PARSING

PURLIE VICTORIOUS
A NON-CONFEDERATE ROMP THROUGH THE COTTON PATCH

An educational study guide
Dear Educators,

Welcome to the world of Purlie Victorious: A non-confederate romp through the cotton patch. For many of you, this may be your first encounter of this classic that was written by Ossie Davis more than fifty years ago. While the show addresses the serious theme of racial discrimination and segregation, it does so with great wit and humor. Ossie Davis invites us to laugh our way to social change.

To best appreciate the show, one must understand its historical context as well as the many techniques that comedians have used through the centuries to poke fun at injustices around them. This study guide is designed to help you give your students valuable background information in advance of your attendance of the performance as well as discussion prompts and in classroom activities, which you can use as a follow-up to the show. We have intentionally chosen an interdisciplinary approach to provide multiple points of entry. We hope you will feel free to pick and choose the sections that are most relevant to and best complement your curriculum.

Above all, we hope that your students’ experience of Purlie Victorious will ignite their creative spirit, tickle their funny bones, and encourage them to continue to be advocates for the civil rights of all.

Best,
The Producers of Purlie Victorious

“Our churches will say segregation is immoral because it makes perfectly wonderful people, white and black, do immoral things;...

Our courts will say segregation is illegal because it makes perfectly wonderful people, white and black do illegal things;...

And finally our theater will say segregation is ridiculous because it makes perfectly wonderful people, white and black, do ridiculous things!”

—from “Purlie’s I.O.U.”
“Purlie Victorious” ... is broad comedy, but it makes its point by laughing at segregation, not at the people involved in it. Mixed with the humor there is intelligent, incisive commentary on segregation, discrimination and the slow pace of integration. You can laugh at the usual cliches and wonder if they do not border on some of the things which our colored citizens protest against, but in the end you realize that they never really conceal the play's sincere plea to find solutions free of bitterness and bigotry.

If you have not seen “Purlie Victorious” I think it is well for you as an American citizen to see it and to ponder our racial problem, not as a question affecting our lives here in the United States but as a question affecting our standing and our real sincerity among the peoples of the world.”

— First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, My Day

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**CAST OF CHARACTERS**

- **Purlie Victorious Judson**
  "a man consumed with that divine impatience, without which nothing truly good, or truly bad, or even truly ridiculous, is ever accomplished in this world— with rhetoric and flourish to match."

- **Lutibelle Gussie Mae Jenkins**
  "is like a thousand of Negro girls you might know. Eager, desirous—even anxious, keenly in search for life and for love trembling on the brink of self-confidences and vigorous young womanhood — but afraid to take the final leap: because no one has ever told her it is no longer necessary to be white in order to be virtuous, charming or beautiful."

- **Missy Judson**
  Purlie's sister-in-law. She is “ageless…she is strong and of good cheer— of a certain shrewdness, yet full of desire to believe.”

- **Gitlow Judson**
  Purlie’s brother, Missy’s husband.

- **Idella Landy**
  "a Negro cook and woman of all work, who has been with the Cotchipee family since time immemorial. She is the only mother Charlie...has ever known”

- **Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee**
  Plantation owner

- **The Sheriff**

- **The Deputy**

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**Place**

The cotton plantation country of the Old South

**Time**

In the late 1950s at a time when the Jim Crow laws were being freshly challenged by the American Civil Rights Movement.
ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

ACT I

Scene 1 - Purlee Victorious Judson returns to his small hometown in Georgia, with Lutiebelle Gussie Mae Jenkins and a plan to win back his family inheritance from Ol’ Cap’n Cotchipee, the plantation owner. Purlee’s dream is to buy back Big Bethel, the community’s church, so that he can preach freedom to the cotton pickers. Purlee shares his plan with his brother Gitlow and sister-in-law Missy, who, despite their initial skepticism agree to help.

Scene 2 - Later that afternoon, in the back office of the village commissary (general store), Idella is tending to the pantry. Furious, Purlie heads up to the back door of the commissary. Lutiebelle is dressed up as Purlee’s deceased cousin Bee, whom she will pretend to be to win back the family inheritance. Purlee and Lutiebelle rehearse one last time before Ol’ Cap’n arrives. All does not go according to plan, but Purlee jumps in and wins Ol’ Cap’n over with flattery. Ol’ Cap’n agrees to give the money and asks Lutiebelle to sign a receipt, which exposes their ruse, and a fight ensues. Purlee and Lutiebelle escape.

Scene 2 - Two days later, Purlee returns to Missy and Gitlow’s shack. Idella is there looking for Charlie, who is missing. Missy thanks her for getting Ol’ Cap’n to drop the charges against Purlie and encourages Purlee to ask Lutiebelle to marry him. He is determined to get his Church back. Gitlow returns bragging that he has secured the $500 inheritance from Ol’ Cap’n, in exchange for Lutiebelle working at the house. Purlee fumes. Lutiebelle enters in a daze. Ol’ Cap’n’s bull whip. Purlee tells the others how he sought vengeance on Ol’ Cap’n. The others celebrate his victory until Idella arrives and reveals the truth about how Purlee has secured the money and won back Big Bethel.

Epilogue - The play concludes with Purlee at the pulpit in Big Bethel, offering a unique and heartfelt blessing for unity and freedom for all.

ACT II

Scene 1 - Later that night, Lutiebelle and Missy wait at the shack for Purlee to return. Gitlow arrives without news. He suspects Purlee has fled rather than confront Ol’ Cap’n. Lutiebelle and Missy worry. Finally, Purlee returns with $500 and Ol’ Cap’n’s big whip. Purlee tells the others how he sought vengeance on Ol’ Cap’n. The others celebrate his victory until Idella arrives and reveals the truth about how Purlee has secured the money and won back Big Bethel.

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PLOT SYNOPSIS

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RAIFORD CHATMAN
“OSSIE” DAVIS (1917-2005)

Davis was born in Cogdell, Georgia. He inadvertently became known as “Ossie” when his birth certificate was being filed and his mother’s pronunciation of his name as “R. C. Davis” was misheard by the courthouse clerk.

Davis attended Howard University but dropped out in 1939 to fulfill his desire for a career in the theater in New York. By joining the Rose McClendon Players in Harlem, he later attended Columbia University School of General Studies.

Davis served in the Medical Corps of the United States Army during World War II. Upon his return, he made his Broadway debut in 1946 in JEB, followed by his film debut in 1950 in the Sidney Poitier film No Way Out. In 1948, he married Ruby Dee, a fellow actor, with whom he frequently performed until his death. In 1949, Mr. Davis’ play Purlee Victorious was produced on Broadway; he performed in the title role, alongside his wife, Ruby, as Lutiebelle. Until that time, only a handful of Black playwrights including Willis Richardson (1923), Garland Anderson (1925), Langston Hughes (1935), and Lorraine Hansbury (1959) had ever been produced on Broadway.

Throughout the next several decades, Davis had an illustrious career on stage and screen — both large and small. Davis found recognition late in his life by working in several of director Spike Lee’s films, including School Daze, Do The Right Thing, Jungle Fever, She Hates Me and Get on the Bus. He also appeared in several popular 1990s films, including Grumpy Old Men and Dr. Dolittle.

In addition to writing over a dozen plays, Mr. Davis was the author of three children’s books: Escape to Freedom (honored by the American Library Association and the Jane Addams Children’s Book Award), Langston and Just Like Martin.

David and Dee were well known as civil rights activists during the Civil Rights Movement and were close friends of Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other icons of the era. They were involved in organizing the 1963 civil rights March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and served as its emcees. Davis, alongside Ahmed Osman, delivered the eulogy at the funeral of Malcolm X. He re-read part of this eulogy at the end of Spike Lee’s film Malcolm X. He also delivered a stirring tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at a memorial in New York’s Central Park the day after King was assassinated.

Ossie Davis received many honors and citations throughout his lifetime, including the N.Y. Urban League Frederick Douglass Award, the NAACP Image Award, the National Medal of Arts, and the Screen Actors Guild Life Achievement Award. In 1994,

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PLAYWRIGHT OSSIE DAVIS ON THE CREATION OF PURLIE VICTORIOUS AND HIS UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY OF HUMOR AMIDST THE BATTLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

(Excerpted from Purlie Victorious: A Commemorative published in 1993)

On September 29, 1961, in the midst of a nationwide struggle by African-Americans for civil rights, Purlie Victorious opened on Broadway at the Cort Theater. In the audience was Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, the spiritual father of that struggle. He was 93 years old; still he insisted on climbing the ten stairs to our dressing room to tell Ruby and me how much he had enjoyed the play. Later in the run, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. saw the play and commended it highly. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP wrote a letter to all the chapters urging them to come, and James Farmer and CORE confirmed for Ruby and me the importance of what we were trying to do.

