



HOME

BY SAMM-ART WILLIAMS

Directed by Ron OJ Parson

November 11 - December 12, 2010

at Court Theatre



CHARACTERS

- **Cephus Miles**
- **Woman 2**
- **Pattie Mae Wells / Woman 1**

STORY

Originally produced by the legendary Negro Ensemble Company, *Home* centers on Cephus Miles, a farm boy in the small community of Crossroads, North Carolina who grows up in a society where opportunities are few and advancing up the economic and social ladder means leaving and (usually) never returning. After various interactions with the female members of his town, Cephus enters a family-sanctioned engagement with Pattie Mae, the prettiest and smartest young lady in Crossroads. When Pattie Mae leaves to go to college, Cephus counts on her promise to return to marry him, but feels humiliated when he learns that she has married a soon-to-be wealthy professional.

In spite of his apparently loose morality, Cephus feels strongly about avoiding the Vietnamese War at all costs. Five years in prison as a draft resister leave him despondent, and when he gets out, he finds his farm has been sold for taxes. With all doors shut in Crossroads, he sets out for the big city to make his fortune. Lacking a high-school diploma, the best job he can get is loading and unloading trucks. The high life seems within reach until his prison record gets him fired. Sliding from welfare to the streets he hits rock bottom--but not for long. A mysterious benefactor has purchased his old farm and invites him to return to Crossroads. After 13 years away from the South, Cephus returns to discover numerous surprising changes, including the absence of segregated bathrooms. Nevertheless, he remains an outsider for the other townsfolk, who invent stories about how mean and disagreeable he is, until Pattie Mae, now divorced, returns to inform him that it was she who bought back his farm and helped him rehabilitate his life. Eventually both Cephus and Pattie Mae realize that, although they left to seek happiness elsewhere, they have finally returned to one another older, wiser, and aware of the true meaning of home.

THE NEGRO ENSEMBLE COMPANY

The mission of the Negro Ensemble Company, Inc. (NEC) is to provide African-American, African and Caribbean professional artists with an opportunity to learn, to work, to grow and to be nurtured in the performing arts. The overall mission of the NEC is to present live theatre performances by and about black people to a culturally diverse audience that is often underserved by the theatrical community.

Prior to the 1960s, there were virtually no outlets for the wealth of black theatrical talent in America. Playwrights writing realistically about the black experience could not get their work produced, and even the most successful performers, such as Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen, were confined to playing roles as servants. It was disenfranchised artists such as these who set out to create a theater concentrating primarily on themes of black life. In 1965, Playwright Douglas Turner Ward, producer/actor Robert Hooks, and theater manager Gerald Krone came together to make these dreams a reality with the Negro Ensemble Company. The main catalyst for this project was the 1959 production of "A Raisin in the Sun."

Written by Lorraine Hansberry, of "A Raisin in the Sun" was a gritty, realistic view of black family life. The long-running play gave many black theater people the opportunity to meet and work together. Robert Hooks and Douglas Turner Ward were castmates in the road company. Together they dreamed of starting a theater company run by and for black people. While acting in Leroi Jones' play "The Dutchman", Hooks began spending nights teaching to local black youth. In a public performance primarily for parents and neighbors, the kids put on a one-act play by Ward. A newspaper critic who had attended the performance recommended that Ward's plays be produced commercially.

While Hooks raised money, Ward wrote plays. The pair recruited a theater manager, Gerald Krone, and the three men produced an evening of black-oriented, satiric one act plays. One of these short plays, "Day of Absence", was a reverse minstrel show, with black actors in whiteface performing the roles of whites in a small Southern town on a day when all the blacks have mysteriously disappeared. The plays, performed at the St. Marks Play House in Greenwich Village, were a major success. They ran for 504 performances and won Ward an Obie Award for acting and a Drama Desk Award for writing. Impressed with his work, the NEW YORK TIMES invited Ward to write an article on the condition of black artists in American theater.

Ward's piece in the Times became a manifesto for the establishment of a resident black theater company. With money from the Ford Foundation and a home at the St. Marks Playhouse, the Negro Ensemble Company formed officially in 1967. Though the new company succeeded in attracting audiences from all walks of life, they ran into a number of political and economic difficulties. In London a performance of the NEC's first production, "Song of the Lucitanian Bogey" (1967) was heckled by-right wing protesters who resented its anti-colonial message. Back home in America, the group had to deal with criticism from members of the black community over their continued association with white administrators, playwrights, and funders.

