

OF EQUAL MEASURE



P.L.A.Y.
PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH

by Tanya Barfield
Directed by Leigh Silverman
World Premiere • June 29 - July 27, 2008
Kirk Douglas Theatre

OF EQUAL MEASURE DISCOVERY GUIDE

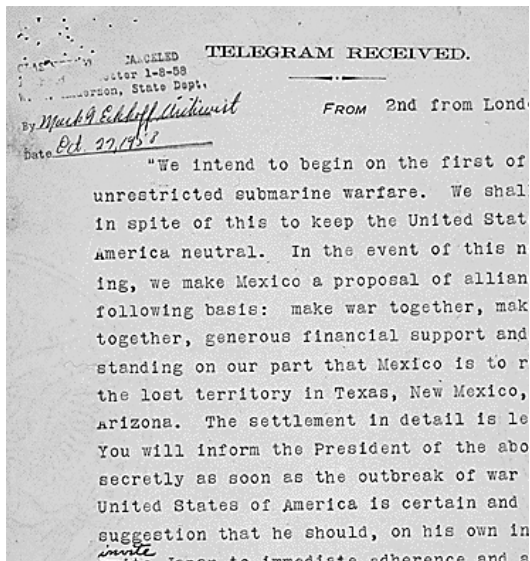


The East Wing of the White House, circa 1919.
Library of Congress.

1914.

In an era of hardening racism, an ambitious African-American woman, Jade Kingston, gets a job in Woodrow Wilson's White House. But when the president embarks on a ruthless campaign to force public support of an unpopular war, civil liberties, civil rights and the truth are the first casualties, and Jade must decide where her loyalties lie. America's past echoes into the present in Tanya Barfield's *Of Equal Measure*, directed by Leigh Silverman, which makes its world premiere at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. ●

Synopsis



The Zimmermann Telegram, when decoded, revealed that the Germans were seeking an alliance with Mexico against the United States.

Courtesy of Record Group 59: General Records of the Department of State, 1756-1979, National Archives and Records Administration, ARC Identifier 302022.

Time:
1914-1919

Place:
Washington, D.C.

An ambitious young African-American woman who grew up in poverty, Jade Kingston is proud to have a job with the federal government, especially as opportunities are very limited for African Americans. And she's even more proud when she is promoted to the White House office of Edward Christianson, an unofficial "advisor" to President Woodrow Wilson. But Jade's pride and ambition make her unwilling to acknowledge that Christianson is a staunch racist and segregationist determined to purge the government of its African-American workers.

Jade's brother, Eugene, works for the post office, but what he really wants to be is an artist. When Christianson's racist mission threatens not only Eugene's job but also his life, Eugene pressures Jade to use her "influence" with her boss to get him another position. Although Jade has so far managed to resist her boss' sexual advances, to help her brother (and preserve her own job?) she becomes Christianson's mistress.

The conservative Christianson competes for influence over the president with Wilson's longtime friend, guide and Chief of Staff, Joseph Tumulty, a Catholic Irish-American of deep liberal convictions. Neither is able to control the president. Given to grand enthusiasms and crippling anxieties, Wilson is an erratic, peremptory and disconnected figure who cannot tolerate criticism.

War breaks out in Europe, and [Wilson](#), like the American public, is determined to stay out of it. But when intelligence



Racial violence was sparked in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on May 31, 1921, by the erroneous assumption of sexual assault by a black man on a white female elevator operator.

Courtesy of Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

suggests that Germany is urging Mexico to invade the U.S. and Lansing warns of a potential racial insurgency by African Americans and other non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic hyphenates — German-Americans, Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, etc. — who may not be loyal to America, the unstable president declares a “war to end all wars,” even as he realizes that winning the public’s support will require a ruthless and repressive propaganda campaign.

The war changes everything. Everyone is suspect. Even Tumulty is detained and violently interrogated by a mysterious intelligence operative, Mr. Plank, who questions the Chief of Staff’s loyalty — can he be Irish, Catholic or liberal and still be a true American?

With the war going badly, the government is forced to recruit African-American troops. But with black soldiers dying during training

because they are denied adequate food, shelter and medical care, and racial violence against African Americans erupting across the country, Wilson increasingly fears that outraged blacks will be exploited by “subversive” elements. A special propaganda unit is created to win the hearts and minds of the African-American community.