Those witnesses, and the reaction of the general public confirmed for Ruby and me what we were trying to do.

Though Purlie Victorious was a comedy aimed at America’s funny bone, it was deadly serious in its purpose: to point a mocking finger at racial segregation and laugh it out of existence.

But there were others — white and black, friends and colleagues, beloved and respected — who were vehement in their opposition to the play, which they felt in many ways to be condescending if not demeaning. To them, we Negroes were locked in a life and death struggle against white, bigoted, Jim Crow oppressors. The cause was serious, and laughter was the last thing we needed at a time like this — bad for morale, and definitely out of order. White folks already looked upon us as a race of clowns, incapable of acting like men, and that was a part of the problem. What we needed from the theater was not buffoons, but heroes hurling invective, like Frederick Douglass and Patrick Henry. A play with characters speaking manfully of our anguish, who would inspire us, like Churchill at Dunkirk, and lead us into battle — raging, angry, bitter and unbending, warning white America, as David Walker had done way back in 1792, that this time we meant to have our freedom by any means necessary. If that meant killing and being killed, so be it.

To them humor was not a weapon; it was rather a confirmation of our cowardice — our lack of manly resolve and self-respect in the face of the enemy. Laughter, except as shared between black and whites based on mutual respect and understanding, was unacceptable. That was war.

I knew the feelings well — the smoldering rage, the resentment of a people continually mocked, insulted, cheated, lied to, ignored, ridiculed, assaulted and killed. I had grown up a black boy in the South, and there was no racial indignity, except lynchings and the chain gang, that had passed me by; I, too, was sick of it. My rights as an American and as a man always deferred, if not denied. I, too, had watched with horror what was happening on television and in the headlines. Anger and vengeance — an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth — seemed very much in order, and I was full of it. And that was exactly the kind of play I set out to write. But a funny thing happened on the way to production.

The idea for what eventually became Purlie Victorious first entered my mind…at a time when the 1954 Supreme Court decision against school segregation had been announced…by the lynching of Emmett Till, a fifteen-year-old black boy by two white men in Money, Mississippi, for allegedly whistling at a white woman.

Having grown up in Waycross, Georgia, I felt particularly arched. It awoke in me a deep and private hurt, stemming from an incident that had happened long ago when I was a very young boy. One day after school I was picked up by the police for no reason whatsoever and taken down to the station house. I was not arrested. Momma was never notified, and I was never threatened. There were just some words said and plenty of fun at my expense. Then one of the policemen poured syrup on my head. They laughed, and I laughed too. Then they gave me some peanut brittle to eat and turned me loose. I don’t remember being scared or angry. Maybe it made me feel special that these white men would take the time to “play” with a little colored boy. I probably washed out the syrup by sticking my head under the pump in the yard when I got home. Maybe I went to the swimming hole laughing and going on about my business. I don’t remember that part of it. I only remember that my six or seven-year-old mind knew that what happened at the police station that day wasn’t innocent — wasn’t fun. Deep down in the recesses of my heart I knew. I had been violated, mocked, insulted, and humiliated. I knew it, even if I didn’t know how to share it with anybody, not even Momma, and certainly not my father. It rankled. It left a question mark. It became my sin against myself of which I grew secretly ashamed. Over and over during the years, I play the moments back in my mind playing for a different ending, with me feeling heroic this time. What happened that day, Emmett Till, and so much else of my life I brought to the writing of the play. And so it was after that work, I sat at the dinner room table far into the night, pencil scratching loud and hard, venting my ancient fury, page after page after page. An eye for an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth for a tooth!

But in the cold light of day, when I set out to make revisions on what had spewed form my pencil like hot lava the night before, I was appalled. The facts were there, embellished freely by the storyteller’s privileged imagination. The passion was there, but all overblown and swollen. I didn’t believe a single word my characters were saying. No white folks could possibly be as mean and hateful, no black folks such helpless, hopeless victims. I read it aloud and found it hard to keep myself from laughing.

Still, night after night, spurred by what was constantly in the news, I wrestled with my cast of characters, trying to make them behave. But the closer I got to the facts hiding in my memory, the more ridiculous they became in retrospect. I finally gave up on the theatrical vengeance. Forgot my high resolve to punish all white folks and just wrote. I let the characters take the play in hand and follow their own fates. Little by little, they began to reveal such inner lives and motives as was totally unexpected. I began to see them and appreciate them in a totally different way.

Gone now was the protest play I had promised myself, the memory of the little boy with a crown of lukewarm syrup, vengeance for Emmett Till and rage against the white oppressors. In its place was a new play with a whole new cast of characters, drawn from my own precious childhood memories of black life in the Cottonpatch, sprinkled with folktales and fables, sermons and storytelling. …
IN HIS OWN WORDS: OSSIE DAVIS

I had little time, and no inclination, to respond to such criticism. I didn’t know what to say or how to say it. I swallowed my own doubts in the general wide and appreciative acceptance of the play. But now, these many years after opening night, the question again stands before me: not so much whether the play was a joke, but whether, given the war-like tenor of the times, the joke was out of order. Did I betray the struggle by implying that the whole affair was ridiculous? Was not being able to keep a straight face a form of treason? Was laughing by night at the very things I marched against by day a defect of character?

In retrospect, I think not.

There must be a reason why we humans are the only animals blessed — or cursed — with the gift of laughter, a reason that would also explain how and why a dramatic idea drawing its inspiration from personal fire and anger, resentment and hostility turned — as if by its own will — into a rearing farce which sent us from crying… to laughing instead of cursing.

Segregation as public policy is forever ended, but the struggle continues. I like to think that somewhere beyond time and space, and all things mundane, there is a kingdom where fools can go when the world no longer needs their sage advice, their scalding satire, or their healing laughter. Where we, too, may visit their misadventures, this time about me, putting me right up there with ol’ Bre’r Rabbit and High John the Conqueror, still my heroes, still my role models.

How I shall love it, and laugh and laugh and laugh.

Purlie belongs to the sunset of an era. In that regard, perhaps a part of my motivation must have been to take a brief look backwards in hope of catching one last glimpse. A bad time, a rough time, those racist years, and yet out of those years grew much that was irreplaceable. A mean world, full of pain, atrocity and horror, yet for many of us it was all the world we knew.

I hope when collection time comes, and I am repossessed, the Reverend Purlie Victorious will come and bring the eulogy. He’ll be long-winded of course, but I won’t mind. All I’ll have to do is lie back in the narrow, wooden walls of my final confinement and listen to Purlie telling lies again, this time about me, putting me right up there with ol’ Bre’r Rabbit and High John the conqueror, still my heroes, still my role models.

How do you create a “safe” space for both your company and your audience when you are working on a piece that includes racist tropes?

I’m used to having a safe environment in rehearsal. We are in a room where everyone can speak to each other as if each steps on someone else’s toes, that person admits that misstep and the other person’s job is to forgive and move on. In order to make the play feel safe to an audience, we have to make them realize that we’re creating an artistic event. For instance, at the start of our show, when the audience walks into the theater, there is a rack of clothes on the stage. When the play begins, we see one character after another come on and put on their costume, so the audience knows we’re playing characters. Nobody’s really Cap’n Cotchipee. Cap’n Cotchipee is a conglomeration of a lot of racist ideologies packed into one to create something that metaphorically represents the idea of racism. Missy is an iconic figure that represents the image of a “strong Black woman.” No one can be a strong Black woman all the time without recognizing that she has soft sides, rough sides, big sides, strong sides. Ida is the maternal character that has been taking care of everybody. Sometimes, those people who take care of everyone else forget about themselves. This play takes the stereotypical nature of different types of people, and we exaggerate those to create characters. To make it feel safe to the audience, we give them a way in, by showing them that we are playing characters and that this is a fable of a story that’s about the history of America.

How do you mine this play for its comedy?

Ossie Davis is a brilliant writer. The music is in his language, the way that he arranges words, the rhythm of those words, and the tone of the whole piece. There are all different types of humor. This play is close to Saturday Night Live in its broad comedic approach and exaggeration of ideas. As a director, my role is to make sure all of the actors are all in the same story. I make sure that everybody stands on a platform of realism and authenticity, but that is also heightened naturalism, so I get the actors to do 80% of what they would do in real life and then exaggerate 20% to make those characters. But everything is on the page. Ossie Davis has written a perfect score, and our job is to make sure that we say every word that he wrote. We can’t improvise words because then it changes the comedy. It’s about timing. Great comedy is always about timing.

Did you always know you wanted to be a director? What was your path?