Among the many plays produced by the Negro Ensemble Company were such greats as Peter Weiss' "Song of the Lucitanian Bogey", Lonnie Elder's "Ceremonies in Dark Old Men" (1969) and Charles Fuller's "Zooman and the Sign" (1980). These plays dealt with complex and often ignored aspects of the black experience. Creating emotionally resonant characters with depth and variety, the NEC paved the way for black Americans to present a voice that had



Members pose with founders Robert Hooks (front, from left), Douglas Turner Ward and Gerald Krone.

been aggressively stifled for three hundred years. This revolution in production and writing also meant an equally important advance for black actors. With the NEC, many black actors found their first opportunity to play characters with depth and meaning.

Though critically acclaimed and presenting some of the most important theatrical work of its time, the NEC ran into a number of economic troubles. With production costs rising and an original grant from the Ford Foundation gone, the group no longer had enough money for many of its projects. Even sellout audiences in the St. Marks Theater could not generate enough revenue to meet the budget. In the 1972-73 season the resident company was disbanded, staff was cut back, training programs canceled, and salaries deferred. The decision was made to produce only one new play a year.

Fortunately, the first play chosen was "The River Niger", by Joe Walker. "The River Niger" was a moving play about the struggles of a black family from Harlem in the '70s. It was the first NEC production to move to Broadway, where it stayed for nine months. It won the Tony Award for Best Play, and embarked on an extensive national tour. The success of "The River Niger" helped to insure the continued work of the NEC and of its many members over the next ten years. In 1981, the NEC had what was probably its most successful production with "A Soldier's Play", by Charles Fuller. "A Soldier's Play" is a gripping story of the murder of a black soldier on a Southern Army base, and the subsequent investigation by a black army captain. It was a tremendously popular play and won both the Critics Circle Best Play Award and the Pulitzer Prize. It was later made into a movie, "A Soldier's Story", which was nominated for three Academy Awards.

Since its founding in 1967, the NEC has produced more than two hundred new plays and provided a theatrical home for more than four thousand cast and crew members. Among its ranks have been some of the best black actors in television and film, including Louis Gossett Jr., Sherman Hemsley, and Phylicia Rashad. The NEC is respected worldwide for its commitment to excellence, and has won dozens of honors and awards. While these accolades point to the larger success of the NEC, it has created something far greater. It has been a constant source and sustenance for black actors, directors, and writers as they have worked to break down walls of racial prejudice.

THE VIETNAM WAR

Compiled by production Dramaturg Martine Kei Green

- The Vietnam War was a Cold War military conflict. The US entered the war as a part of their larger containment strategy in 1950.
- The Vietnam War saw the highest proportion of blacks ever to serve in an American war. During the height of the U.S. involvement, 1965-69, blacks, who formed 11 percent of the American population, made up 12.6 percent of the soldiers in Vietnam. The majority of these were in the infantry, and although authorities differ on the figures, the percentage of black combat fatalities in that period was approximately 14.9%

African American opposition to the war:

- The reasons behind American opposition to the Vietnam War fall into the following main categories: opposition to the draft; moral, legal, and pragmatic arguments against U.S. intervention; reaction to the media portrayal of the devastation in Southeast Asia.

- The Draft, as a system of conscription which threatened lower class registrants and middle class registrants alike, drove much of the protest after 1965. Selective Service regulations offered deferments for college attendance and a variety of essential civilian occupations that favored middle- and upper- class whites. The vast majority of draftees were poor, undereducated, and urban—blue-collar workers or unemployed. This reality struck hard in the African American community. Furthermore, African Americans were underrepresented on local draft boards; in 1966 blacks accounted for slightly more than 1 percent of all draft board members, and seven state boards had no black representation at all. Conscientious objectors did play an active role although their numbers were small.
- U.S. involvement in Vietnam unfolded against the domestic backdrop of the civil rights movement. From the outset, the use, or alleged misuse, of African American troops brought charges of racism. Civil rights leaders and other critics described the Vietnam conflict as racist—"a white man's war, a black man's fight." Black youths represented a disproportionate share of early draftees and that African Americans faced a much greater chance of seeing combat.
- Opposition to the war arose during a time of unprecedented student activism which followed the free speech movement and the civil rights movement. The military draft mobilized the baby boomers that were most at risk, but grew to include a varied cross-section of Americans. The growing opposition to the Vietnam War was partly attributed to greater access to uncensored information presented by the extensive television coverage on the ground in Vietnam.

THE GREAT MIGRATION

www.wikipedia.org

The Great Migration was the movement of 2 million African Americans out of the Southern United States to the Midwest, Northeast and West from 1910 to 1930. Estimates of the number of migrants vary according to the time frame used. African Americans migrated to escape racism and seek employment opportunities in industrial cities. Some historians differentiate between the First Great Migration (1910–40), numbering about 1.6 million migrants, and the Second Great Migration, from 1940 to 1970.

