

# P.L.A.Y.

(Performance = Literature + Art + You)

## Student Matinee Series



# Flyin' West

By  
Pearl Cleage

Directed by  
Jane Page

Student Matinee  
2001/2002

# SEASON



**Geva**  
Theatre

# Dear Educators,

Dear Educators,

I can still smell them. We always forced my mother to make two. We knew with certainty that she would give half of what she made away to the neighbors, so we reasoned that if she made two, we could at least keep a full one for our own.

And that smell. That welcoming smell. Just the right combination of ingredients tossed together into an eight inch round Pyrex plate – cinnamon, nutmeg, eggs, sugar, flour, butter, lemon juice and apples that had been peeled with gentle loving care. Our front door would open, and any poor, hapless soul that happened to be standing on our front porch would become immediately mesmerized. The smell of my mother’s apple pie would let any visitor know that they may have walked up to a house, but they were entering a home.

I love Pearl Cleage’s *Flyin’ West* because baking an apple pie, a simple and heartwarming act – indeed an American institution – is the climax of the play. This is a slice of pie that will change this family forever, and allow them to keep their home. But the ingredients in this pie are domestic violence, prejudice, segregation, slavery, Jim Crow laws, homesteading, and freedom.

To assist you in helping students understand these ingredients, you will find in this study guide a variety of resources, including a synopsis, an article from the director Jane Page, questions and activities, and comments from the set and costume designers. Our hope is that you will find these to be useful tools in preparing a lesson plan, and that seeing the play will only be a part of your journey.

To further assist you, please let me **strongly urge you to attend our free teacher workshop for *Flyin’ West* on Thursday February 21st from 4-5:30 pm, in Geva’s rehearsal hall.** We will be bringing together some of the artists who created the show to speak first hand about their intentions and experiences with this production.

Thank you for coming to *Flyin’ West*. Please call with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,



Skip Greer  
Director of Education

*“You wouldn’t really kill somebody over a piece of ground in the middle of nowhere, would you?”*

Frank

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## Cast of Characters

(in order of appearance)

**Sophie Washington**  
a black woman,  
born into slavery,  
age 36

**Miss Leah**  
a black woman,  
born into slavery,  
age 73

**Fannie Dove**  
a black woman,  
age 32

**Wil Parrish**  
a black man,  
born into slavery,  
age 40

**Minnie Dove Charles**  
a black woman,  
age 21

**Frank Charles**  
a very light-skinned  
black man,  
born into slavery,  
age 36

## The Story

Strictly speaking, the women of *Flyin' West* are not family by blood relations. Miss Leah is not the mother of the three younger women, and Sophie is not sister to the sisters Fannie and Minnie. Still, the women are bound together as strongly as and blood-related family. How did this happen? Why did this happen?

Sophie, Fannie, and Miss Leah share a house on their farmland outside the black homesteader settlement of Nicodemus, Kansas. Miss Leah is the oldest of the three and a former slave. Sophie is a fiercely independent woman set on building the all-black community and protecting it from infiltration and destruction by white land speculators. Fannie is in the throes of a budding relationship with neighboring farmer, Wil Parrish.

Conflict arises when Sophie and Fannie's younger sister Minnie comes to visit her family with her abusive husband Frank, a mulatto. Frank and Minnie have been living in London, where Frank has a reputation as a poet. Frank's white father has been providing them with an allowance, allowing them to live comfortably in Europe, but he has recently died. Frank has returned to the United States to fight his (legitimate) half-brothers' attempts to cut him out of the will.

On his second day in town, Frank loses all of his money in a gambling match with some white men he met on the train into town. Not long after, he learns by telegram that his white brothers have disowned him. Suddenly, Minnie's share of the sisters' valuable land becomes Frank's only way out of a town, and a situation he so despises. Minnie is caught between her husband and her sisters. To whom will she be faithful?

**Speculate:** to assume a business risk in hope of gain; to buy or sell in expectation of profiting from market fluctuations.

