Guess Who's coming to Dinner

Adapted by Todd Kreidler

From the screenplay by William Rose

Directed by Skip Greer

A co-production with Indiana Repertory Theatre

P.L.A.Y. (Performance = Literature + Art + You)
Student Matinee Series
2016-2017 Season
Dear Educators,

During the 1950s and 60s, the theatre world witnessed the development of what became known as “kitchen-sink” dramas. They were typically hyper-realistic, often dealt with serious topics, and usually took place in mundane settings – such as kitchens. A bit more recently, *American Theatre* magazine noted the rise of what have been dubbed “living-room” plays. Similar to their kitchen-sink counterparts, they center on difficult topics in very realistic environments – like, well, living-rooms. While *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* does take place, in part, in a living room, and we get glimpses of the house’s kitchen, maybe we should actually consider it a “table play,” as much of the story drives us again and again to the importance of the Drayton family’s dinner table.

You might even consider the table to be another character in the story, as this basic piece of furniture, in turn, functions as a gathering place for meals, a hub of discussion, and the anchor for much of what happens in the house. It is as much a part of the household as any of the home’s inhabitants. And, not so coincidentally, it is central to the conversation that needs to take place when Joanna Drayton brings home John Prentice, her African American fiancé, to meet her seemingly-progressive white parents. It’s the type of conversation that we’ve all been party to at one point or another, where we know – really know – that if we can get everyone involved to sit down and share a meal, we can figure out how to handle the situation before us.

Todd Kreidler, the play’s adapter, emphasizes the value of the table as well. “If we can just get to that table in the story, metaphorically and literally, we’ll be better off.” That table, hopefully, puts us on equal footing with one another as we eat the same food, drink the same drinks and, by virtue of sheer proximity, take part in the same conversations.

Skip Greer, the director of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, notes that not only are we witnesses to the conversation about John and Joanna’s impending marriage, but that “we in the audience are asked – right on the heels of being reminded just how powerful love is in our fragile lives – to join the discussion. We are, in effect, invited to the table.”

Thank you for bringing your students to this production. They are in the process of discovering how to navigate the more delicate interactions in life, and we’re honored to play a role in their journey. So, pull up a chair, and join us at the table for what is sure to be a most enlightening conversation.

Eric Evans

Education Associate
eevans@gevatheatre.org
(585) 420-2035

Tillie: “I don’t trust a nice acting man in a new suit except if he’s in church.”
Background at the Forefront

Synopsis: It’s 1967 in a white, upper-class neighborhood in San Francisco, and Matt and Christina Drayton are delighted by the surprise arrival of their daughter Joanna, who has just returned from Hawaii where she’s been interning at a hospital. Joanna (“Joey”) stuns them with the news that she’s fallen in love and her new fiancé, Dr. John Prentice, will be joining them for dinner. Though open-minded and progressively-inclined, Matt and Christina are astonished to find themselves facing an issue they never saw coming: John is African American. Furthermore, Joanna shocks everyone, including John, when she reveals that she has also invited John’s parents, Mary and John Sr., to join them for dinner.

“When a film of mine criticizes some aspect of American life, it is not an anti-American gesture. On the contrary, it is an affirmation of the American ideal because it reminds us that only in a democratic country like America would I have the right to do so. [My goal has always been to] make pictures that would last, about issues that would last, about issues that would not go away.”
– Stanley Kramer, Filmmaker and Director of the 1967 film

“People have tried to make linguistic adjustments, so racism today has become more covert. The systemic racism and the endemic attitudes are cloaked, but they’re still very much alive. The play actually invites us [to step forward]; there’s a lot more work to be done. If we can just get to that table in the story, metaphorically and literally, we’ll be better off.”
– Todd Kreidler, Playwright of the stage adaptation

When the film premiered in 1967, only 0.5% of all marriages were interracial (until very recently, it was still illegal in 16 states.) The movie starred Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, and Sidney Poitier, and gathered ten Academy Award nominations. Six months later, the Supreme Court ruled anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional.