I grew up as a poor kid from Tallahassee, Florida. With an outhouse and no running water. The idea was that I might be a preacher, or a teacher. I ended up going to a historically Black college, and my major was political sciences. I was going to go into Law. I eventually ran into a group of artists including Samuel L. Jackson, Spike Lee and Angela Bassett, who grew up in my same hometown. They introduced me to theater, and I just loved it. I left Law School after less than a year and...
started acting. I was acting for 5-6 years, and I was pretty successful, but then I had my first opportunity to direct. It was a play call The Wishing Place. It was such a beautiful experience. I never felt anything like it, and I realized this is what I’m meant to do. The very next day I stopped acting. I left that company where I was working because the Artistic Director felt I didn’t have the skill set to direct. As soon as I left, I was approached by some folks from the National Endowment for the Arts to be a part of a directing fellow program and I’ve never turned back since. It was a spiritual intervention.

What advice would you give to young, aspiring directors?

Just do it! There is no “right” way to do it. If you are a writer, write every day. If you want to direct, just get two of your friends and read a scene together. Then invite one person to see it, and then two people. Then do it at your church. Then do it at your school. Just do it. Success will find you!

How do you prepare for a role like this? What if any research did you do before rehearsals start?

The first responsibility is committing the words to memory. I hired a young woman who’d just graduated from my alma mater, Carnegie Mellon University, and we would meet once or twice a week on Zoom for about 45 minutes to an hour and run the scenes until I knew them. We did this for months and months. So, I was able to come into the rehearsal process with a fair amount of it already committed to memory. That’s important when you are dealing with language this dense and passages this musical and rhythmical. The same is true for the work of Lin Manuel Miranda and Shakespeare. I invoke these three writers together not by accident. There is a connection between them. I built the spine of Purlie, the spine of Aaron Burr, on the language that the author had given me.

Then, I look for all the things that I have in common with the character. I make notes about all the ways in which we are similar, in order to bring them close to me and help me empathize with them. Once I feel like I understand them like a cousin or a dear friend, then I reach for those aspects that are harder for me to understand and explore the ways in which we are dissimilar. But now I’m doing it with an empathetic heart. The characters are all flawed and ridiculous, but so are we.

What do you think makes this play relevant today?

America, is as relevant today as ever. It is my hope that the genius of Mr. Davis will connect to and inspire the genius of some of the students who will come to see this production. I hope that they will sit down and write about the truth of their own experiences. I hope that their stories might live and inspire for decades to come.

What do you think makes this play relevant today?

The truth is and always will be relevant. Shakespeare was writing about what it meant to be human, what it meant to fall in love, what it meant to lose love, what it meant to be young and to come of age while shouldering the expectations of parents... and those plays are still relevant 400 years later. This play about Mr. Davis’ childhood, growing up in the segregated South in
What was your approach to designing Purlie Victorious?

The play takes place on an old cotton plantation that is going through a period of transition. It’s set in the late 1940s, but from the text, it feels like Purlie’s house is actually much older, perhaps from the 1920s or 30s—

The Depression era. There is no running water or electricity in the house. I tried to capture that in the design without having it be sentimental. It was important to me and our Director, Kenny Leon, that the design have a contemporary sensibility because the ideas in the play feel so modern.

The architecture of the set is minimal and fairly unadorned. We needed a space that could be shared by the three locations described in the play—Purlie’s ‘shack’, the stock room of the commissary, and Big Bethel church, so we designed a surround that could shift with minor scenic changes.

Where does your process begin?

Every set must fit in a particular space whether it’s on Broadway, off-Broadway or in some alternative type of space. That container is super important because each is very different. Some spaces are very shallow. Some have no wing space. So, I start every design by getting a scale drawing of the stage, and then, in my studio, I build a scale model of an empty stage. That’s the starting point. Usually, we work in 1/4 inch scale, which means that 1/4 inch in a model or drawing equals one foot in real life. Another way to look at it is that the model is 1/48 the size of real life. Next, I make a few models of the actors, because everything needs to relate to the size of the actors. I usually take a photograph of the empty model stage and then I start sketching. The drawings usually start out very rough and then over time, as ideas start to emerge, the drawings become more specific and more detailed. When I land on a design sketch that feels right, we build a scale model of the set and put it on the model stage. We usually do several versions of that, making adjustments each time. The process is a little bit of trial and error. When we’re ready, we invite the director to take a look and give comments. Once we’ve agreed on the design, my studio draws the set to scale. We produce drawings that are very much like an architect’s renderings for a house or building. That’s what we send to the carpenters in the shops so that they can build the set.

All the design elements layer upon each other. How do you collaborate with other members of the creative team to create a full effect?

I work very closely with Kathy, the Props Supervisor, to dress the set. In my sketches, I will lay out suggestions for the furniture and dressing and then Kathy usually takes those ideas and delivers even better. The tricky part is that everything has to fit to the size of the set. Part of what the scale model that I make does is define how big the furniture wants to be. Together, we also looked at a lot of research of plantations in the 1940s and 50s—photographs of the commissaries and some of the plantation workers houses. It’s then about selecting the right details from there. We don’t put all the details on stage, just the ones that seem most salient and use them to create these little moments, little still lifes, within this wooden box.

How does lighting come into play?

Our scenic design presented some challenges. One is that there is a full ceiling on the set. Often Broadway lighting design operates from above the stage, so Adam, our lighting designer doesn’t really have that option here. He does some of the lighting from the front, but I didn’t want it to feel flat, so we created a theatrical lift in that the boards have little spaces between them—about a half inch of gap—to see we can light through them. Adam does a beautiful job lighting through the spaces and giving another dimension of light from behind. There are also a lot of openings on stage—doors, archways, windows—which Adam can use to counteract the light from up front.

What do you love best about the work that you do?

I love the collaboration. I love working with directors. My favorite part is figuring out what the world of the play is. As a set designer—because sets take longer to build than most other aspects of the production—I usually start earlier than most of the other designers on the show. Very often, it’s me working with the director, trying to figure out the physical manifestation of the play. A lot of times, designing the set also involves establishing the theatrical rules for the production. How real is it? How unreal is it? How theatrical is it? All those things start to get answered as you develop the physical design.

Where does the design process begin?

When I read the script, I think the script is the holy grail. It’s the roadmap. It’s what you go back to for references. For me, everything starts with the words. When I read the script, I take notes and look for direction. Then the collaboration with the director begins. I don’t go into that conversation with any design ideas yet; I like to listen to what the director has in mind. At the end of the day, my job — and everyone on the creative team’s job — is not only to interpret the text, but also to support the Director’s vision.

When you are designing costumes for a historical era, what kind of research do you do?

One of the reasons I love costume design so much is because it marries both of my loves: fashion and history. It is a lot easier now with google to research any time period that you want; before you had to go to the library and physically research. When it’s a revival, I try not to look at other productions. I try to keep myself away from other artists’ work, so I can come up with my own version, and the Director will guide me to where he wants us to be. Purlie Victorious is an interesting piece because it’s set on a plantation, but when you read the text, there are also more modern details, like sneakers. It also mentions Martin Luther King. So, it’s not really in the time-period of the Jim Crow South, but rather inspired by it.

How do you marry form and aesthetic with function especially when dealing with a period that may have had more restrictive clothing?

You have to think of those things prior to making the costumes. You can’t get to the stage of rehearsal and find out that the actor can’t move. I know what the silhouette of the period is supposed to be, but how I get there is where the ingenuity and design comes in. You must make allowances. If you want to see beautiful and historically correct costumes, you go to a museum. Costumes need to move the way the actors move. You do that with the fabric selection and construction. You need to be smart and inventive about how you create shape but don’t restrict your actor.

What does a typical day look like for you?

The one thing I love about theater is that there is no typical day in the life. Every day is different. Every day brings its own challenges it’s just a matter of prioritizing. You may think, today we’re going to do shoes, but the designer says he wants coats in the rehearsal room the next day. So, you have to be able to shift. You have to be able to multitask. Usually, I’m designing for three or four shows at the same time, so I have to be organized.

What was your path to costume design and what was your training?

My path was not linear. I never ever dreamt of having the career that I have now. It is a blessing. I always say that theater chose me; I didn’t choose theater. I got into costumes by chance as a fashion design major at Pratt here in New York City. I had a teacher who taught a History of Fashion course that was a requirement for all design students. One day, she made an announcement that a costume shop was looking for a shopper. A shopper in the costume world is someone that literally goes for thread, fabric, shoes, whatever needs to be purchased. For the first two years that I was in school, theater was just a side job. It was not something I was planning to have a career in, but I was fortunate and another friend who was a costume designer recommended me for a dance company and I took a job as Assistant Wardrobe Supervisor and I toured for two years taking care of the costumes. That is when I fell in love with the art of costume design, theater, and touring. There is a path to having a career in theater if you choose it. You just have to be resourceful and say yes to any opportunity. You have to work hard and love it. This is one of those industries that if you don’t love it, you won’t be successful, because it can take a while to establish yourselves and you need that love to carry you through.
What is the role of a lighting designer?