In the Second Great Migration, 5 million or more people relocated, with the migrants moving to more new destinations. Many moved from Texas and Louisiana to California where there were jobs in the defense industry. From 1965–70, 14 states of the South, especially Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi, contributed to a large net migration of blacks to the other three Census-designated regions of the United States. By the end of the Second Great Migration, African Americans had become an urbanized population. More than 80 percent lived in cities. Fifty-three percent remained in the Southern United States, while 40 percent lived in the Northeast and North Central states and seven percent in the West.

Since then, scholars have noted a reverse migration under way that gathered strength through the last 35 years of the 20th century. It has been named the New and identified in visible demographic changes since 1965. Most of the data is from 1963-2000. The data encompasses the movement of African

Americans back to the South following de-industrialization in Northeastern and Midwestern cities, the growth of high-quality jobs in the South, and improving racial relations. Many people moved back because of family and kinship ties. From 1995-2000, Georgia, Texas and Maryland were the states that attracted the most black college graduates. While California was for decades a net gaining state for black migrants, in the late 1990s it lost more African Americans than it gained.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Samm-Art Williams

Born: Samuel Arthur Williams on January 20, 1946 in Burgaw, North Carolina
A Tony Award-nominated, American playwright and stage and film/TV actor.



As Samm Williams, he entered New York City theater as an actor as early as 1973, with the play *Black Jesus*. With New York's Negro Ensemble Company (NEC), he appeared in such plays as *Nowhere to Run, Nowhere to Hide* (St. Mark's Playhouse, 1974) and *Liberty Calland* (St. Mark's Playhouse, 1975), before taking on the name Samm-Art Williams for *Argus and Klansman* and *Waiting for Mongo* (St. Mark's Playhouse, 1975). He wrote the play *Welcome to Black River*, produced by the Negro Ensemble Company at St. Mark's Playhouse in 1975. As Samm-Art Williams, we wrote *The Coming* and *Do Unto Others*, both at the Billie Holiday Theatre in Brooklyn in 1976; *A Love Play* produced by the NEC at St. Mark's Playhouse that same year; *The Last Caravan* (1977); and *Brass Birds Don't Sing*, at New York City's Stage 73 in 1978. Williams was once a sparring partner of Muhammad Ali and made his screen debut playing "Roger" in the Richard Price novel adaptation *The Wanderers* (1979), and played a subway police officer in director Brian DePalma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980). Williams participated in the NEC Playwrights Workshop, under the guidance of playwright-in-residence Steve Carter, who had a tremendous impact on his work. About Carter, Williams has said "that no single individual has influenced my writing to the degree that Steve Carter has."

Williams wrote and directed the comedy *The Dance on Widows' Row*, produced by the New Federal Theatre at Manhattan's Harry De Jur Playhouse at Henry Street Settlement from June 25 - July 30, 2000. Other works with the Negro Ensemble Company include *The Sixteenth Round* (1980), *Eyes of an American* (1985), and *The Waiting Room* (2007).

Williams is now the current Artist in Residence at North Carolina Central University.

Nominations and Awards:

1980 Tony Award Nomination - Best Play: *Home*, written by Samm-Art Williams

1980 Drama Desk Award Nomination - Outstanding New Play: *Home*, written by Samm-Art Williams

1985 Emmy Award Nomination - Outstanding Writing in a Variety or Music Program, for *Motown Returns to the Apollo*

1988 Emmy Award Nomination - Outstanding Comedy Series, *Frank's Place* (as story editor; shared with executive producers Hugh Wilson and Tim Reid, producers Max Tash and David Chambers and co-producer Richard Dubin)

Fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts

DISCUSSION & FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- The “fish out of water” trope, or a character’s discomfort at being “home” again after a significant time away, appears throughout literature. What do you think it means to say “you can’t go home again”? Is this true? Why or why not?
- When Cephus returns home after being in the north, he is surprised to discover that segregation has loosened its grip on the south significantly. Have you ever experienced something unfamiliar in a familiar place? What did it feel like?
- In *Home*, characters learn about themselves through their interactions with one another. Identify the ways in which your friends and classmates teach you about yourself on a daily basis.
- Do you think the characters in this play ultimately find contentment because they’re home again, or because they left in the first place? Why?
- Samm-Art Williams, and the Negro Ensemble Company, set out to portray the African American experience on stage. Do you think they accomplish this with *Home*? Why or why not?