Fifty years later, in 2017, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, author of *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* asks, “How is it possible to have this tremendous degree of racial inequality in a country where most whites claim that race is no longer relevant? How do whites explain the apparent contradiction between their professed color blindness and the United States’ color-coded inequality?”

Themes

* Belief vs. Reality
John: “I believe your father would happily support the idea of a mixed couple featured front page of his newspaper. But when the idea appears in the flesh in his home and that flesh wants to marry his daughter, your father pulls out his editing knife.”

* Time: Friend or Foe?
Matt: “If you want to know what I think, you’ll have to give me time. I need time.”

* Tolerance vs. Acceptance
Matt: “The Doctor is welcome in my home, welcome at my table, welcome to live in the house beside me – but he’s not welcome to my approval in marrying my daughter.”

* Love Conquers All
Matt: “Anyone can make one hell of a strong case against your marriage, [but] there’d still be just one thing that would be worse. And that would be if, being what you two are, and having what you have, and feeling what you feel – you didn’t get married.”

Matt: “When you imagined looking through Joey’s wedding pictures, did it ever remotely occur to you that the man standing beside her would look like him?”
Geva: Why was this play selected for Geva’s 16-17 season?

Skip Greer, director: We select the season about a year ahead, so the reasons to do it now have magnified since the time that we chose it. In the play, there is a sense that the younger generation has it all figured out. 50 years ago, our ksubscribers were that younger generation in the play, and now we ask ourselves, “Since we thought we had it all figured out, how’d we do?” It’s a good litmus test to flash forward 50 years. The second piece, which spans the ages, is the practical application of personal philosophies: the skewering of Matt Drayton’s liberal ideas in his newspaper. It’s now, as Joanna says, inside your front door. Now you have to practice what you have been preaching; it’s time for all of us to live what we’ve been speaking. I think those are at least two of the things that pulled us into the play, in the beginning.

Geva: What do you hope students will take away from their experience at the theatre?

Skip: I believe one of the things theatre does is re-sensitize when we are desensitized. I think we are aware of the problems in our society that we need to fix, and it’s great to go back in to the theatre to touch them, and be re-sensitized to them. This play will be hard-hitting for some audiences as they see themselves up on stage. Two moments in the play that are particularly exciting to me are when Christina tells Mary, “I do wish we had met under different circumstances,” and Mary responds with “How? How else do you think we would have met? We stay away from you as much as you stay away from us.” The second is when John asks Christina, “Are you surprised that my parents would be upset too?” and she reveals her blind spot by saying, “I…I never thought about it.” Everyone in the play looks in the mirror and, at least for a moment, loses their bearings. All of the pieces have to fall apart in order for the play to pull them back together. I’m also curious how students will react to the statement John makes to his father: “You still think of yourself as a colored man. And I think of myself as a man.” The suggestion might be that John is turning his back on any sort of ethnicity by saying that we’re all just human beings in it together when he tells his father, “you only think of yourself as black.” Yet, earlier in the play when Matt suggests that he sees no difference between himself and John, John says, “Of course there’s a difference. We do share our humanity. But we are a different people, Mr. Drayton.” And that’s a real question, right now, for all of us. How do we come together while still celebrating our differences?

Geva: In addition to generation and race, how does this play comment on gender?

Skip: Tillie is the matriarchal presence and, in a sense, the leader of the women, who are the strongest in the play; they are the ones who bring this whole piece to its fruition, which is really exciting. But it’s written and structured in such a way that that one of the biggest initial resistances to John comes from Tillie, so purely by understanding dramatic structure, her vote is going to be the strongest. When she acquiesces, then you know that you’re moving forward.

Geva: How do these characters, in their own ways, challenge the status quo?