The lighting designer is like the cinematographer of the stage. We help the audience know where to look and how to feel when they are looking. Lighting designers are responsible for what we see and what we don’t see. Do we have access to what's on stage? How much access?

From an emotional standpoint, lighting design is also like the scoring of a film, adding all these minute nuances that evoke feelings from the audience. Scenery creates the environment and then we put the atmosphere and energy on top of that. Is it a dark, seedy room? Is it a bright happy day? Is there a creepy door with the light coming through it? In the sense of Purlie Victorious, it’s a mid 1940s farmhouse in the middle of the countryside. There was no electricity at that time, so it’s all natural bounds through a window.

For all projects, the job starts with the script and the director, determining how we want to tell that story and what is the energy of the atmosphere.

What do you like about lighting design?

What I love about lighting design is that it’s an invisible medium. People who make good lighting designers see the world from a different perspective, where they think about everything from the top down. The lower human-levels and that’s what lighting design does. We work closely with the scenic designer to layer the environment with dressing and decoration. We are also responsible for what is in each of the actor’s hands, what each object means to the play, how it’s used, whether it’s safe, how it integrates into the overall design. Propping entails quite a bit of research into the particular period in which the play takes place.

What does your research entail?

The first thing I do is read the play. Then I need to understand the time and place, which I find through pictorial research. For the most part, we have everything at our fingertips on google. With Purlie Victorious, we're talking about plantation life in Georgia, during the 1940s when the Jim Crow laws were in effect, so I need to understand everything from the climate to the types of items these folks have access to. Their economic and social background, religion, everything about the character. We listen closely to the Director’s vision for this play and what the story is about. The research we do about time and place is so that we can choose the correct props and fabrics and furniture. What kind of wood is most authentic? Would the subjects of the paintings on the wall be a Northern snowy-scape or would it be a field landscape with bales of hay in a hot blazing sun? We ask questions about every single object and those drive our decisions.

What does your team look like?

What kind of training did you do to become a lighting designer?

First and foremost, I learned a lot when I was younger through play. I joined my theater club in middle school. We used to do shows on the stage in our “cafetorium” with the florescent lights on. One day, I said, “what if we rented a spotlight? What if we used these old burnt our Fresnel lights that are in the stage?” Through play, I figured out how a spotlight interacts with a human and a wall. In high school, I took a technical theater class, that was very rudimentary. It taught what the theater and how the technical elements interact with the story. I was planning to go to college for Broadcast journalism, and my high school theater director said, “no, no, no, no, you should be going for design.” I didn’t even know what that meant. He handed me a copy of Julie Taymor’s The Lion King coffee book that includes all the renderings of the costumes and masks as well as a light plot, and I realized that this is what I wanted to do. So, I switched gears and applied to several universities to study design. I went to the University of Oklahoma with a triple emphasis on scenery, costumes and lighting and trained in all three. It wasn’t until my senior year that I focused on lighting design.

When I moved to the city, I tried everything. I called up all the people I knew and asked them if they had any openings, because designers are busy, but for the handful that did, I would just show up to their tech rehearsals and watch. There were a couple of internship programs that I participated in — one at Williamstown theater Festival, which was a big one for me. I met a lot of great Broadway designers through that program, who offered to let me shadow them. That was probably the most important — finding mentors in my life.

What advice would you give to young people who are interested in the more technical aspects of theater, particularly lighting design?

Just do it. It seems intimidating. There will be invitations and offers that come your way that are often going to feel much larger and greater than you and the best thing is to accept it and learn by doing. Also, find a good mentor that will take you in and show you the ropes and teach you. The biggest takeaway that I can give to the youth is no one wants you to fail. We all want you to be here. I think theater is one of the most loving and nourishing communities in the world. We want to help you. If you need help, just ask for help. If you don't know the answer, say you don't know the answer. We want you to succeed. Also, there are so many opportunities - beyond design — to work on the technical side of theater. Local One union technicians on Broadway — like Spot Operators for example earn six-figures salaries with benefits. It is an amazing opportunity. It really is possible. It may seem daunting at first, but there is money to be made on the technical end. It is a very lucrative industry.

What is the job of the Production Props Supervisor?

Our layer of any production — play, musical, tv, film — is to provide a complete package to include all the of hand-held items, all the set decoration and usually, in most cases, the furniture. We work closely with the scenic designer to layer the environment with dressing and decoration. We are also responsible for what is in each of the actor’s hands, what each object means to the play, how it’s used, whether it’s safe, how it integrates into the overall design. Propping entails quite a bit of research into the particular period in which the play takes place.

What does your research entail?

The first thing I do is read the play. Then I need to understand the time and place, which I find through pictorial research. For the most part, we have everything at our fingertips on google. With Purlie Victorious, we were talking about plantation life in Georgia, during the 1940s when the Jim Crow laws were in effect, so I need to understand everything from the climate to the types of items these folks have access to. Their economic and social background, religion, everything about the character. We listen closely to the Director’s vision for this play and what the story is about. The research we do about time and place is so that we can choose the correct props and fabrics and furniture. What kind of wood is most authentic? Would the subjects of the paintings on the wall be a Northern snowy-scape or would it be a field landscape with bales of hay in a hot blazing sun?

We ask questions about every single object and those drive our decisions.

Where do you source your props?

There are many ways we choose the best place to acquire props. For most periods we shop on online auction sites like eBay, Etsy. First Dibs are the best resource. When you are doing a contemporary musical and you need 10 of any one given item as a dance Prop for the ensemble, the fastest and most affordable way to get those items is to order from Amazon and Wayfair. One of the biggest differences between doing this kind of purchasing and purchasing as an interior Decorator is that you have a deadline—sometimes only two or four weeks. We don’t have the luxury of time. When we are sourcing items that are difficult to purchase because they are so specific, we have those items constructed from a shop that does custom work. Another way of sourcing is renting. There are particular rental houses that are ‘go-to’ for theater, but that can get expensive for shows running longer than six weeks.

So many moving parts! How do you stay on top of it all?

Step one is breaking down the entire props list from the large units and the furniture, the set dressing, any on stage lighting pieces like lamps, sconces and chandeliers, and the hand props including food and nightly perishables. We break them down into categories on a big to do list which everyone on my team has access to, and then everyone specializes in a different area. One person oversees handcrafted items, another does all the online vintage auction ordering, another shops on foot in Pennsylvania or upstate New York at vintage flea markets and antique stores.

What happens to props after a show?

Some plays have a life after Broadway, so those props get put into storage so that they can be used for a later tour, a production abroad or at a regional playhouse. That’s always painful because we hate to see things thrown away. When our version of the show is not going to have a further life, we sometimes resell or donate to places like Materials for the Arts, which is a not-for-profit that collects unused materials and makes them available to lower budget projects, like Long Green that will re-sell props to film. There is a big effort in our industry to figure out how to recycle and limit what is thrown away.

How many people are on your team?

My team and I work about 5 people on full time staff but then I also have a lot of contract workers—extra props assistants who handle rehearsals, people who do shopping, crafting, van driving, deliveries, loading rehearsal halls in and out. And sometimes we hire people with special skills like photoshop, upholster, drapery makers. To be a Props Supervisor, you don't have to be an expert at all these skills, but you need be an expert at finding the right people with these skills. This job is never boring, especially if you are a person who is curious, not afraid to ask questions, interested in both visual and performing arts mediums, and excited to try lots of different things.
CIVIL RIGHTS TIMELINE: 1862-1961

- **APRIL 9, 1865**
  - The Confederate Army surrenders.

- **APRIL 12, 1865**
  - Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant.

- **APRIL 26, 1865**
  - President Andrew Johnson issued a conditional pardon to Union soldiers and African Americans.

- **APRIL 26, 1865**
  - Congress passed the 14th Amendment, abolishing slavery and guaranteeing citizenship.

- **APRIL 26, 1865**
  - Johnson's Ten Percent Plan was passed, allowing for the readmission of Southern states to the Union under certain conditions.

- **MAY 21, 1865**
  - Johnson vetoed Congress's attempt to override his veto of the 14th Amendment.

- **JUNE 19, 1865**
  - President Johnson issued the Reconstruction Acts, which included giving African Americans the right to vote.

- **JUNE 19, 1865**
  - Frederick Douglass was appointed as a federal commissioner to assist in the enforcement of the 14th Amendment.

- **JULY 9, 1868**
  - The 15th Amendment was ratified, granting African American men the right to vote.

- **JULY 9, 1868**
  - The Civil Rights Act of 1868 was passed, providing for federal court enforcement of the 15th Amendment.

- **SEPTEMBER 18, 1869**
  - The Fifteenth Amendment was ratified, guaranteeing African American men the right to vote.

- **JULY 15, 1875**
  - The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was passed, making it illegal to deny African Americans the right to vote or to be excluded from jury service.

- **OCTOBER 18, 1883**
  - The Supreme Court in Plessy v. Ferguson, a decision that upholds the doctrine of segregation.

