

Alice Childress's **TROUBLE IN MIND**

Directed by Awoye Timpo

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

ABOUT THE PLAY (SYNOPSIS)

Time: 1957. Place: New York City. Six actors gather in a Broadway theater to rehearse an anti-lynching play, written and directed by white artists. Newcomer John believes in the sanctity of theater, ingénue Judy insists there's only the human race, and veteran actress Wiletta is torn between getting along and delving into the authentic truth of her character. As the actors get on their feet and small talk turns into discussion on motivation and theme, tension begins to run high, ultimately reaching a point of no return. A boulevard comedy with undeniable dramatic force, Alice Childress's masterpiece would have been the first play by a Black woman produced on Broadway if she had agreed to the producers' demands that she soften its message. Funny, incisive, and poignant, this play-within-a-play is an unflinching examination of white fragility and liberalism in the theater industry.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Alice Childress was an American novelist, actress, and playwright. Born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1916, she moved to Harlem at the age of nine and studied acting at the American Negro Theatre. As an actress, she appeared in John Silvera and Abram Hill's *On Striver's Row*, Theodore Browne's *Natural Man*, and received a Tony Award nomination for her role in Philip Yordan's *Anna Lucasta*. In 1949, she began writing for the stage, and her first full-length play *Trouble in Mind* was produced in 1955. From 1966 to 1968, she attended the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. Childress passed away in 1994, and her paper archive is held at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, NY.

INSIDE THE WORLD OF *TROUBLE IN MIND*

From the Kinolibrary, this clip shows footage of a table read of Alice Childress's *Wedding Band* from the 1960s: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_a6XO8Fjl2Q

Director Awoye Timpo and dramaturg Arminda Thomas, who worked on A.C.T.'s presentation of *Trouble in Mind*, are both members of CLASSIX, an organization that celebrates classic plays by Black playwrights. Their vision and mission can be found on their website: <https://www.theclassix.org/our-vision>

New York Magazine theater critic Helen Shaw writes about why she thinks theaters everywhere should be reviving Childress's work: <https://www.vulture.com/2020/01/alice-childress-trouble-in-mind.html>

In 1987, Alice Childress appeared on an American Theatre Wing panel with fellow theater artists to discuss her career trajectory. Watch her speak here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ik7h_HFXKtY&feature=youtu.be

THE ENDURING VISION OF ALICE CHILDRESS

BY ARMINDA THOMAS

Announcing her death in 1994, the *New York Times* headline read, “Alice Childress, 77, a Novelist,” though the full obituary allowed that she also wrote some plays. While Childress would likely have objected to that order, having devoted the bulk of her life to playwriting, the paper of record’s choice is understandable. As a playwright, Childress’s story is more difficult to measure: hers was a progressive voice too often hemmed in by anxious, benighted producers; a mainstage talent shoehorned into black box realities.

The story began, promisingly enough, at a little Harlem theater with a big mission, the American Negro Theatre—a company so hardworking members called themselves the ANTs, and were expected to function as actors, directors, designers, and box office managers. “The American Negro Theatre Company,” Childress recalled, “worked ten years without salary, four nights per week, keeping the same acting company together, until the boot-straps wore out.”



ALICE CHILDRESS.
PHOTO COURTESY OF ARMINDA THOMAS.



ALICE CHILDRESS.
PHOTO COURTESY OF ARMINDA THOMAS.

When Childress expressed her discontent with the quality of the material in general and with the quality of roles for women past the ingénue stage in particular, her colleagues (including fellow ANT Sidney Poitier) challenged her to write it herself. She came in the next day with her first play, *Florence*—a gem of a piece centered around a character who would seldom be granted more than a line or two in most plays of that era. From the beginning, her work displayed her talent for marrying rich, layered characterization and sharp insight into the political forces shaping those characters.

After ANT disbanded, Childress along with several members joined forces with the Committee for the Negro in the Arts to keep providing opportunities for African American artists and audiences at Club Baron, a Harlem nightclub-turned-community theatre. Her pieces written for this venue spoke to the struggle for freedom (in the US and in Africa), while incorporating song, dance, and live music—a combination that was popular both with the crowds and the few critics who made the trip uptown. “Alice Childress seems to know more about language and drama than most people who write for theatre today,” wrote *Freedom* magazine’s reviewer Lorraine Hansberry in 1952.

*“It’s the man’s theater, the man’s money, so what you gonna do?” (Wiletta, *Trouble in Mind*)*

Then came Childress’s first big break. Greenwich Mews, a downtown theatre with a progressive cachet, had an open slot in their 1955–56 season. Childress had the play to fill it—her first full-length play, *Trouble in Mind*, about an interracial cast and crew who come together to produce a play about racial injustice in the South and instead find themselves caught up in racial tensions of their own. The Greenwich Mews producers snapped it up.