Skip: Monsignor Ryan is fascinating. He’s so excited to meet John because he did his work in Togo, in Africa. We are afraid of the other – those who are different from ourselves – when we’re not familiar with the other; when we don’t talk to the other and bring the other into our lives. So we created a back-story suggesting that when Monsignor Ryan came back from Africa, he purposefully and consciously creates a church that embraces all. It’s incredible when Monsignor Ryan recognizes that there just might be a bigot inside of Matt that’s dying to get out, despite all of his writings about Civil Rights in The Guardian. It’s funny and excruciating all at the same time to watch the characters come around. This is such a simple story in that you have to go through all of this to finally watch the characters invest again in the notion that love conquers all. Like any good and really well-written play, you have to tear it to shreds before you can bring it back together again, and do it in an effective way so that we buy into the destruction and the subsequent re-examination of our own lives, as well. It’s a pretty moving play. I remember thinking that it was a romantic comedy – and it is a romantic comedy, and very much a situation comedy, but it’s a situation comedy with teeth, and it can shake you when you’re vulnerable. I’ve loved working on it, and I’ve loved this company of actors who helped to solve it every step of the way.

Joanna: “You wrote that the whole world needs a round table. That gathering over issues and talking best expressed our humanity. Now look in that dining room. There’s our round table.”
Matt Drayton not only writes for *The Guardian* newspaper, but he is also its publisher. This position gives him enormous influence in what the newspaper reports, as well as how it is reported. Over the course of his career he has, by his admission, often been in the minority when it comes to popular thinking regarding social or political issues. “All my life,” he says, “I’ve held unpopular views and I’m used to standing alone.” He is critical, for example, of those in the public eye who support the war in Vietnam, voicing a hope that time will “kick all the war criminals in Washington to the wrong side of history.” It is this type of outlook that guides Matt as he utilizes his newspaper to call attention to those issues he believes are deserving of scrutiny, regardless of whether or not his views are in line with public opinion. Look for other instances in the play where Matt uses the power of his position to question the status quo. 

While Tillie Binks, the Drayton’s housekeeper, and Monsignor Ryan, their long-time friend, are not directly affected by the impending marriage of John and Joanna, they both offer perspectives on the union that may, at first, run counter to our assumptions about them. At a time when racial discord was a daily presence and the Civil Rights movement was in full stride, Tillie voices a belief that “civil rights don’t mean you trust everybody,” and that John is not yet deserving of her trust simply because they are both African American. Monsignor Ryan shares that he has been witness to “many marriages between races,” and that, “curiously enough, [they] usually work out well.” As someone in his seventies, Monsignor Ryan most certainly would remember a time when an interracial relationship could not be publically discussed, particularly by someone of a traditionally conservative-leaning faith, such as Catholicism. In their understated ways, Tillie and Monsignor Ryan offer new ideas to those who are still processing their feelings about John and Joanna’s partnership.

Early in the play, Joanna tells John that she was raised on Ralph Waldo Emerson and self-reliance - the idea of an individual following their own instincts rather than confirming to an established norm. As the evening’s conversation turns increasingly turbulent, Matt chastises his daughter for her “outrageous optimism.” In the face of a potentially volatile situation for any family (announcing a new fiancé to unsuspecting parents and springing a surprise dinner party with the in-laws-to-be), regardless of what other differences may arise, Joanna is effortlessly bright and unwavering in certainty. It would be easy to write her off as naïve or oblivious for bringing such eruptive information into the household and expecting it to go off smoothly. However, Skip Greer shared several “a-ha” moments that help give Joanna dimension: In the first act, she tells John, “My parents love surprises. Surprises make them listen.” Shortly thereafter, we learn that the reason Joanna invited John’s parents to dinner is because he told her they were approving of the marriage. So she invited them to assist her in winning over her own parents. She did this on purpose to catch her parents off guard, and then called in the reinforcements. Whether you see her as naïve and radically optimistic, or clever and aware, Joanna’s infectious conviction urges a re-examination of principles and shattering of the status quo.

John Prentice is a well-traveled, well-mannered and well-spoken, educated, handsome doctor and family man with an impressive resume and a worthy medical research career fighting tropical diseases in Africa. Who wouldn’t want this man for a son-in-law? But in 1967, at the height of the Civil Rights movement, it was a bold statement for Hollywood to not only endow an African American man with such desirable qualities, but for that African American man to become engaged to a wealthy, educated, white woman. John was designed, said filmmaker Stanley Kramer, so that the only thing “wrong” with him was his race. In the film, John challenged Joanna’s parents, his own parents, and millions of viewers to take a deeper look at their own values. Personally, professionally, generationally, and even culturally, John broke the mold of what an African American man was presumed to be and how an African American man was presumed to think and act. “Your whole generation believes that the way things were for you is the way they’ve got to be forever,” John tells his father. In that declaration, John represents hope for the future of race relations in America.