- **MARCH 2, 1891**
  - Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1891, aimed at protecting the rights of African Americans.

- **MAY 18, 1896**
  - The Supreme Court in Plessy v. Ferguson upholds the doctrine of segregation.

- **DECEMBER 18, 1896**
  - The Supreme Court in Plessy v. Ferguson upholds the doctrine of segregation.

- **MAY 17, 1954**
  - The Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education, a landmark decision that declared segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional.

- **SEPTEMBER 1957**
  - President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to protect nine African American students from being prevented from entering Central High School.

- **DECEMBER 10, 1961**
  - The Supreme Court in Morgan v. Virginia, a decision that upholds the doctrine of segregation.

- **MAY 2, 1965**
  - President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which outlawed voting practices that discriminated against racial minorities.

- **MAY 6, 1960**
  - President John F. Kennedy signs the Civil Rights Act of 1960, providing for the establishment of federal civil rights examiners and the federalization of civil rights enforcement.

- **JUNE 12, 1965**
  - President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Freedom Summer Act, which establishes a voting rights act.

- **SEPTEMBER 1957**
  - President Eisenhower sends federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to protect nine African American students from being prevented from entering Central High School.

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WITH EACH NEW LAW ENACTED AND EVERY STEP TOWARDS RACIAL PROGRESS, BARRIERS WERE CONTINUALLY PUT INTO PLACE TO RESTRICT THE ADVANCEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES.

Black Codes
When slavery was abolished at the end of the Civil War, southern states created black codes, laws which aimed to keep white supremacy in place. Black codes attempted to economically disable freed slaves, forcing African Americans to continue to work on plantations and to remain subject to racial, social and economic hierarchies within the southern society.

Black code laws varied from state to state, but all were designed to restrict the civic participation of freed people; the codes deprived them of the right to vote, the right to serve on juries, the right to own or carry weapons, and, in some cases, even the right to rent or lease land.

Jim Crow Laws
Black Codes were just the beginning of what were known as Jim Crow laws, a collection of state and local statutes that legalized racial segregation. Named after a Black Minstrel show character, the laws—which existed for about 100 years, from the post-Civil War era until 1968—were meant to marginalize African Americans by denying them the right to vote, hold jobs, get an education or other opportunities. Those who attempted to defy Jim Crow laws often faced arrest, fines, jail sentences, violence, and death.

In the 1880s, as freed Blacks began moving to the cities, Jim Crow laws expanded. The laws affected almost every aspect of daily life, mandating segregation of schools, parks, hospitals, libraries, drinking fountains, restrooms, buses, trains, building entrances, theaters, restaurants and more. “Whites Only” and “Colored” signs were constant reminders of the enforced racial order. African Americans were not allowed to live in white neighborhoods. These laws lasted for decades.

Jim Crow Laws continued to be enacted and every step towards racial progress was met with resistance until the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Sharecropping
At the end of the Civil War, former slaves needed jobs, and plantation owners needed laborers to work their land. A new hierarchical system was born, sharecropping.

Sharecropping is a farming system, where a landlord allows a tenant to plant and harvest his land in exchange for a share of the crop. In the South, after the Civil War, many black Americans, though free continued to live in rural poverty. Given their economic circumstances and lack of education, which was denied to them during slavery, many ex-slaves were forced to rent land from former white slave owners. There, they continued to raise cash crops such as cotton, tobacco, and rice.

In many cases, the landlords or nearby merchants would lease equipment to the sharecroppers, providing them with seed, fertilizer, food, and other necessities on credit until the harvest season. High interest rates, unpredictable harvests, and corrupt practices of landlords and merchants often kept sharecropping families severely indebted. Laws favoring landowners made it difficult or even illegal for sharecroppers to sell their crops to others besides their landlord, or prevented sharecroppers from moving if they were indebted to their landlord. The system severely restricted the economic mobility of black laborers.

Furthermore, the Black Codes often required black sharecroppers to sign annual labor contracts with white landowners. If they attempted to violate or evade these contracts, they could be fined, beaten, or arrested. Upon arrest, many “free” African Americans were made to work for no wages, essentially being reduced to the very definition of a slave. In addition, though “apprenticeship” laws, many young African American orphans were bound to white plantation owners who would then force them to work. Although slavery had been outlawed by the 13th Amendment, it effectively continued in practice in many southern states.

Voter Suppression
Following the ratification in 1870 of the 15th Amendment, which barred states from depriving citizens the right to vote based on race, southern states began voter suppression tactics such as poll taxes, literacy tests, all-white primaries, felony disenfranchisement laws, grandfather clauses, fraud, and intimidation to keep African Americans from the polls. The Supreme Court upheld many of these tactics until Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Little Rock Nine
The “Little Rock Nine” refers to the nine Black students who volunteered to integrate Little Rock’s Central High School as a test case for desegregation in the South following the ruling of Brown vs. the Board of Education. As in most of the Southern states, the idea of integration was met with much bitterness and opposition.

On September 3, 1957, three years after the historical ruling, the nine students arrived at Central High School, where they were met by a threatening white mob as well as the state’s National Guard, who had been deployed by Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, to block their entrance on the pretense of their safety.

Two weeks later, a federal judge ordered the National Guard removed. On September 23, the Little Rock Nine tried again to enter the school escorted by the local police, but again, they were met by an angry mob. School official, fearing for the lives of the nine students, once again sent them home.

Finally, on September 25, 1957, following a plea from Little Rock’s mayor Woodrow Mann, President Dwight D. Eisenhower federalized the National Guard and sent US Army troops to Little Rock. Guarded by the soldiers, the Little Rock Nine began regular class attendance at Central High.

Watching the video will help you understand the historical context of the Little Rock Nine and the events that led to their integration of Central High School.
BEYOND OFFERING RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY, CHURCHES HAVE LONG BEEN A PLACE OF GATHERING, SAFETY, JOY AND RESILIENCE FOR THE BLACK COMMUNITY.

They have been a source of strength and liberation. It is no surprise therefore that Purlie is so eager to reclaim Big Bethel and that he finds its ownership key to freedom for the cotton pickers working for Ol’ Cap’n.

Here are a few of the churches that have played a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement:

Ebenezer Baptist Church (Atlanta, Georgia) The spiritual home of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., this church played a crucial role in the civil rights movement. Dr. King served as co-pastor and delivered some of his most famous speeches there.

Riverside Church (New York City) Known for its commitment to social justice, Riverside Church hosted influential civil rights leaders and activities, including Dr. King’s famous “Beyond Vietnam” speech in 1967.

Brown Chapel AME Church (Selma, Alabama) This church was a starting point for the Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965, a key turning point in the civil rights movement that led to the Voting Rights Act.

Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (Baltimore, Maryland) This church, founded in 1785, has a long history of advocating for civil rights and social justice.

Zion Baptist Church (Cincinnati, Ohio) Led by Rev. L. Venchael Booth, this church was actively involved in the civil rights movement in Cincinnati.
TO TRULY LAUGH, YOU MUST BE ABLE TO TAKE YOUR PAIN, AND PLAY WITH IT.”
— CHARLIE CHAPLIN

“MUSIC PLAYED A LARGE ROLE IN THE SURVIVAL OF THE BLACK PEOPLE IN AMERICA — THAT AND A SENSE OF HUMOR THAT JUST COULDN’T BE ENSLAVED.”
— RED FOXX

“OUR COUNTRY’S SOCIAL EVOLUTION LENDS ITSELF TO JOKES AND I USE THEM.”
— NIPSEY RUSSELL

“FUNNY IS AN ATTITUDE.”
— FLIP WILSON

OSSIE DAVIS OFTEN SAID THAT HE WAS “BORN TO LAUGH” AND HE BROUGHT THIS ENERGY TO HIS ART.

He was influenced by many comedians throughout his lifetime including those represented on these pages. Many of these comics revolutionized the entertainment business and comedy as an artform, by introducing new styles and breaking barriers in the industry. All chose to find the funny in the world around them, even when it was filled with pain.

RESEARCH & WRITE: How is laughter used as a tool against oppression? Choose one of the comedians below — or another you admire. Research their life history and catalog of work. How did they use their craft to comment on the society around them and alleviate pain? In what way were they trailblazers in the industry?