Soon, however, Childress found her play hitting uncomfortably close to home. Deep into the rehearsal process, the producers became uncomfortable with the

play’s ending and demanded that Childress craft a more hopeful resolution, with a unified cast and a redemptive arc for the play’s antagonist (a liberal, white director). It was a resolution Childress could not believe in, but—faced with the prospect of scrapping the production so close to opening—she acquiesced. The play was a hit, with mostly positive reviews (though some made a point of objecting to the “claptrap” ending) and sold-out audiences. Even better, Broadway producers came knocking, and soon it was announced that Alice Childress would be the first African American woman to be produced on the Great White Way.

That announcement, however, turned out to be premature. The new would-be producers, had more conditions (including a new title), and demanded still more rewrites,

until the playwright “couldn’t recognize the play one way or the other.” After two years, Childress withdrew the play and restored her original ending for publication. Also premature was the *New York Times*’s report heralding a Broadway production of her next big work, *Wedding Band*, which had been optioned immediately after its first reading in 1963 for production the next year. Those plans also fell through. And though the play was produced in Michigan and in Chicago—and optioned for Broadway seven times—it took nearly a decade to reach New York. The subject matter was controversial, certainly, but the sticking point seemed to be remarkably similar to the one that stopped her earlier piece: not enough attention being paid to the (white, male) lover, too much Black everywoman at the center.

“The Black writer explains pain to those who inflict it. Those who repress and exclude us also claim the right to instruct us on how best to react to repression. All too often we follow their advice.” (Childress, 1984)

The latter half of the 1960s saw a resurgence of Black theatres across the nation—at least five sprang up in New York City, alone. In the years before *Wedding Band* found a New York home, Childress had three new plays produced: two at



ALICE CHILDRESS. PHOTO COURTESY OF ARMINDA THOMAS.

New Heritage Repertory Company, one at the Negro Ensemble Company. While still deeply personal, deeply political, and deeply committed to telling Black women's stories, Childress's new works shifted these women away from the terrain of interracial relations to explore more fully the navigation of class, gender, and racism-related tensions within African American communities.

From the beginning of her career, Childress had advocated for "a Negro People's Theatre...powerful enough to inspire, lift, and eventually create a complete desire for the liberation of all oppressed peoples," and if her rhetoric tempered, her belief in the necessity of Black theatres remained firm. Still, she was sometimes frustrated by the constraints of writing to fit into the venues in which those companies operated. "I like writing full-length plays," she confessed, "but I saw a need for short plays, because so many little theatres in black communities...need for many reasons, which we can understand, short plays. And also they kept writing me for something for their group of eight people to do or that they had forty minutes on a program or they had an hour."

It was, perhaps, this need to write as expansively as she craved, without having to compromise her vision, which led Childress to take up novel writing. And while Childress never stopped writing or identifying as a playwright, it is nevertheless true that her second path garnered her the attention and acclaim she so richly deserved.



ALICE CHILDRESS IN *ANNA LUCASTA*.
PHOTO COURTESY OF ARMINDA THOMAS.

ⁱ Alice Childress, "But I Do My Thing," *New York Times*, February 2, 1969

ⁱⁱ Alice Childress, "A Candle in a Gale Wind," in Mari Evans, *Black Women Writers* (New York, Harbor), 113

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Childress, *Selected Plays*, xxviii

PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

- On a piece of paper, create two columns. Set a timer for one minute. In the left column, write down the names of as many Black writers (book authors, playwrights, journalists, etc) as you can think of before your timer goes off. Reset the timer and repeat the process, this time writing down as many white writers as you can think of within one minute. Afterward, compare your two lists: With which group of writers were you more familiar? Why do you think that is? What can you do to expand your awareness of a diverse range of writers and artists?
- Think about a time you saw a play, watched a movie, or read a book that shifted your perspective on another person's experience. Maybe you have watched a documentary that explained a pop star's inner life or read a book like *The Diary of Anne Frank* that shifted your idea of what it was like to live through a particular moment in history. What was your belief before experiencing that piece of media? How did your belief change after experiencing the media? Reflecting on that piece of art, why do you think the story impacted you in that way?
- This performance of *Trouble in Mind* will be a type of performance called a reading, wherein actors read directly from their scripts, with no costumes, sets, or staging. Another actor will read the stage directions, or the notes the playwright wrote into the script that describe how the actors should move around the stage or what they should do. Often, a reading can be part of the playwriting process, when the playwright gets the chance to hear their play out loud for the first time (this is not the case today—this play was written in the 1950's, and the actors have spent time learning and rehearsing the script for this performance). Why do you think it would be helpful to the playwriting process for a playwright to hear a play read aloud? What elements of theater might be present in a reading that wouldn't be there if you simply read the script silently as you would a book, without actors?

POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

- Alice Childress wrote this play in the 1950's, a time when the theater industry was dominated by the work of white, male playwrights. What do you think Childress was trying to teach her audience? Why would it have been important to produce this play in the 1950's? Why is it also important to produce this play now?
- When *Trouble in Mind* was first being produced, the producers asked playwright Alice Childress to rewrite the ending, so that it ended with a "more hopeful resolution." She did so, but restored the original ending when it came time to publish the version of the play you saw today. Why might the producers have asked Childress to change the ending of her play? Why is it important that *Trouble in Mind* be performed with the ending Childress intended it to have?
- Early on in the character's rehearsal of the play, Sheldon stumbles over the word "iffen" in one of his lines (Childress, page 15). Other cast members chime in to imply that the playwright of the fictional play has made up this word as he imagined what Sheldon's character might have sounded like. A similar situation arises a little while later, when it is discovered that the playwright called a barn dance a "stomp" (Childress, page 25–26). What assumptions about his characters do you think the imaginary playwright might have made when he wrote these words? Why do the characters object to them? What could the fictional playwright have done to better reflect his characters' voices?
- What is one thing you learned from this play? How will it change the way you write or act in the future?

ACTIVITY: IMAGINING TWO CHARACTERS

Often, plays are written by playwrights who do not have a lot in common with their characters. *Trouble in Mind*, for example, tells the fictional story of a white playwright having written a play featuring many Black characters, a play which does not accurately reflect the Black characters' experiences. In this activity, you will imagine two distinct characters, create a scene between them, and then reflect on what it was like to write in each other these characters' voices.

This activity is based upon the following California Arts Standards for Public Schools (CA State Board of Education, 2019):

Acc.TH:Cr1 b. Use personal experiences and knowledge to develop a character that is believable and authentic in a drama/ theatre work

Acc.TH:Cr2 b. Cooperate as a creative team to make interpretive choices for a drama/theatre work.

Adv.TH:Re8 a. Use detailed supporting evidence and appropriate criteria to revise personal work and interpret the work of others when participating in or observing a drama/ theatre work.

Vocabulary:

Dialogue: (n.) a written or spoken conversation between two or more people

Part A: Creating the World of the Play

Your task is to write a dialogue between two characters. A dialogue is a written or spoken conversation between two or more people. Since this dialogue will be between two characters, you'll need to first create the characters who will be in your scene.

Step 1: Before you begin writing, it is important to get to know your characters. Take a moment to imagine two very different people who you would like to write about. Give them names. Write down all the details you can about them, including identity characteristics like their age, gender, or ethnicity; physical characteristics like their height, their hair color, or the way they walk; and personality characteristics like whether they are friendly, self-centered, energetic, or outspoken. Think about what your characters' jobs might be, what clothing they would wear, and who their family or friends are. It might be helpful to draw a sketch of each character, featuring some of these traits. Try to make your characters as different from one another as possible.

Step 2: Next, imagine the setting of your scene. Does it take place in one character's home? On the moon? During quiet hour at a library? Be creative!

Step 3: Identify the conflict of your scene. What problem are the characters trying to solve? Are they arguing about something? Does one of them want something from the other? Are they trying to solve a mystery? The more specific your conflict is, the easier it will be to write an exciting scene.

ACTIVITY: IMAGINING TWO CHARACTERS CONT.

Part B: Writing, Listening, and Revising

Step 4: Write the scene! Since this scene is a dialogue, the characters should take turns speaking. Imagine the way each character talks and try to reflect their individual voices as you write. How might each character react to the line the other character just said? Write until your characters reach a resolution of the conflict you created in Step 3. If you get stuck, use the following Scene Starter as a jumping off point.

Character 1: I'm glad you're here! I have to tell you something.

Character 2: Is it what I think it is?

Character 1: You're not going to believe it.

Character 2: Hurry up and tell me! We don't have much time.

Step 5: Read your scene out loud with a partner. Plays are meant to be performed onstage (or over Zoom!), so hearing your script read aloud is an important part of the playwriting process. Do all the lines of dialogue sound true to the character? Do they feel natural to say? If not, make some edits. Repeat this process of listening to your scene and then revising it until you are happy with the final product.

Part C: Reflecting

Step 6: Now that your scene is complete, take a moment to reflect on the writing process. Did one character feel more natural to write for than the other? Did one character's voice turn out to sound more authentic than the other's? Why might this be?

Step 7: Take a moment to think about your relationship to your characters. Is one character more like you than the other? Maybe you share some identities or character traits with one of your characters: you are the same age, or are both students, or both have twin sisters. Make a list of the ways you are similar to and different from each of your characters. Do you notice any relationship between the character that felt most authentic to write and the character you have more in common with, or vice versa? Why do you think that might be?

Step 8: As a class, discuss books or plays you know that were written by authors who did not have very much in common with their characters. Did these writers do a good job authentically representing their characters? What is the danger of misrepresenting peoples' experiences in books, plays, or TV? What could you do, in the future, to more authentically represent the voices and experiences of characters who are different from you? What is the benefit of more authentic representation?