Tillie: “There’s a lot of good reasons not to trust white folks. Good reasons not to trust black folks too. We make each other distrustful.”
Matt: “Regardless of the law...laws won’t protect you when you get pulled over.”
Jim Crow Laws in California

Jim Crow laws were first passed in Southern states following the end of the Civil War in an effort to legally discriminate against African Americans. The term originally referred to a black character in 1800s minstrel shows in which white performers wore "blackface" and pretended to be black characters.

Jim Crow laws segregated seemingly every private and public institution, including railways, restaurants, theaters, public parks, libraries, and cemeteries. Separate schools, hospitals, and other public institutions – generally of inferior quality – were designated for blacks. The laws also required blacks to use separate phone booths and bathrooms, and in some cases, deprived blacks of the right to vote. Other Jim Crow laws did not specifically mention race, but were written and applied in ways that discriminated against blacks. Literacy tests and poll taxes, for example, were designed to prevent African Americans from voting.

While California had passed its own set of Jim Crow laws, they had been overturned by the late 1960s. Many of the laws were specifically aimed at the large populations of Asians and Latin Americans that had arrived in the state after the turn of the century. African Americans in California, however, continued to encounter racism – legal or otherwise. In an interview with FoundSF, former San Francisco Sun-Reporter editor Thomas Fleming shared some of his recollections of the Civil Rights efforts in the area in the late 1960s:

“A lot of the war industries had closed down completely, and quite a few blacks had moved out of San Francisco to East Palo Alto and over to Oakland. None of the big hotels were hiring blacks in any capacity. None of the cab companies were hiring any black drivers. So the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) picked the big hotels out first. They started demonstrating, picketing in front of the Palace Hotel. All the white liberals turned out in support of this movement. We had the next target, the next demonstration, at Auto Row. Auto Row on Van Ness Avenue, none of them hired blacks other than janitors. Well, we thought they should have some black salesman because Cadillac seemed to be the favorite vehicles of blacks who had a lot of money, so they picked the Cadillac agency. Of course the inevitable arrests were made there also, but we got a black salesman in there anyway as a result of it. I think Stokely Carmichael came out here once during that period. It was national, and we became part of the national movement.”

As a newspaper editor, Matt Drayton would have been a contemporary of Mr. Fleming and would likely have published articles about the protests mentioned above. What other topics do you think Matt would have covered in his paper? Do you think his personal beliefs would have influenced how he reported those stories? ❖

Race Relations in Europe

Early in Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, we learn that John and Joanna are leaving for a trip to Switzerland so that John, an expert in tropical diseases, can continue his research. John knew that he would most likely not be able to conduct his research, much less receive credit for his findings, if he remained in America. “Where would I be if I stayed in Sacramento?,” he asks his father, before providing the answer: “Doctoring a handful of patients in a run-down hospital.”

By working overseas, John would have been part of a group of African Americans who lived in Europe during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, largely due a relaxed atmosphere regarding racial and cultural differences. There were several countries, such as Germany and France, that hosted African American communities. Germany was home to a number of American military bases, so many there came from military backgrounds while more artistically-inclined individuals were drawn to France’s rich cultural history. Switzerland, in particular, enjoyed a reputation for acceptance and tolerance, which was especially attractive to African Americans seeking to escape entrenched racism in America.