“IF YOU DON’T WANT YOUR CHILDREN TO KNOW THE TRUTH ABOUT LIFE DON’T SEND ‘EM TO THE THEATER TO SEE MOMS ‘CAUSE I’M GONNA TELL THEM THE TRUTH, HEAR?”
— MOMS MABLEY

“I HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO DISCOVER ANYTHING DISGRACEFUL ABOUT BEING A COLORED MAN. BUT I HAVE FOUND IT INCONVENIENT — IN AMERICA.”
— BERT WILLIAMS

“I NEVER LEARNED HATE AT HOME, OR SHAME. I HAD TO GO TO SCHOOL FOR THAT.”
— DICK GREGORY

“HUMOR IS THE TRUTH; WIT IS AN EXAGGERATION OF THE TRUTH.”
— STAN LAUREL

“NO-ONE IS DUMBER THAN A DUMB MAN WHO THINKS HE’S SMART.”
— OLIVER HARDY

“We have to believe in free-will. We’ve got no choice.”
— ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

LISTEN: Another of the comedians Ossie Davis admired was Pigmeat Markham, who is credited as being the first rapper, with his piece “Here Comes the Judge.”
THE FOOLS OF CHELM

The Fools of Chelm were a great source of inspiration to Ossie Davis. In fact, he wrote Purle Victorious while stage managing the Broadway production The World of Sholom Aleichem, a play composed of three stories about the foolish Chelmmites, starring his wife Ruby Dee as the Defending Angel. Davis credits that play as one of the key influences that steered him towards a satirical approach for Purle Victorious as opposed to a straight drama. The Fools of Chelm reminded him of comedic icons from his own heritage — Bre’r Rabbit and High John the Conqueror, the “patron saints of black folk wit and humor.”

Chelm is an actual city in Poland, but in Eastern European Yiddish folklore, it is also an imaginary town of fools, who believe that they are wise. In some stories, they are ironically referred to as “The Wise Men of Chelm.” In a typical Chelm story, the people are faced with a challenge, which they resolve with the most ridiculous, unintelligent solution imaginable. Hundreds of hilarious folk tales have been written about their clumsy actions and humorously embarrassing events.

There are many types of humor at play in Purle Victorious. Some are easier to identify, and others are more nuanced and sophisticated.

EXPLORING THE MANY FACES OF HUMOR

Some of the humor at play in Purle Victorious.

PERFORM: Put your story up on its feet. How will you physically inhabit these characters? How do they talk? How will you infuse humor into your scene?

READ/RESEARCH: Study these three Chelm stories by Isaac Beshvis Singer or explore other tales about the Fools of Chelm.

WRITE: With a partner or in small groups, create your own Chelm-like folk tale. Before you put pen to paper, brainstorm your ideas. Remember, these stories are meant to be a mockery. Where will you set your story? Who are the characters? What is the dilemma? What crazy schemes do the characters come up with to solve the problem? How does it all resolve? What are the lessons learned?

word-play | noun. playful use of words: verbal wit

farce | noun. a comic dramatic work using buffoonery and horseplay and typically including crude characterization and ludicrously improbable situations.

slap-stick | noun. comedy based on deliberately clumsy actions and humorously embarrassing events

WATCH: Charlie Chaplin was one of the great masters of slapstick comedy. Enjoy this Video clip of the factory scene of Modern Times, 1936.

WATCH: Watch The Three Stooges ice fishing or bunk bed clips, in which Curly, Larry and Mo incorporate elements of Farce, slapstick, and vaudeville comedy.

Satire | noun. the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people’s stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues. 2. A play, novel, film or other work which uses satire.

Satire is a form of social commentary. Writers and artists use exaggeration, irony, and other devices to poke fun at and criticize political leaders, societal customs, and belief systems. Satire is often designed to challenge those in power and drive social change.

Satire in literature and drama can be found across the millennia, dating back to ancient Greece and Rome, highlighting the social and political issues of the times.

Contemporary satirists have used their craft to comment on everything from capitalism and communism to sexism and race.

There are three notable forms of satire:

Horatian: Horatian satire is comic and offers light social commentary. It is less sharp and cruel, more of a gentle, clever mockery, meant to poke fun at a person or situation in an entertaining and playful way (example: Jonathan Swift’s novel Gulliver’s Travels, Oscar Wilde’s play The Importance of Being Ernest, or Greta Gerwig’s recent film Barbie).

Juvenalian: Juvenalian satire is darker, sharper, and more direct. It often targets social conventions and mindsets. It commonly expresses anger and resentment and is meant to speak truth to power (example George Orwell’s 1945 novel Animal Farm, the modern-day television show South Park or Jordan Peel’s film Get Out).

Menippean: Menippean satire casts moral judgment on a particular belief. It focuses less on social conventions and more on the attitudes of people, attacking particular types such as “pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds.” (Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism) It can be comic and light, much like Horatian satire—although it can also be as stinging as Juvenalian satire (Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland or many of the political skits on Saturday Night Live).

Some of the literary devices and technique used to create satire include:

- Hyperbole over exaggerates statements or claims not meant to be taken literally.
- Irony creates or highlights situations that was meant to be a mockery, when in actuality it has the opposite effect.
- Caricature selects and highlights specific features to make a person look ridiculous.

WATCH: Watch The Three Stooges ice fishing or bunk bed clips, in which Curly, Larry and Mo incorporate elements of Farce, slapstick, and vaudeville comedy.

the effects of satire on the psyche:

Satire often challenges established norms and beliefs, encouraging individuals to think critically about the world around them. It prompts people to question authority, societal structures, and accepted ideas, which can lead to a more nuanced understanding of complex issues.

Satire can provide a healthy outlet for frustration or dissatisfaction with certain aspects of society. By laughing at absurd or frustrating situations, individuals may experience a sense of catharsis and emotional release, reducing feelings of stress or helplessness.

Satire can empower individuals by offering a way to express dissent or criticism, hopefully in a way that will lead to action.

Sharing a laugh over satirical content can foster a sense of camaraderie and connection among individuals who share similar perspectives. This can create a feeling of belonging to a community that understands and appreciates the same satirical viewpoints.

Satire often highlights the absurdities and contradictions present in society, shedding light on issues that might otherwise go unnoticed. By drawing attention to these issues, satire can increase awareness and provoke conversations about topics that deserve attention.

While satire aims to be humorous, it can also evoke discomfort or offense.

Vauudeville

Elements of vaudeville humor are also present in Purle Victorious. Vaudeville, which rose to popularity in the 1890s, was a form of light entertainment that comprised of a series of unrelated acts featuring singers, dancers, comedians, magicians, acrobats, trained animals, jugglers, and the like. These variety shows were more accessible to a wider audience than more traditional forms of theater not only for their affordability, but also for the mass appeal and easy comprehension of their content. Many of today’s late night television shows as well as America’s Got Talent are descendents of Vaudeville.

• Paradox shows a situation or event with two opposing aspects that contradict one another.
• Allegory creates a fictional narrative that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one.

LAUGHING THROUGH THE PAIN

LAUGHING THROUGH THE PAIN

• Paradox shows a situation or event with two opposing aspects that contradict one another.
• Allegory creates a fictional narrative that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one.
Black artists were eager to contradict the racist stereotypes put forth in Birth of a Nation, uplift the image of African Americans, and reclaim Black Humanity through the portrayal of joy, spirituality and resilience. A new genre of race films emerged - films produced by black filmmakers for black audiences featuring black casts. Between about 1915 and the early 1950s, approximately five hundred race films were produced. Of these, fewer than one hundred remain. Because they were produced outside the Hollywood studio system, race films were largely forgiven by mainstream film historians until they were resurrected in the 1980s.

Some modern day Black artists have reclaimed the use of stereotypes for satire, to flip the narrative as an act of defiance. Childish Gambino’s music video “This is America” (2018) is one such example.

**GROUP EXERCISE:** Divide the class up into small groups and have them explore some modern-day examples of satire. **Saturday Night Live** clips provide an excellent resource. Consider using some of the short SNL commercials below. [Please preview in advance to determine the appropriateness for your classroom.]

- Pepsi Commercial - SNL
- 39 Cent - SNL
- Amazon Echo - SNL
- Guns - SNL
- Levi’s Woke - SNL
- Covid-19 - SNL
- Handfree selfie stick - SNL

Ask your students to consider the following:

- Who or what is being mocked in these commercials?
- What is the social/political commentary that these commercials are making?
- Why is satire such an effective tool for social and political commentary?
- Why is it important to be able to recognize satire?

**CREATE:** Staying in small groups, ask your students to create their own SNL inspired satirical commercial. What social or political issue do they wish to critique? What situation and characters will they develop to achieve their goal?

**VISUAL SATIRE:** For over two hundred years, political cartoons have been used to support, attack, caricature and comment on the most pressing political and social issues of the day. For students who are more drawn to the visual arts, have them research some historical political cartoons using this link to the Library of Congress website and compare with some modern-day cartoons from The New Yorker. Who is/what is the target of the cartoon? What is the social/political commentary each cartoon is making? Once they are inspired, ask them to create their own satirical cartoon.