In the character list that heads the text of *Flyin' West*, Pearl Cleage notes that all the characters except Fannie and Minnie were born into slavery. Why is this important? If not slavery, what were the younger sisters born into?

### About the Playwright, Pearl Cleage

Pearl Michelle Cleage was born December 7, 1948 in Springfield, Massachusetts, and grew up in Detroit, Michigan. Her father, Albert Cleage, was a prominent minister who founded his own church; her mother, Doris, was an elementary school teacher.

Cleage began her playwriting career in the 1980's with productions of *Puppetplay*, *Hospice*, *Good News*, and *Essentials*. This was in addition to contributing essays to national magazines such as *Essence*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Ms.*, and *Black World*. In 1990 and 1991 she published collections of her essays entitled respectively, *Mad at Miles* and *Deals with the Devil*. Cleage gained national attention as a playwright beginning in 1992 with the production of her play *Flyin' West* which premiered at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta and has subsequently been produced at a number of regional theatres across the country. *Flyin' West* was followed by *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Bourbon at the Border* which have only added to her reputation and popularity as a playwright.

An essayist, poet, and journalist, Cleage currently is Playwright in Residence at Spelman College, the editor of *Catalyst*, and Artistic Director of Just Us Theater Company. Most recently she has written a best-selling novel entitled *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, an Oprah Bookclub selection.

Excerpted from "Pearl Cleage," *Women of Color Women of Words*, <http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~cybers/cleage2.html>

"... all-colored towns, full of colored people only! That sounded more like heaven to me than anything else I'd heard in church." Sophie

What is the essential choice that Minnie has to make? What leads her to make that decision? Would you have made the same choice if you were caught in the same situation? How might you have solved the problem differently?

## From the Director, Jane Page

*Flyin' West* is a play that tells a tale of freedom, pride, independence and dependence, and power. It's about taking a stand and standing your ground. Pearl Cleage stands her ground when she says, "That is what theater is for me – a hollering place, a place to talk about our black female lives, defined by our specific black female reality to each other first, and then to others of good will who will take the time to listen and understand."

Pearl Cleage was inspired to write this play after reading a story by Ida B. Wells, black journalist/anti-lynching activist and tireless Freedom Fighter. In her story Ida B. Wells calls for the Memphis African-American community to "Go west!" After first reading this piece Cleage carried the book with her for weeks, asking her friends to read it too. Finally, after calming down a bit, she knew she wanted to write something about Ida B. Wells. She decided that she didn't want to write directly about her, but about being a woman in that time who read Wells' story and followed the directive to, "Go west!" *Flyin' West* was the result.

I grew up in Kansas; my connection to this play is in my bones. My mother's family homesteaded in Kansas, southeast Kansas, and every weekend as a child we would go to the farm. I remember the big wood stove, the water pump, the hen house, the outhouse, and the wind. The wind in Kansas is relentless, it either makes you crazy or makes you strong, or...both.

I always wondered what it must have been like for my family to cross the prairie in a covered wagon, stopping in the middle of Kansas grasslands, and deciding this was it. This is where "I take my stand." I regret not having talked to my grandmother when she was alive about this, about the early days living in a soddy and what prompted them to head west.

I am thankful now for the time I spent on my family's homestead and the connections I have to the rural Midwest. Independence, responsibility, community and the importance of land are values that are the heart of Kansas. I feel honored to help tell the tale of *Flyin' West*, to take the time to listen and understand: Taking a stand and standing your ground.

**Soddy: a house built  
from sod, or grass  
and dirt, bricks**

# Ho for Kansas!

**Brethren, Friends, & Fellow Citizens:**

I feel thankful to inform you that the

**REAL ESTATE**

**AND**

**Homestead Association,**

Will Leave Here the

# 15th of April, 1878,

**In pursuit of Homes in the Southwestern  
Lands of America, at Transportation**

**Rates, cheaper than ever**

**was known before.**

For full information inquire of

**Benj. Singleton, better known as old Pap,  
NO. 5 NORTH FRONT STREET.**

Beware of Speculators and Adventurers, as it is a dangerous thing  
to fall in their hands.