Despite their experiences in Europe, many African Americans returned home, but only after, writes author Dr. Onita Estes-Hicks, “they had stretched their imaginations and increased their own beings, finding opportunities for self-discovery and for self-development.” ❖

John Sr.: “The work you do for a white man won’t make him treat you any different.”
Mary: “I’ve come to understand there’s no way to control how we get introduced to things in life.”
“In the 1968-69 school year, 783 black students were enrolled in American medical schools, just 2.2% of the overall total. By the late 1970s, the number of black students had increased nearly fivefold, with the proportion peaking at 8% in the mid-1990s.” – Damon Tweedy, The Case for Black Doctors (The New York Times)

Like Dr. Prentice, many African American doctors in the first half of the 20th century and prior traveled to Canada or countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia to develop their skills, gain experience, build expertise, and seek medical employment. According to the National Institute of Health’s (NIH) U.S. National Library of Medicine, “Organized healthcare for African Americans first developed as a result of the slave owners’ need to tend to illness and disease within the enslaved populations on their plantations. After the Civil War, white communities gradually began to establish segregated, white owned and operated hospitals to care for the newly freed slaves. Although they admitted only black patients, these ‘separate but equal’ hospitals were often inadequate and rarely provided access for black physicians or nurses. Segregated hospitals continued to exist well into the 20th century. As more African Americans obtained medical degrees, black physicians began to respond to racism in American medicine by forming their own medical institutions, teaching hospitals, and medical societies. Provident Hospital and Training School in Chicago, the first black owned and operated hospital in the United States, was established in 1891, and the National Medical Association was formed in 1895, in direct response to the exclusion of black physicians from the American Medical Association. With the advance of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and the introduction of integration, African American physicians became gradually less dependent on black hospitals for training, and black doctors and patients were more readily accepted at formerly ‘white only’ medical facilities, though many still faced blatant ostracism and discrimination.”

**Medical Progress and Volunteerism in Africa**

Dr. Prentice, a medical researcher specializing in tropical diseases in Africa, would not have been a rarity in this field (although several remarks are made about his world-renown work at such a young age). In 1945, the UN established the World Health Organization (WHO), in part, to eradicate yaws - a debilitating condition that affected millions of children in West Africa. In the 1960s, there was a rapidly expanding need for care in Africa and Asia “due largely to the after-effects of the newly-won independence of many countries in those regions,” said Ololade Olakanmi and Philip A. Perry in Medical Volunteerism in Africa: A Historical Sketch. The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 provided relief services and promoted research and innovation for specific global health concerns such as malaria, tuberculosis, smallpox, and HIV/AIDS. While global efforts overseas may have been the best career advancement opportunity for John, his dedication to these causes were also very much needed.

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**Did you know?**

* The first heart transplant took place in 1967, in South Africa.
* In 1960, 12 out of 26 medical schools in the south were closed to African American students.
* In 1964, the Civil Rights Act made discrimination illegal in hospitals that received federal funding.
* In 1965, Medicare and Medicaid legislation mandated hospital integration (paving the way for John and Joanna to meet at the hospital in Hawaii where they both were working.)

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John: “I know all about America, Mr. Drayton. Why do you think I work overseas? Most major research labs here would only let me inside to push a broom.”
Reflecting the Characters: Scenic, Lighting, and Costume Designs

“In Rob Koharchik’s incredible scenic design, choosing to put the dining room off center, behind a stone fireplace, and – depending on where you are in the audience – behind glass, allows us to see some of the rest of the life of the house, but not to continually share that story. So one of the mysteries that we watch unfold through this scenic design is how Tillie is running this household and how, through her connections with all the other characters (whether they live there or are visitors), she is pulling the strings to make it all happen.”
– Skip Greer, Director

“The mid-century modern style (especially architects Alvar Aalto, Richard Neutra, and Raphael Soriano) inspired this set design. Being that Christina owns an art gallery and Matt is a newspaper publisher, the style helps to establish them as modern, forward-thinking people instilling their daughter with progressive ideas, such as racial equality.”
– Rob Koharchik, Scenic Designer

“From a lighting standpoint, the household should reflect the vibrant mood of this family, with the atmosphere being open, clear, and sunny. As complications arise, the house begins to close in. With the setting of the sun and the approach of nightfall, the characters sense how trapped they have become, and their need to break out in new directions.”
– Kendall Smith, Lighting Designer

“The characters should be wearing what seem to be real, believable garments, not costumes. While the play takes place in the 1960s, the director and I wanted to avoid any clothing that was too wild, consciously trendy, or counter-cultural. Each character in our play, even Joanna, is a professional in the world and wants to put his or her best foot forward. Each would have considered carefully what they would wear for the occasion, and how it would be perceived by others. My goal has been to reflect that thoughtful consideration by dressing them in flattering, contemporary, wearable clothing that suits them and the momentous evening they anticipate.”
– B. Modern, Costume Designer

John Sr.: “I knew something was wrong the minute we started driving up the hill to this neighborhood.”
Christina: “They’ve faced ugly prejudice all day in what’s supposed to be the sanctuary of our home. I cannot see to do anything else than to stand with them, add to their strength.”

