

THE COLORED MUSEUM by George C. Wolfe

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A Thesis Presentation

SYNOPSIS:

The Colored Museum is a play that takes us on a satirical journey. We move into, out of, and back and forth through a sequence of pivotal times in African-American history. Our means of transportation is a time machine, which author George C. Wolfe calls the “Celebrity Slave Ship.” Through the play’s exhibitions, the madness in our history (and in the heads of key characters) is explored, faced, and conquered. The “museum” is, in fact, the play. It contains all the good, the bad, and the ugly experiences of the peoples who migrated, unwillingly, from Africa to America. It portrays us as we were, as we are, and as we can be. The play’s narrative of madness, transformation, and identity-formation is descriptive of what has come to be called The Black Experience. The Black Experience, in turn, is internalized as the personal identity crisis confronted by the play’s final major character, Topsy Washington.

POINT OF VIEW:

I’ve chosen *The Colored Museum* as my thesis because in addition to its having had a great influence on me as a theater artist, the play also reflects my life journey. *The Colored Museum* is the first play I ever read, and it was my introduction to theatre. The satirical edge and the colorful language appealed to me instantly, and *The Colored Museum* became the foundation of my interest in storytelling.

Returning to the script 11 years after first reading it, the story has opened up to me in ways that feel increasingly personal; and the play has inspired me to consider the past while imagining my future. I initially thought this was a play about history and black struggle, but I see now see that it’s about something much more complex: identity. In *The Colored Museum*, identity is expressed, at times, as a sort of madness, which reflects our history, is descriptive of our present, and will certainly color our future. I think this play offers us new

meanings now that we've arrived in the 21st Century, have had our first black president, and have seen the creation of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture. These events have permitted me to approach The Colored Museum in ways which, I hope, show how more of our stories might emerge. So I began this project by asking my 2019 self: "What is this play really about/doing/saying/meaning?"

In my telling of *The Colored Museum*, Topsy Washington is the only "real" character in the play. The play's other exhibitions, which precede Topsy's scene, are sequences from an racial/cultural/political identity struggle known as The Madness. Within the sequence of scenes, we are introduced to the furies – or embodied anxieties – which beset Topsy's troubled mind. These anxieties are viewed through a time machine known as the Celebrity Slave Ship. I've decided to use the tip of an Egyptian pyramid as the model for the ship, which is powered by "the drums of madness" which underscore each scene (or scenic transition). We are taken through a non-linear time-line from before slavery to a near-future described as Afro-futurism. At the end of the play we discover that what we have experienced has been the madness in Topsy's head, which is a sort of organic time machine of its own. Like an alchemist, Topsy takes her madness and turns it into her beauty. She realizes the good, the bad, and the ugly are all things that make her who she is. Or, as I see it, the goddess she has become.

As a costume designer, I had to find ways to express each of the play's time periods as well as the internal struggles which are expressed by many of the characters. Luckily, *The Colored Museum* establishes specific historical eras for each exhibition, and the characters within these exhibitions tend to be archetypes of black people in American history. But while history may inform the cuts and colors of the clothing, it seems to me that Wolfe's more heightened, satirical characters require a very subjective (but still character-driven) design. So, I learned to consider the exhibitions as fusions of time, place, and events, which permitted me the freedom to explore.

In my production, because we are seeing each exhibition through the mind of Topsy Washington, the characters are evoked from memory (mine, hers, and the nation's) but, more often, from emotion. I found, as I worked, that my costume ideas seemed to spring from the combination of fear and liberation that George C. Wolfe has written – and tapped into – in this play. That tension seemed to be

expressed everywhere in the images I discovered in my research: images from historical photography, American advertising, popular entertainment, and “the street.”

So, my designs (and design influences) range across time and oceans and continents – from the time before Columbus, through 20th-century America (the 13 Colonies), and into Topsy’s “personal” future. Furthermore, because we experience a complete cycle of Topsy’s anxieties and madness, we may sometimes find ourselves in all of the play’s places and periods all at once. In addition, because each of the exhibitions is birthed and contained within the *Celebrity Slave Ship*, there is always an added layer of complexity (and joy) to explore through the costumes.