Nashville, Tenn., March 18, 1878.

*"Well, some people truly are city people....  
It gives them somethin' to hide behind....  
Out here, nothin' stands between you  
and your soul." Miss Leah*

## Going West

The Homestead Act of 1862 offered 160 acres of land to each homesteader on payment of a nominal fee after five years of residence. Interested in bringing new settlers into the rugged, wind swept Kansas plains, a white man, W.R. Hill traveled throughout the South encouraging blacks to choose from new government lands. A few brave souls decided to take part in this social experiment of black rule. Former slave, Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, steered more than 20,000 migrants to Kansas between 1877-1879. After a lynching and a riot in Memphis, TN in 1892, over 7,000 African-American residents of that city packed up and headed west. This table shows the enormous growth in Kansas’ African American population.

The town of Nicodemus was advertised as a place for African Americans to establish their own self-government. By the summer of 1877, 300 blacks were convinced to move from the South to Graham County and the new town site of Nicodemus was established. The town, named after the first slave who bought his freedom, which is the setting for *Flyin’ West*, grew rapidly in 1870’s and 1880’s. Nicodemus could also boast of several prominent black businessmen in an age when opportunities for blacks to own and operate their businesses were rare.

To their shock, what had been advertised as a “Western Eden” turned out to be an endless stretch of nothingness, save for a single river. Those first years in Nicodemus were a test of sheer endurance for the former slaves. There were so few natural resources, families had to live in dugouts like prairie dogs. Some simply could not adapt to the environment and headed back south. But those who persevered gradually built a thriving community that boasted two newspapers, three general stores, at least three churches, a number of small hotels, one school (the first school in the county), a literary society, an ice cream parlor, a bank, a livery and 700 African American residents. By 1880, 60% of all African Americans living in the West were in Kansas. And in 1890 unmarried or widowed women ran 250,000 farms and ranches in the West.

Unfortunately in 1887 the Missouri Pacific and the Union Pacific Railroads bypassed Nicodemus by 6 miles and businesses moved south to the rail lines. Nicodemus remained a small but prosperous African American community through World War I. By 1910, 600 residents, most of them black, were living there. As with many small farming communities between the World Wars, Nicodemus began to decline in population and business. The depression of the 1930s dealt an especially big blow to the townspeople, but a strong community spirit lingered.

Today, Nicodemus exists as a small community; in fact it has become the longest lasting black town in the state – a monument to the pioneers who came to Kansas in search of new opportunities and prosperity. The efforts of those pioneers were recognized in 1996 when Congress established the Nicodemus National Historic Site operated by the National Park Service. The town of Nicodemus is symbolic of the pioneer spirit of African-Americans who dared to leave the only region they had been familiar with to seek personal freedom and the opportunity to develop their talents and capabilities.

Why was the word “exodus” used to describe African American migration from the south? Why were these migrants called Exodusters?

African American Population Growth in Kansas	
1860	627
1870	17,108
1880	43,107
1890	40,710
1900	52,003

**Dugout:** a shelter dug in the ground and roofed with sod

*“This land is the center of the world to me as long as we’re standing on it.”*

Sophie

## After the Civil War

When Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 he was promising confederate African-American slaves freedom from servitude. But slavery was not a simple system to abolish. Economic, political, sociological and cultural traditions in the South lay squarely on the shoulders of slavery. Instituting such a massive change in the social order was easier said than done.

Directly following the Civil War, the North sent federal troops to assist in the “Reconstruction” of the South. This included enforcing new laws which enabled black men to vote, hold office, own property and hold jobs which had previously been denied to them. Again, these laws were easy enough to create on paper – harder to make into reality.

In 1873 the country fell into an economic depression. Many Northerners maintained that Reconstruction was the cause of economic paralysis in the South and pressured President Grant to abandon the stringent policies towards the south, encouraging him to leave the South to self-governance and natural economic growth. Economics trumped equality. Once federal troops were removed, the door was open to a series of events which would affect civil rights far into the future.