Discussion Questions

**Before You Go:**
* Do you think concerns such as religion, finances, familial approval, social status, education, past relationships, age, or ethnicity should play a considerable role in a couple’s decision to marry in the 21st century? Can any or all of these issues be overlooked if the couple connects on other important levels? In your opinion, what are necessary components for a lasting marriage?
* Consider the role the film may have played in transforming societal attitudes towards interracial marriage in the late 1960s. Do you think interracial marriage is still an issue in 2017? What laws exist today regarding marriage? Do you agree with them? Do you think they, too, will change?
* Barack Obama was born in Hawaii in 1961; the film was released when he was 6 years old. Joanna states: “All of our children will be president of the United States – and they’ll have colorful administrations!” What parallels can you draw between Obama’s parents and John and Joanna, Obama’s upbringing, and John and Joanna’s dream for their future children?
* How do you think your family might respond if you were to bring home a fiancé of a different race, religion, background, gender, or status than they may have imagined for you? Would they have reservations? Would they be tolerant? Would they be accepting? Are the only stakeholders in the decision to marry the couple themselves?
* Do you have views that differ from friends, family, or acquaintances from another generation? How big of a role do you think generational differences played in Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? And in our lives today?
* How might this story be different if it were set in 2017? Imagine a variety of timely and relevant scenarios that might further update this story.

**After the Show:**
* There are many obvious differences between John and Joanna (age, race, income, education, status, religion, etc.). What are some of the commonalities they share? How do these connections help to ease some of the conflict?
* What parenting choices enabled Joanna to fall in love with John? What in John’s upbringing, do you imagine, might have enabled him to fall in love with Joanna?
* John insists that he and Joanna will not wed without the approval of Joanna’s parents. Do you agree with his choice? Do you think parental approval (from one or both sets of parents) will be important to you if you decide to marry? Do you think it will be important to your parents or family?
* How do you feel about John and Joanna’s decision to share their big news without giving their parents more than one evening to digest the information? If Matt and Christina and Mary and John Sr. had been given more time to think about it, do you think that additional time would have helped or hurt?
* Did you anticipate that John would be hesitant to tell his own parents about Joanna, or that John’s parents would be equally as caught off guard and conflicted about the engagement as Joanna’s parents? Why or why not?
* What were each set of parents’ concerns for their child? How were they the same? How were they different? After John and Joanna marry, how do you imagine the two families will interface?
* How did each set of parents interact with their spouse in resolving this crisis? How did John and Joanna manage with their own respective parents, and their future in-laws? What role does communication and coming together at the “round table” play in this piece?
* What role did Tillie, Monsignor Ryan, and Hilary play in affecting the outcome of the story?
* Why do you think Tillie initially respond the way she did? What were her concerns?
* How did each character challenge the status quo? Did anyone respond or behave in a way that surprised you, for better or for worse? Was anyone just as you expected them to be?
* How do cultural stereotypes affect our view of strangers, and how does this relate to racial profiling? Can you recall any lines or moments in the play that seemed to speak to this specifically?
* What generational, class, and gender topics did you identify in the play? What impact did they have in the story? How are these topics the same or different today?
* John tells his father that while he thinks of himself as a man, his dad thinks of himself as a “colored man.” What is your response to this?
* The Draytons believed themselves to be progressively-minded, but had difficulty following through on those beliefs in reality. Consider the beliefs and values you hold. What would living the reality of those beliefs look like? Would it be difficult?
* As director Skip Greer posed in his interview, fifty years later, how are we doing?

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