Working for the new propaganda unit, Eugene feels important for first time — and he seems oblivious to the increasingly sinister nature of his assignments. Seeing her brother willingly collaborate with the government’s oppression of African Americans, Jade realizes that she too is being pulled into the “propaganda machine.”

As Wilson struggles with accepting — and exploiting — the damage caused by his war, Jade must decide where her loyalties lie: with her career and family, or with justice and equal rights for her people? ●

Cast of Characters



Jade Kingston
An educated, ambitious African-American woman working for the federal government in an era of Jim Crow
MICHOLE BRIANA WHITE



Eugene Kingston
Jade's brother; a postal worker and aspiring artist
CHRISTOPHER O'NEAL WARREN



Edward Christianson
Unofficial advisor to President Woodrow Wilson; Anglo-American Protestant
MICHAEL T. WEISS



Joseph Tumulty
Wilson's longtime friend, counselor and now White House Chief of Staff; Irish-American Catholic
JD CULLUM



President Woodrow Wilson
A Southerner who lived through the Civil War; considered progressive reformer on many issues; in poor health; Anglo-American Protestant.
LAWRENCE PRESSMAN



Robert Lansing
Secretary of State; Anglo-American Protestant
DENNIS COCKRUM



David Leonard
Jade's cousin; a journalist devoted to publishing the truth about African-American life
JOSEPH C. PHILLIPS



Mr. Plank
An intelligence operative and interrogator
T. RYDER SMITH



Ensemble
SCOTT DAWSON



Ensemble
MICHAEL HYLAND

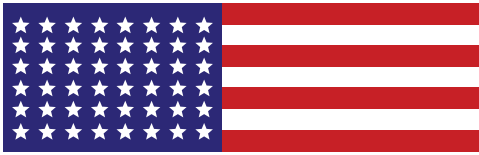
Jim Crow



Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice popularized the black-faced minstrel on the American stage with his 1828 caricature of a crippled plantation slave, dancing and singing the words: "Weel about and turn about and do jus' so, Eb'ry time I weel about, I jump Jim Crow." White audiences readily accepted the stereotype of the happy-go-lucky, singing, dancing, grinning buffoon as representative of blacks, at the same time that white hostility and violence against free blacks escalated.

Originally a minstrel show character, "Jim Crow" became the name for the legal system of comprehensive racial segregation, discrimination and exploitation that emerged in America after 1877. After the Civil War concluded in 1865, federal legislation and the 14th and 15th Amendments established the equal rights of male African Americans, but newly freed slaves were only able to exercise these rights — and only at great risk — while federal troops defended them from white terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. When the federal government, tired of fighting what was essentially an ongoing white insurgency, withdrew troops from the South in 1877, the former slave states legislated a new system of white

(more)



OF EQUAL MEASURE

TALK ABOUT...

■ *Of Equal Measure* takes its title from a scene in which Tumulty is challenged: Can he be both Irish and American, or Catholic and American? For the interrogator, a “real” American is a Protestant Christian of English descent. From the mid-19th through the early 20th century, America absorbed millions of immigrants from Ireland as well as Eastern and Southern Europe, creating a deep concern among “established” Americans as to how the nation’s democracy and culture could survive if the country were divided by ethnicity, race and religion. Similar questions are asked today both in America and Europe.

Are such concerns legitimate? How much diversity can a nation have and still maintain a national identity and core values?

■ Jade and Eugene are caught in a dilemma commonplace for minorities trying to advance in a racist society: they are exceptions that prosper by helping the majority maintain the ethnic status quo. For a contemporary example, consider the handful of non-white actors in Hollywood who manage to have steady careers only by portraying stereotypes.

Do you think Jade and Eugene are right to accept the jobs they’re offered?

Do you agree with Jade’s final action? Do you think it confirms the government’s suspicions about African Americans? Does that matter?

JIM CROW (continued)

supremacy. This system was sanctioned by the U.S. Supreme Court, most famously in the 1896 case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which established the principle of “separate but equal.”