**AN EXPLORATION OF THEMES, CHARACTERS, AND PERFORMANCE**

**Production Elements**

What did you think of the opening of the play? How did it invite you into the story and what did it signal to you about what to expect? Purlie Victorious premiered on Broadway in 1961. What aspects of the play continue to resonate today? What elements of the production support this contemporary resonance? Ossee Davis was criticized for his use of humor in Purlie Victorious. Read “In his Own Words” to learn more. Do you think his use of humor is an effective tool to make a social commentary on race in our country? Why or why not? Support your opinion citing specific examples from the play.

**Character tropes/archetypes**

As a literary technique to strengthen the social commentary of his satire, Ossee Davis portrays most of his characters as exaggerated archetypes. Choose one of the characters below. Discuss how Ossee Davis’ hyperbolic depiction highlights their absurdity to subvert stereotypes and create comic effect. Consider some of the following quotes. What do they reveal about the characters and their social circumstances?

**PURLIE** - combination of **Hero/Trickster/Outlaw** - the driving force of the story, his goal is to challenge the status quo and liberate the cotton patch workers, but he does so through a bit of deception and cunning.
- “Some of the best pretending in the world is done in front of white folks.”
- “If it’s one thing I am foolproof in it’s white folks’ psychology.”
- “Some of the best pretending in the world is done in front of white folks.”
- “Talking big is easy — from the proper distance.”
- “Oh, I’m a great one for race pride, sir, believe me - it’s just that I don’t need it much in my line of work! Miss Emmylou sez…”
- “Talking big is easy — from the proper distance.”

**OL CAP’N** - racist **Villain** - “Great White Father of the Year” - he is the very embodiment of bigotry and white supremacy.
- In response to Charlie standing up for the cotton patch workers: “You are tampering with the economic foundation of the southland! Are you trying to ruin me? One more word like that and I’ll kill you!”
- “My ol’ Confederate father told me on his deathbed feed the Negroes first - after the horses and cattle - and I’ve done it each time!”

**GITLOW** - portrayed as **Uncle Tom/Uncle Remus** - depicted as a “good,” loyal, religious, a faithful and submissive former slave.
- “You the boss, boss.”
- “The finer they come, the braver they be, the deader these white folks gonna kill em when they catch em.”
- “That man’s got the president, the governor, the courthouse, and both houses of the congress — on his side! The army, the navy, the marines, the sheriff, the judge, and the hungriest dogs this side of hell! Surely you all don’t expect that poliboy to go up against all that caucasiatic power empty handed!”
Character Relationships/Power Dynamics

• What is the role of Charlie in the story? Why do you think Ossie Davis chose Charlie as the one to save the church? Do you see Charlie Cotchipee as an ally or as a white savior? Why? How has his relationship with Idella shaped him? Consider the year in which the play was written vs. now in its revival over six decades later.

• What is the role of the women in the play? How do they exert their strength and power? Consider Missy and Idella specifically. How do they influence the men in their lives?

• Consider the power dynamic between Ol’ Cap’n Cotchipee and Gitlow. Ol’ Cap’n refers to Gitlow as kin: “I told him how you and me growed up together. Had the same mammy - my mammy was your mother.” Throughout their first scene together Ol’ Cap’n turns to Gitlow for comfort and validation. How does Gitlow respond? What does it reveal about their power dynamic?

• When Ol’ Cap’n collapses in distress, he asks Gitlow to sing him “a few passels…of that ol’ spiritual” (“Old Black Joe”) which eases his pain. Why does a song about death and sadness bring comfort to Ol’ Cap’n? Study the lyrics below and discuss.

“OLD BLACK JOE”
By Stephen C. Foster

GONE ARE THE DAYS WHEN MY HEART WAS YOUNG AND GAY,
GONE ARE MY FRIENDS FROM THE COTTON FIELDS AWAY,
GONE FROM THE EARTH TO A BETTER LAND I KNOW,
I HEAR THEIR GENTLE VOICES CALLING “OLD BLACK JOE.”
I’M COMING, I’M COMING, FOR MY HEAD IS BENDING LOW:
I HEAR THOSE GENTLE VOICES CALLING, “OLD BLACK JOE.”

WHY DO I WEEP WHEN MY HEART SHOULD FEEL NO PAIN
WHY DO I SIGH THAT MY FRIENDS COME NOT AGAIN,
GRIEVING FOR FORMS NOW DEPARTED LONG A GO?
I HEAR THEIR GENTLE VOICES CALLING “OLD BLACK JOE.”
I’M COMING, I’M COMING, FOR MY HEAD IS BENDING LOW:
I HEAR THOSE GENTLE VOICES CALLING, “OLD BLACK JOE.”

WHERE ARE THE HEARTS ONCE SO HAPPY AND SO FREE?
The CHILDREN SO DEAR THAT I HELD UPON MY KNEE,
GONE TO THE SHORE WHERE MY SOUL HAS LONGED TO GO.
I HEAR THEIR GENTLE VOICES CALLING “OLD BLACK JOE.”
I’M COMING, I’M COMING, FOR MY HEAD IS BENDING LOW:
I HEAR THOSE GENTLE VOICES CALLING, “OLD BLACK JOE.”

LIBERATION THROUGH THE RECLAIMATION OF BLACK JOY
Purlie’s primary mission throughout the play is the quest for freedom and the celebration of Black joy, beauty and culture. Consider the following:

“You’ve missed the important part of being somebody. Love – being appreciated, and sought out, and looked after; being fought to the bitter end over even.”

What role does love and appreciation have in validating our identities?

“I find, in being black, a thing of beauty; a joy; a strength; a secret cup of gladness; a native land in neither time nor place – a native land in every Negro face!”

How can one’s body be a “native land?”

“...it was a - a parable! A prophecy! Believe me! I aint never in all my life told a lie I didn’t mean to make come true, some day!”

What is the significance of his response?

“OLD BLACK JOE”

DIGESTING THE PLAY POST-ATTENDANCE
A DRAMATIC EPILOGUE IS USUALLY A SHORT SPEECH GIVEN BY A NARRATOR CHARACTER, ADDRESSING THE AUDIENCE DIRECTLY, AT THE END OF A PLAY.

It usually brings closure to the play, wraps up loose ends, reports on any unresolved fates of the characters, comments on the events that have unfolded and sometimes charges the audience with action. Through Purlie’s sermon in the epilogue of the play, Ossie Davis calls on us to come together as a community — to celebrate our differences:

“We still need togetherness; we still need each otherness — with faith in the futureness of our cause. Let us therefore, stifle the rifle of conflict, shatter the scatter of discord, smuggle the struggle, tickle the pickle, and grapple the apple of peace!”

DISCUSS: What does freedom mean to you? What are the different forms of freedom? How can we celebrate each other’s differences? Where is our country today and where do we need to go?

“The South is split like a fat man’s underwear, and somebody besides the Supreme court has got to make a stand for the everlasting glory of our people!” - Purlie Victorious

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic engagement is taking responsibility for improving your community and taking action to address social issues or public concerns. Action can be taken as an individual or in groups with people who share similar values and a desire to make change in their community.

Civic engagement can take many forms:
• Starting a conversation (in-person or on social media)
• Learning about other perspectives
• Volunteering your time
• Advocating for a cause
• Marching in protest
• Voting and encouraging others to vote
• Mobilizing and leading others into action

ACT: What issues are important to you? What steps can you take to make change at your school, in your community, in our country?

“NEVER DOUBT THAT A SMALL GROUP OF THOUGHTFUL, COMMITTED CITIZENS CAN CHANGE THE WORLD; INDEED, IT’S THE ONLY THING THAT EVER HAS.”

— MARGARET MEAD

“EVERY GREAT DREAM BEGINS WITH A DREAMER. ALWAYS REMEMBER, YOU HAVE WITHIN YOU THE STRENGTH, THE PATIENCE, AND THE PASSION TO REACH FOR THE STARS TO CHANGE THE WORLD.”

— HARRIET TUBMAN

RELEASE: REVOLUTIONARY LAUGHTER AND THE POWER OF HUMOR AS A TOOL OF EMANCIPATION
“I am released of you — the entire Negro people is released of you! No more shouting hallelujah! Every time you sneeze, nor jumping jackass every time you whistle “Dixie”! We gonna love you if you let us and laugh as we leave if you don’t. We want our cut of the Constitution, and we want it now: and not with no teaspoon, white folks — throw it at us with a shovel!”

- PURLIE

Keywords:

**re·lease**
verb. 1. to set free from restraint, confinement, or servitude. 2. to relieve from something that confines, burdens, or oppresses

**rev·o.lu·tion·ary**
adjective. 1. involving or causing a complete or dramatic change 2. engaged in or promoting political revolution

**e·man·ci·pa·tion**
noun. 1. the fact or process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions; liberation
There is an alchemy inherent in Black folk’s humor, a way of transforming our gut-wrenching experiences into something digestible that we can stomach and survive. Finding humor in fraught topics isn’t anything new for our people. It’s a method of coping that stems back to when the first enslaved Africans were brought to the shores of Point Comfort Virginia in 1619. Black people have been searching for a release, reaching for our freedom by any means necessary, ever since.

