, as in Chaos in Belleville, would tell her son to give himself up to be lynched, regardless of his innocence or guilt. Appalled by other untruths, Wiletta announces that she will not perform unless some changes are made in the script. Because of her frankness, she is summarily dropped from the cast.

Trouble in Mind, Childress' first professionally produced play outside of Harlem, received glowing reviews. Loften Mitchell, in Black Drama [1967], commented, "Now the professional theatre saw her outside of her native Harlem, writing with swift stabs of humor, her perception and her consummate dramatic gifts." Equally laudatory is the assessment made by Arthur Gelb of the New York Times [5 November 1955], who says that Childress has "some witty and penetrating things to say about the dearth of roles for Negro actors in contemporary theatre, the cut-throat competition for these parts and the fact that Negro actors often find themselves playing stereotyped roles in which they cannot bring themselves to believe."

Source: Elizabeth Brown-Guillory. "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, Ntozake Shange: Carving a Place for Themselves on the American Stage" in Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America, Greenwood, 1988, pp. 25^9.

Adaptations

Trouble in Mind was filmed by the BBC as a television movie.

Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast Wiletta in Trouble in Mind to Jackie "Moms" Mabley in Childress's 1987 play Moms: A Praise Play for a Black Comedienne. Both characters are black actresses, though Moms was a real person. Discuss Childress's depiction of their professional lives and the choices they made.

Research the social conditions surrounding African Americans in the United States in the mid-1950s. How does Trouble in Mind reflect these conditions? How does Childress depict them within the play?

Explore the themes of Trouble in Mind via the song of the same name and Psalm 133.

Research the psychology of groups. How does your research explain the African-American actors' struggle between presenting a united front and their infighting in Trouble in Mind

Compare and Contrast

1955: Marian Anderson is the first black singer to appear with the Metropolitan Opera.

Today: There are many black opera singers appearing on stages across America. One of the most famous is Jessye Norman.

1955: The first woman is admitted to the Harvard School of Divinity.

Today: The first woman graduates from one of the last gender segregated institutions, the Citadel.

1954: The Supreme Court rules in Brown v. Board of Education that public schools should be integrated. To follow this order, many schools resort to bussing students.

Today: There is a movement away from bussing students and letting them attend their neighborhood schools. This sometimes means that schools are racially segregated once again.

1955: While riding a bus, Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat to a white person. This leads to the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott and a firestorm of controversy.

Today: Rosa Parks is still regarded as a hero of the Civil Rights Movement. She is often lauded for her courageous act, which is considered by many to have been one of the primary catalysts of one of the most important social movements in American history.

What Do I Read Next?

For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf, a play by Notozake Shange published in 1977. The play concerns African-American women who are fighting for their integrity and self-respect.

Florence, a play by Childress which was first produced in 1949. The play explores racism in the South under Jim Crow laws. The title character is an actress who lives in New York City and has a hard time finding work.

The First Black Actors On the Great White Way is a nonfiction book written by Susan Curtis in 1998. It is a history of black actors in New York City.

A Raisin in the Sun, a play by Lorraine Hansberry first produced on Broadway in 1959. The play focuses on the life of a strong black woman.

Like One of the Family Conversations from a Domestic's Life (1956) is a collection of monologues written by Childress. The primary character, an African-American domestic named Mildred Johnson, comments on working for white people as well as her life as a single woman.

Further Study

Brown-Guillory, Elizabeth. "Alice Childress: A Pioneering Spirit" in Sage, Spring 1987, pp. 66-68.

An interview with Childress which focuses primarily on biographical information and professional inspiration.

Brown-Guillory, Elizabeth. Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America, Greenwood Press, 1988, pp. 28-34.

Discusses many playwrights, including Childress. The analysis of Childress includes a discussion of Trouble in Mind.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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