Jim Crow is associated with the Deep South, but it spread throughout the nation and, with increasing hysteria, into every aspect of American life. By World War I, belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority was ubiquitous among whites, including “liberals” and “progressives.” When the [NAACP](#) (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) was established in 1909, conditions were so bad for African Americans that some wondered if they had not been better off under slavery. It would require decades of struggle for African Americans to regain their rights. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 are considered the end of Jim Crow era, although not, of course, of racism. ●

The Great War and the Great Depression



President Woodrow Wilson (at the head of the table) and his war cabinet

World War I was one of the great ruptures in history, a cataclysm which marked a radical break from the past and the birth of a new age. The conflict was so senseless, the carnage so catastrophic and the behavior of the world's leaders so insensible that institutions, authorities, ideas and values that had dominated the West for centuries, if not millennia, lost their previously unquestioned legitimacy. This was true, albeit far more subtly, even for the United States, which did not suffer the devastation experienced by Europe and emerged from the war as a world power. Still, the war changed America and marked, among many other things, a crisis and turning point in our attitudes toward civil liberties and race relations.

African-American Soldiers in World War I

By World War I, Jim Crow had infected the armed services and blacks had largely been excluded from the military. When America declared war in 1917, however, hundreds of thousands of African Americans quickly volunteered to serve. The War Department, having doubts about the capacity and loyalty of African Americans and yielding to political pressure from Southern politicians, initially rejected black recruits. But eventually some 367,000 African Americans enlisted. Despite being ill-trained, ill-equipped, commanded by officers who wanted them to fail, abused and even attacked by white civilians and soldiers, African Americans served with great distinction.

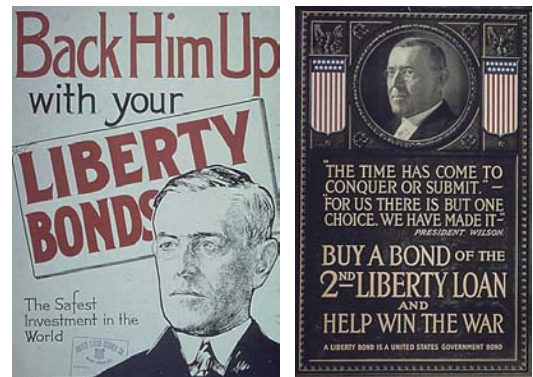
Although head of the American Expeditionary Force General John Pershing had long experience commanding black troops (including a regiment of [‘Buffalo’ soldiers](#)) and great respect for their abilities, he was forced to instruct the French to respect America’s racist sentiments by not socializing with or speaking well of the black troops.

Nonetheless, Europeans — allies and enemies, military and civilian — were very impressed by the African-American troops, especially the 40,000 who served in combat. Perhaps the most famous black unit was the 369th Infantry Regiment, whose valor earned them the name [“Hellfighters”](#) from the Germans and the Croix de Guerre from the French government. Few in America knew of these recognitions, as the U.S. government had a policy of suppressing and denying the achievements of black servicemen.



The celebrated 369th regiment, the Hellfighters, arrives home from France.

Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the War Department, Record Group 165, ARC Identifier: 533548



Americans strongly opposed getting involved in the European conflict, so much so that [Woodrow Wilson](#) won re-election in 1916 on the slogan “He Kept Us out of War.” Within months, however, Wilson flip-flopped to the outrage of his Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, who quit in protest. Determined to force an unwilling country to support the war, Wilson initiated a campaign of [pro-war propaganda](#) combined with suppression of dissent that was unprecedented in size and scope (and prefigured propaganda strategies later associated with totalitarian regimes). The Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 criminalized any criticism of the government’s war policy. Hundreds of newspapers and magazines were shut down and thousands of people jailed or deported — among them a film producer, Robert Goldstein, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison for portraying America’s ally, Great Britain, in an unflattering manner in a film about the American Revolution. Forced for the first time to consider freedom of speech and the scope of the First Amendment, the Supreme Court, to the shock of many in the legal community, sided with the government.

To enforce conformity and blind allegiance, the government unleashed some 250,000 private vigilantes to spy upon, intimidate, harass and even murder fellow citizens they suspected of “disloyalty.” Once unleashed, the forces of

TALK ABOUT...