In the wake of Ossie Davis’s Purlie Victorious, a powerful theatrical satire that highlights the complexities of African American history and identity, it is abundantly clear that the struggle for true equality has persistently eluded the African American community in the United States. Milestones such as the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and even the Emancipation Proclamation have all fallen short in their promise of equal rights.

In their persistent struggle, African Americans have turned to their rich imagination, creativity, and, notably, humor as a subservive tool of resistance and resilience. Satire became an action word powerful enough to cut tense atmospheres with spontaneous joy. Just like negro worksongs and spirituals, this verb has been an emancipating tool used to challenge the status quo and generate a unique code for the emotional intelligence and resistance needed to withstand an unfaltering harsh environment. Through storytelling, music, art, and the humor of figures like Purlie Victorious, African Americans transcend the limitations imposed upon them, forge their own cultural identities and assert their humanity.

Humor, in particular, has been a powerful form of dissent and connection. It has allowed African Americans to both critique injustices and find solace in shared laughter. In the face of adversity, humor becomes a weapon, a balm, and a form of cultural preservation. It can dismantle stereotypes, expose the absurdity of discrimination, and provide a light in the darkest of times. It has allowed marginalized voices to combat their realities and speak truth to power with authenticity and defiance.

Laughter is a protest: far more than mere amusement in the quest for liberation.

Ossie Davis knew this. Penned in this work is the safe space where Black rage could reside, coated in honey to save a nation; a safe space where we could reclaim humanity consumed through and with laughter.

In this enduring legacy, we are reminded that humor is a dynamic force—one that refuses to be silenced, that has the potential to inspire, provoke, and unite. Through humor, we find not only emancipation but also a testament to the indomitable human spirit and its capacity to overcome even the most formidable obstacles.

As we conclude this journey, the legacy of revolutionary laughter continues to evolve, adapting to the changing landscapes of injustice and inequality. In a world where new challenges emerge and where the fight for emancipation persists, humor remains a vital weapon in the arsenal of those who seek change. Let us carry forward the lessons learned from “Revolutionary Laughter” and recognize that in humor, there exists a powerful means to confront injustice, build connections, and pave the way for a more equitable world. Emancipation, it seems, will forever bear the unmistakable imprint of laughter.

Sources of Inspiration:
- https://www.kalw.org/show/crosscurrents/2020-12-04/danielle-fuentes-morgan-on-the-revolutionary-power-of-black-satire

Satirist / Comedians that defined the Civil Rights Movement:
- Godfrey Cambridge
- Dick Gregory
- Moms Mabley
- Richard Pryor

Satirist / Comedians of the 21st Century:
- Jordan Peele
- Dave Chappelle
- Quinta Brunson
- Issa Raye
THE HEALING POWER OF LAUGHTER

The field of medicine has long recognized the importance of humor. Many studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of laughter. Laughing during a humorous film elevates the pain threshold and can help break the cycle between pain, sleep loss, depression, and immunosuppression. Laughter lowers blood pressure, epinephrine, and glucose levels, and increases glucose tolerance. Throughout history, humor has been linked to tragedy in literature and theater, but it can also be a form of escape. Humor can qualify as support mechanisms in the presence of impossible situations or traumatic circumstances in order to relieve tension and cope with the stress. The search for a funny aspect in a difficult moment can help us endure it, and when used to help others to cope.

Short-term benefits

A good laugh has great short-term effects. When you start to laugh, it doesn’t just lighten your load mentally, it actually induces physical changes in your body. Laughter can:

• Stimulate many organs. Laughter enhances your intake of oxygen-rich air, stimulates your heart, lungs and muscles, and increases the endorphins that are released by your brain.
• Activate and relieve your stress response. A rollicking laugh fires up and then cools down your stress response, and it can increase and then decrease your heart rate and blood pressure. The result? A good, relaxed feeling.
• Soothe tension. Laughter can also stimulate circulation and aid muscle relaxation, both of which can help reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress.

Long-term effects

Laughter isn’t just a quick pick-me-up, though. It’s also good for you over the long term. Laughter may:

• Improve your immune system. Negative thoughts manifest into chemical reactions that can affect your body by bringing more stress into your system and decreasing your immunity. By contrast, positive thoughts can actually release neuropeptides that help fight stress and potentially more-serious illnesses.
• Relieve pain. Laughter may ease pain by causing the body to produce its own natural painkillers.
• Increase personal satisfaction. Laughter can also make it easier to cope with difficult situations. It also helps you connect with other people.
• Improve your mood. Many people experience depression, sometimes due to chronic illnesses. Laughter can help lessen your stress, depression and anxiety and may make you feel happier. It can also improve your self-esteem.

Interactive Questions:

• How do you process painful realities?
• Where does your laughter come from?
• How do you use laughter?
Dramaturgical Statement:

“WE HAVE MADE LIFE WORTH LIVING THROUGH HUMOR. HUMOR AS A TOOL FOR SURVIVAL HAS BEEN PASSED DOWN FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION, ALMOST RITUALISTICALLY. IT’S IN OUR BONES AND OUR BLOOD, IN OUR SWEAT AND OUR TEARS AND IT IS WHY WE ARE STILL HERE.”

– DARA M. WILSON
COMEDIAN/PODCASTER
LAUGHING THROUGH THE PAIN
Common Core State Standards

Grades 9-10:

• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite the text evidence to support analysis of what the author says explicitly as well as in what the author implies.

• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the context of a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3: Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced).

• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4: Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

DIGESTING THE PLAY POST-ATTENDANCE: AN EXPLORATION OF THEMES, CHARACTERS, AND PERFORMANCE

Common Core Standards

Grades 9-12:

• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Use a wide range of idea creation techniques (such as brainstorming) to develop and organize ideas, as well as strategies for adapting and expanding on ideas that are presented by others.

• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Analyze complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

Grades 11-12:

• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3: Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4: Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

EPILOGUE: MAKE CIVIL RIGHTS FROM CIVIL WRONGS

Framework for 21st Century Learning: Creativity and Innovation

• Use a wide range of idea creation techniques (such as brainstorming).

• Elaborate, refine, analyze, and evaluate their ideas in order to improve and maximize creative efforts.

• Act on creative ideas to make a tangible and useful contribution to the field in which the innovation will occur.

ORGANIZATIONS AND RESOURCES FOR ACTION

Reparations: https://www.fabnyc.org/reparationsny/
A conversation on reparations in NYC: https://vimeo.com/showcase/810333/video/568590261
The Legal Aid Society: https://legalaidnyc.org/what-we-do/fighting-for-racial-equity/
Operation Hope / Financial Literacy: https://operationhope.org/join-us/volunteer/
Centrality / Financial Literacy: https://centralityeducation.org/
Preservation of Parks, Nature and Community Spaces: https://www.nycgovparks.org/opportunities/volunteer/groups/black-focused
Center for Racial Justice in Education: https://centerracialjustice.org/
Audie Lorde Project: https://alp.org/
New York Communities for Change: https://www.nycommunities.org/
We Are New York Values: https://www.wearenewyorkvalues.org/
Youth Voting: https://www.nyvotes.org/get-involved/youth-programs/
Black Girls Vote: https://blackgirlsvote.com/
BK Library Youth Advocacy: https://www.blklynlibrary.org/support/volunteer/blklyn-library-youth

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES


PURLE VICTORIOUS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT/ BLOCKING PROGRESS: https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/civil-war-era/reconstruction/is/reconstruction
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https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/sharecropping/rise-of-the-sharecropping-system
https://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/sharecropping/
https://www.facinghistory.org/ideawEEK/remembering-little-rock

LAUGHING THROUGH THE PAIN:

FOOLS OF CHELM

https://www.comedywriters.com/articles/isaac-singer/three-stories-for-children/
VAUDEVILLE

https://vaudevilleamerica.org/
https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/vaudeville-about-vaudville/711/
https://www.britannica.com/art/vaudeville

DIFFERENT TYPES OF HUMOR

https://study.com/learn/lesson/satire-types-examples.html
https://www.britannica.com/arts/farce

HISTORY OF BLACK SATIRE IN THE US

https://black-face.com/jim-crow.htm
https://www.americanheritage.com/blackface-sal-history-minstrel-shows
https://www.history.com/explore/stories/blackface-birth-american-stereotype
https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/influence-birth-racism
https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2006/03/04/468594240/restored-movies-by-african-american-filmmakers-find-new-audiences

CHARACTER ARCHETYPES

https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/jezebel/index.htm

Study guide conceived and developed by Rachel Weinstein with contributions from National Black Theatre.
PURRLE VICTORIOUS
A NON-CONFEDERATE ROMP
THROUGH THE COTTON PATCH