While African Americans could no longer be owned as property, they found it increasingly difficult to do any of the things they had hoped to do as “freedmen.” Literacy laws and poll taxes made it almost impossible to vote, much less run for office. They were not treated fairly in the marketplace – being given lower prices for their crops and higher prices for the goods they wished to purchase. The power structure of the South – economic and political – was still white. Without economic or political power there was little former slaves could do to change the world they lived in.

Many African Americans were threatened with violence when they



*Potential settlers wait on the bank of the Mississippi for a steamboat to take them north.*

attempted to challenge or change the system. In Memphis when a black owned grocery store “stole” customers from a white owned store, the black store-owners were lynched – an event which inspired several thousands of black residents to abandon the South (including the women in *Flyin’ West*.) The Ku Klux Klan, which was founded in 1866 in Tennessee, did its part to terrorize blacks into submission.

Perhaps the most pervasive of discriminations were the far-reaching Jim Crow laws. These laws kept blacks separate from whites in schools, on trains, at water fountains and restrooms. The Jim Crow laws were the basis of the “separate yet equal” legislation which was challenged and struck down in 1954 with the Supreme Court case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka*.

The women in *Flyin’ West* came to Kansas like thousands of other African Americans to escape the discrimination and frustration of the South. Living conditions which had seemed to be on the brink of change at the end of the Civil War had instead become so untenable the only option was exodus. While many blacks found discrimination in the West, it paled in comparison to the South; limited opportunity was better than none at all.

**Benjamin Singleton was instrumental in convincing blacks in the south to migrate west. In 1880 he was called before Congress to testify about his actions in connection with this overwhelming migration. You can find his testimony at [www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/resources/archives/seven/w67singl.htm](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/resources/archives/seven/w67singl.htm). Why do you think Congress would feel the need to investigate black migration from the south? When you think of reasons consider political, economic and social variables.**

*“Some people are not raised for this kind of life.”*

Fannie

## Excerpts from *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition*

By F. James Davis, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991

...[T]o be considered black in the United States not even one half of one's ancestry must be African black....The nation's answer to the question "Who is black?" has long been that a black is any person with any known African black ancestry. This definition reflects the long experience with slavery and later with Jim Crow segregation. In the South it became known as the "one-drop rule," meaning that a single drop of "black blood" makes a person black. Some courts have called it the "traceable amount rule."... This definition emerged from the American South to become the nation's definition, generally accepted by whites and blacks alike....[T]his American cultural definition of blacks is taken for granted as readily by judges, affirmative action officers, and black protestors as it is by Ku Klux Klansmen. (p.5)

...[I]n one of my classes on minorities...a panel of students was describing selected personal experiences with discrimination. One student...said:

I am part French, part Cherokee Indian, part Filipino, and part black. Our family taught us to be aware of all these groups, and just to be ourselves....It seems to make people curious, uneasy, and sometimes belligerent. Students I don't even know stop me on campus and ask, "What are you anyway?"

As this panelist tried to describe her feelings of group marginality, a young black woman student (who appeared to be about half white, biologically) raised her hand and asserted strongly, "You don't have any problem. You are black." There was a murmur of approval and nodding of heads, especially among the black students, but the panelist replied softly, "No. No. Not just black. I am the other things too. All of them." After class the black students showed great concern that this panelist either did not understand or did not accept the American definition of a black person....The other black students were frustrated and disturbed by this questioning of the one-drop rule, which had provided them with a clear guide to their own group identity. Some even suggested to me that the panelist was a traitor, trying to "deny her race." (p.133-134)

Being able to pass for white has constant potential for ambiguities, strains and surprises....Those who pass have a severe dilemma before they decide to do so, since a person must give up all family ties and loyalties to the black community in order to gain economic and other opportunities.... Imagine what it must be like for them to listen to expressions of racial prejudice and to witness acts of discrimination against blacks. The stresses of passing as white call attention to the difference between the biological and social definitions of who is black. Those who agonize over whether to pass are already mostly white genetically, and perhaps entirely in some cases. Thus, the struggle is mainly about permanently leaving the social status category, the community, that is called black. (p.143-144)