There have been a number of scandals in recent years concerning the government's use of propaganda, both direct and covert, to influence public opinion. Indeed, it was recently revealed that the Pentagon has been secretly coaching supposed independent media "military analysts" on how to justify and support, often with false information, the Bush administration's Iraq war and anti-terrorism policies.

While no one questions the right of the president and the executive branch to promote its policies, how far should the government be allowed to go to influence public opinion? What are the implications for democracy if the government is allowed to mislead, misinform or suppress important information?

Antiwar dissent can undermine a nation's will to fight, and thus win, a conflict. However, we also depend on the "free market of ideas" to provide us with the information we need to give "informed consent" to our government's acts and to know if a war is illegitimate, ill-advised or poorly managed.

Abraham Lincoln, confronting a mass rebellion that remains by far the most terrible crisis and conflict in our history, did not silence his critics, while Woodrow Wilson (and other presidents), entering a conflict that involved no direct threat to American interests, was determined to ruthlessly suppress all dissent.

Should we surrender our freedom of speech during war? If so, to what extent? When and how should the decision be made, and by whom? And what are the potential consequences?

repression and hatred did not limit themselves to opponents of the war. Minorities of all kinds suffered: immigrants, people of German descent, labor unions, socialists, women's rights advocates and, of course, the most oppressed of all, African Americans.

Some African Americans, including radicals such as W. E. B. DuBois, actually supported the war in the hope that their patriotism would win them greater acceptance and equality. Huge numbers of African Americans volunteered for military service [see sidebar, previous page]. Even more left the South for northern cities and the promise of a better life created by a labor shortage (resulting from increased production and severely decreased European immigration), which for first time opened industrial jobs to blacks. But in both cases, African Americans found intensified hostility and racism, rather than acceptance. Long a fact of African-American life, lynching and "race riots" (i.e. white pogroms on black communities) increased considerably during the war.

World War I was the nadir for civil liberties in America and, perhaps, for post-Civil War black civil rights. Once the "war fever" had broken, jurists, even the Supreme Court, repudiated the authoritarian actions of the Wilson administration and established the principles of constitutionally protected dissent that we enjoy today. As to black rights, it can be argued that after World War I, African Americans were less willing to accept discrimination. Disappointment bred a new militancy. Black veterans returned from Europe, where racial prejudice was far milder and their achievements were lauded, with a new confidence in their abilities and rights. Historians note that the season of extreme racial violence that erupted immediately after the war, the "Red Summer of 1919," featured an element rare in earlier race riots: African Americans fought back. ●

Tanya Barfield's Drama of Memory: The Dialogue of Then and Now



Photo by Craig Schwartz.

Tanya Barfield.

Tanya Barfield graduated from New York University in 1991 intending to be an actor but soon discovered that roles for black actors were largely limited to ghetto caricatures — even in commercials. Recalling an audition in which she was directed to put more of “the hood” into her performance, Barfield, who is biracial and grew up in a middle-class, mostly white community in Portland, Oregon, admits that, “Try as I might, I just couldn’t manage to make the line ‘This toilet paper is so soft’ (as bland as it is) sound inner-city.” Barfield turned to writing, first solo works for herself and then plays. A short play about two slave sisters, written while Barfield was in Julliard’s Graduate Playwriting Program, marked the beginning of the playwright’s ongoing exploration of race and history. It also initiated her practice of finding inspiration in historical research, particularly primary sources such as memoirs and oral histories, which, she says, reveal “the way people talked about things, experienced things” and the details, ambiguities, complications and contradictory and conflicting accounts that are left out of standard histories.

Barfield has written several acclaimed plays that do not directly deal with history, but it was a musical about a youth who escapes slavery and joins the Union Army that brought the playwright back, in a very odd way, to the issues that had motivated her to abandon acting: Some young actors refused to audition for her show because they didn’t want to play a slave, even a heroic ex-slave. Barfield was baffled, especially as these same actors were willing to play degrading and clichéd “gangsta” stereotypes. She began to reflect on how African Americans relate to their history — and how rarely she saw middle-class blacks represented on stage and screen. “Today it seems the legacy of African-American identity is often rejected by the predominant feeling that being a descendant of a slave is shameful — yet being a misogynistic rap artist idealizing



Reg E. Cathey, left, and André Holland in *Blue Door* at Playwrights Horizons in New York City, 2006.

Photo by Joan Marcus.

violence is not,” Barfield writes. “I call this ‘cultural amnesia,’ which has not been foisted on us entirely by whites, but by our own internalized racism.”

Barfield’s reflections inspired her widely acclaimed and much produced 2006 play, *Blue Door*, the portrait of a prominent African-American academic, a man who believes he has moved beyond race, confronting his personal and cultural history.

America has always been considered a place where an individual can create a new identity, and while *Blue Door* is deeply rooted in the past and present of African-American life, it also explores a broader theme central to American life and literature (for example, *The Great Gatsby*): the price of assimilation and/or success in terms of losing not only one’s own heritage, but also a legacy to pass on to future generations.

Tanya Barfield describes *Blue Door* as “a theatrical meditation on ‘blackness’ — a dialogue between *then* and *now*, between cultural amnesia and memory.” Something similar could be said of her new play, *Of Equal Measure*, except now Barfield’s focus is even broader and the meditation is not only on “blackness” but also “Americanness.” Who is accepted as American? What defines us as a nation? Although the play has at its center two ambitious African-American professionals for whom success has a high moral price, Barfield says that the play was largely inspired by the memoir of a white man: Woodrow Wilson’s mysterious advisor, Joseph Tumulty. “I was interested in the way that Tumulty’s being Irish and Catholic was considered a problem,” Barfield explains. “The way in which his

life was affected by prejudice. And then there is the ‘dialogue’ between the war then and the war now.” By recalling how we so quickly sacrificed our fundamental values and liberties at the start of the “American Century,” Barfield confronts our “national amnesia” and asks, “What is our legacy?” ●

TALK ABOUT...

Playwright Tanya Barfield notes that, “The relationship between the Wilson administration and the current administration is too glaring to ignore” and that the resonances in her play between Woodrow Wilson’s war policy and those of George W. Bush are both “inevitable” and “intentional.”

■ The play is set in 1914-1919, but are there elements in the production (such as the dialogue, design or directing) which seem to be specific references to contemporary America?

■ What are the similarities and differences between America’s involvement in World War I and our current conflicts?

Resources

Websites:

<http://www.redstone.army.mil/history/integrate/welcome.html>

The U.S. Army's Redstone Arsenal hosts this frank, straightforward history of African-American service in the U.S. military.

<http://www.vpcomm.umich.edu/admissions/legal/expert/foner.html>

A preeminent scholar in the field, Eric Foner of Columbia University wrote this superb brief history of race in America as an “expert report” for the 2003 Supreme Court case regarding the University of Michigan’s admissions policy.

<http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/>

Website for the PBS series on World War I

Books:

[The Strange Career of Jim Crow](#) by C. Vann Woodward (Oxford University Press, 1955) In this landmark history that Martin Luther King called “the historical Bible of the civil rights movement,” the renowned Southern historian Woodward debunks the myths of segregation, showing that it was a recent phenomenon and revealing the complex political and economic interests that created it.

[Jim Crow and the Wilson Administration](#) by Nicholas Patler (University of Colorado Press, 2004) An account of the segregation of the federal government workforce during the Wilson administration

[Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime from the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism](#) by Geoffrey R. Stone (W.W. Norton, 2004)

The acclaimed history and analysis of America’s successes and failures to maintain free speech during wartime

About P.L.A.Y.

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Performing for Los Angeles Youth

Leslie K. Johnson
Director of Education
and Outreach

Celeste Thompson
Department Manager

Kimiko Broder
Educational Programs Manager

Rachel Fain
Editorial Manager

Dan Harper
Educational Programs Associate

Emily Weisberg
Educational Programs Associate

Christine Mantilla
Educational Programs
Coordinator

Jennifer Hartmann
Education Services Agent

Corey Madden
Associate Artist and
Consultant to P.L.A.Y.

Discovery Guide Credits

Christopher Breyer
Writer

Rachel Fain
Managing Editor

Jean Kling
Proofreader

Christopher Komuro
Graphic Designer

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