See, people have gotten colors all mixed up with ideas about what is good or bad or nasty or clean....My mother used to tell me about the blue veins, and when I was in high school some girls were really invested in that. If the skin is – well, if it is less dark you can see your veins. And this small thing was made so big that it split up friendships and made people hate and envy each other. My father told me about those paper bag tests and comb tests that you had to pass to get into some of the clubs that they used to have in Louisiana....They used to put a brown paper bag in the beds of your arm, and if your skin was the same color or lighter, then you could join....or maybe you could come in and eat or do whatever they did in those clubs. Sometimes there would be a man who would run a comb through your hair, and if it went through easily – you know, if your hair wasn't too curly – then you could get in. (p.147)

**Do you think our sense of racial identity is changing over time? Would this classroom discussion happen today? Would it happen in your classroom? Does the one-drop rule still apply in 2002?**

**Look at images of African Americans on television, in magazines, and in music videos. Listen for references to skin tone of African Americans in popular music. Do you see, or hear, a bias towards a particular skin color?**

**Why does Frank act the way that he does? How do the actions and reactions of the people around Frank change the way he views himself and the world around him? Is Frank evil?**

*"To tell you the truth, I've seen about all the Negroes I need to see in this life."*

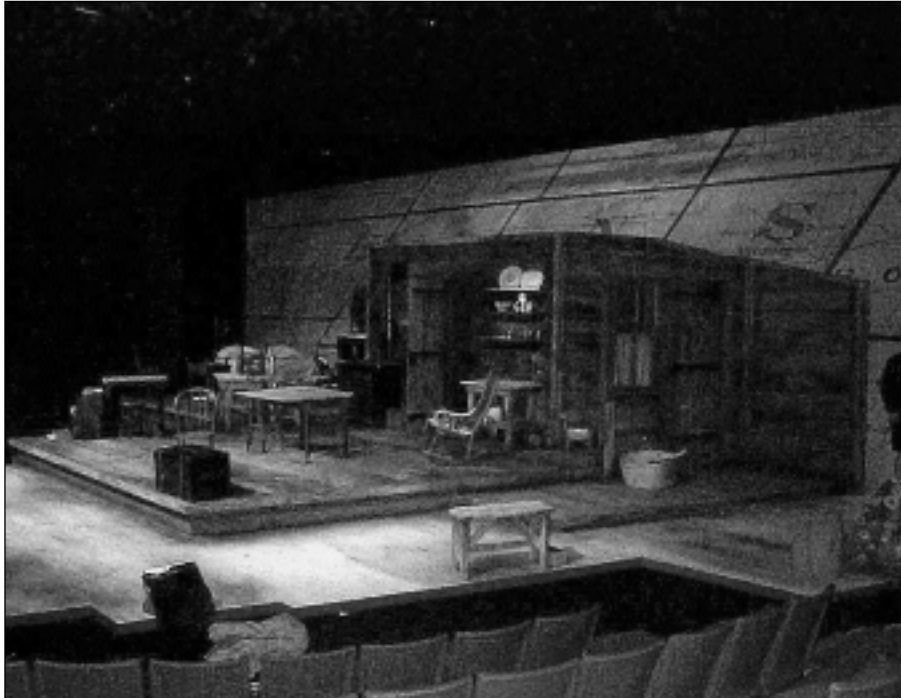
Frank

## From the Set Designer, Hugh Landwehr

When I began work with Jane Page, the director of *Flyin' West*, I was eager to avoid designing the kind of scenery that would too realistically set the story of the play. It seemed important to me that the physical production focus on the great harshness and difficulty that surrounds the lives of the characters, and that the precariousness of their everyday efforts to work their land and to stand off outsiders not become submerged in too many period details. I very much wanted to avoid sentimentality, hence the monochromatic, angular walls, the lack of plants and trees, and the wind-swept angle of the whole set. The giant map behind the house in which the sisters live is intended to remind the audience of the historical period of the play, the limitless flatness of Kansas (at least its northwestern part), and by means of the translucent red county lines, the ways in which property lines and blood lines figure in the play and its outcome.

**The set blends both realistic and non-realistic elements to create a world for the play. Is this successful, in your opinion? How do the scenic elements fit together to tell the story?**

**Vomitorium: an entrance piercing the banks of seats of a theater, amphitheater, or stadium**



**One of the entrances/exits for the stage is through a vomitorium. This ramp is created by removing two seats in the first 6 rows of the theatre. The vomitorium, or vom, leads to a passageway beneath the audience that leads to the dressing rooms and the other side of the stage. Designers and directors have the option of using voms as part of the set design and staging – if you came to see another play at Geva, the vom might be removed and replaced with seats. Why do you think the director and designer decided to use a vom to assist in staging the play?**

*“It takes some doin’  
to be able to see a place in your mind  
where you never been before.”*

Miss Leah

## From the Costume Designer, Deborah L. Shippee

Director Jane Page and I have collaborated on five productions at Studio Arena Theatre. Our approach is one of mutual trust and respect for each other, the actors and the playwright and goes something like this: After my initial reading I allow the play to percolate in the back of my mind over a period of time. With a historical piece like *Flyin' West* I begin the research in my own library and in the local library as well as over the Internet. I like to look at as many photos, paintings and other printed images of the period as possible. Because this play is about an actual place and based on some historical fact it was wonderful to discover documents about Nicodemus, Kansas. After sorting through period photos and reading materials about the life of freed-slaves and other African American homesteaders and a couple more readings of the script, the basic shape of costumes begins to come together. The sketches you see are rough ideas of where we wanted to go with the clothes. When Jane and I work together we always believe it is extremely important to allow actor input and the rehearsal process to help shape the look of the costumes. As long as time, budget and logic allow, we will accommodate actor ideas whenever possible. It is my job to try to take the ideas and bring them together to help support the characters and the play. It was wonderful to be able to design the very realistic clothing of Fannie, Sophie, Wil and Miss Leah in Nicodemus and then also have the pretentious London high fashion look of Frank and Minnie in the same play. Achieving the look of the Kansas dust and hard work and wear took a great deal of fine-tuning during final dress rehearsals and previews. Being able to use the costume stocks from both Geva and Studio Arena Theatre was a special pleasure. Many of the costumes were built new to my specifications by the Studio Arena costume shop staff, but many of the added finishing touches come from the stock rooms of our sister theatre. I owe a debt of gratitude to the wonderful, meticulous work of the costume shop staff at Studio Arena Theatre and many thanks to the Geva costume shop staff for the access to their stock as well.

In what ways can color and texture be used to distinguish the clothing of Kansas homesteaders from that of their London visitors? For what practical reasons would their clothing differ from one another?

**Percolate:** *to simmer, to spread gradually*

**Pretentious:** *expressive of affected, unwarranted, or exaggerated importance, worth, or stature*



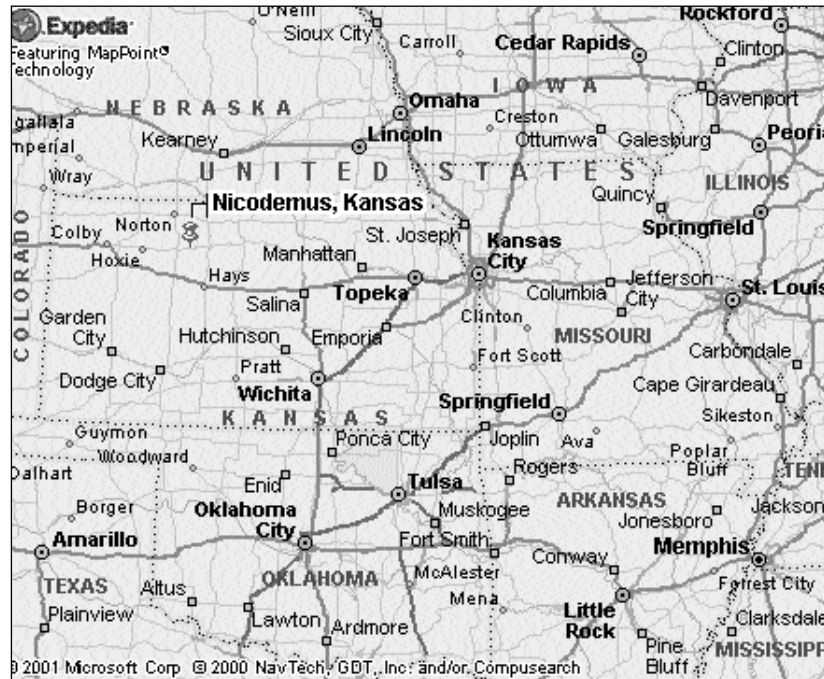
Costume renderings for Minnie (left) and Sophie

*"Sometimes people are a lot stronger than you can tell by just lookin' at 'em."*

Wil

## Map

The women in *Flyin' West* left their home in Memphis, Tennessee to homestead in Nicodemus, Kansas. Many Exodusters traveled West by going up the Mississippi River to the Missouri River to Kansas. Below is a modern map showing the distance from Memphis to Nicodemus, via modern roads a trip of 815 miles. . You can find a map of Kansas from the 1895 Rand McNally atlas at [www.livgenmi.com/ks1895mp](http://www.livgenmi.com/ks1895mp). Nicdemus is located in the Northwest corner of the state in Graham County.



## Tell Us What You Think

We love to get letters from our student audiences, telling us what they thought about the show. We will be posting excerpts from student letters on our website: [www.gevatheatre.org](http://www.gevatheatre.org). Send letters to: Amy Goeldner c/o Geva Theatre, 75 Woodbury Boulevard, Rochester, NY 14607 or email them to [agoeldner@gevatheatre.org](mailto:agoeldner@gevatheatre.org).

- What do you think Pearl Cleage is trying to say about race and identity?
- How did the production elements – lights, costumes, set, sound – support or detract from the play? What would you have done differently? Why?
- Did you have a favorite scene or moment in the play? Which was it, and why?
- In your opinion, what is *Flyin' West* about? Would you recommend it to someone who hasn't seen it? Who would you recommend it to?

*“Colored folks ain't been free long enough to have forgot what it's like to be a slave.”*

Miss Leah

## Staff

**Skip Greer**  
Director of  
Education

**Amy Goeldner**  
Associate Director  
of Education

**Marge Betley**  
Literary Manager

**Chris Murray**  
Artistic Intern

**Arthur Brown**  
**Christopher Gurr**  
Conservatory  
Associates

**Mark Cuddy**  
Artistic Director

## Resources For Students

Haskins, Jim. *The Geography of Hope: Black Exodus from the South after Reconstruction*. Brookfield, CT: Twenty-First Century Books, 1999.

Hughes, Langston. "Passing." *The Ways of White Folks*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933.

Katz, William Loren. *The Black West*. Seattle: Open Hand Publishing, 1987.

Painter, Nell Irvin. *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction*. New York: Knopf, 1977.

*Promised Land on the Solomon: Black Settlement at Nicodemus, Kansas*. U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, Rocky Mountain Region, 1986.

Yount, Lisa. *Frontier of Freedom: African Americans in the West*. New York: Facts on File, 1997.

[www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/) - the website for the documentary series *The West* by Ken Burns. An excellent source of timelines, biographies, links and lesson plans.

## Resources For Teachers

Davis, F. James. *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

Kelly, Robin D.G. and Earl Lewis, ed. *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

Savage, W. Sherman. *Blacks in the West*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976.

"*The Geography of Hope*" *The West*. Dir. Stephen Ives. Exec. Prod. Ken Burns. PBS Home Video, 1996.

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The Rochester Group

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An anonymous donor

*"Colored folks can't forget the plantation any more than they can forget their own names. If we forget that, we ain't got no history past last week."*

Miss Leah

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