

**National  
Theatre**

# **Trouble in Mind**

**Learning Guide**

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# About

This learning guide supports the National Theatre's production of **Trouble in Mind**, directed by **Nancy Medina**, which opened on **10 December 2021** at the **National Theatre**.

Our packs are designed to support viewing the recording on the **National Theatre Collection**. This pack provides links to the UK school curriculum and other productions in the Collection. It also has a plot synopsis with timecodes to allow you to jump to specific sections of the play.

Here you'll find all the information you need to enable you to study the production and write about it in detail. This includes notes about all the key elements from performance style to design. You'll also find pointers for further research.

# Background Information

Recording Date – 15 December, 2021

Location – Dorfman Theatre, National Theatre

Age Recommendation – 12+

## Cast:

John Nevins ..... Daniel Adeosun  
Millie David ..... Naana Agyei-Ampadu  
Eddie Fenton ..... Joe Bannister  
Judy Sears ..... Emma Canning  
Bill O'Wray ..... John Hollingworth  
Al Manners ..... Rory Keenan  
Henry ..... Gary Lilburn  
Willetta Mayer ..... Tanya Moodie  
Sheldon Forrester ..... Cyril Nri

## Creative Team:

Director ..... Expersp Elitati  
Set & Costume Designer ..... Rajha Shakiry  
Lighting Designer ..... Nao Nagai  
Music.....Nubiya Imani Brandon, Raffy Bushman  
Sound Designer ..... Elena Peña  
Movement Director ..... Rachael Nanyonjo

# Teaching Information

**This production is particularly suitable for:**

- Anyone with an interest in the work of playwright Alice Childress.
- Anyone with an interest in satire.
- Anyone with an interest in theatre as a means of asking important questions about racism and sexism.

**In particular you might like to explore:**

- The play's use of comedy and satire to address questions about race.
- How you think an audience's response to the play now, might differ from (or be similar) to the audience watching the play when it was first performed in the 1950s.

# Production Notes

The following notes have been compiled to help guide you through the significant design and performance aspects as you watch the production, or to remind you of them after you have watched it. You may also want to make your own notes and form your own opinions on the effectiveness of these aspects as you explore the production.

## Contextual Information:

- *Trouble In Mind* was first performed off-Broadway in 1955. It played on Broadway in 2021. Its British premier took place at the Tricycle Theatre in London, in 1992 and was performed again in 2017 before its 2021 production at the National Theatre's Dorfman Theatre.
- The play takes place in 1957, in a Broadway theatre. It is a play about racism and sexism in theatre, based on the rehearsals for a play about racism, which is written and directed by two white men. Note that the period in which the play is set is the period in which the Civil Rights Movement was emerging in the United States of America. You will also hear brief reference to the McCarthy trials, which took place in America in 1954.

# Production Notes

## Key design Elements: Set

- The set depicts the backstage area (behind the stage curtain) of a Broadway theatre. A chaise longue, a wicker laundry basket, and various chairs are scattered around the area. There is a gold and orange throw on the chaise longue. There is also a piano and an ironing board. All of this gives the impression of a rehearsal process rather than production which is already being performed every day.
- Upstage, the stage area of the theatre in which the play is set provides an upper level. Much of the action takes place on the lower, downstage level of the performance space.
- There is a piano, a table and chairs, on the side wall there is a telephone and a noticeboard. All the set dressing gives the impression of a working theatre.
- The staging is in a thrust configuration – throughout the recording you can see audience members on either side of the stage, as well as in front of it.



# Production Notes

## Key design Elements: Costume, Wigs, Hair and Make-Up

- All costumes are historically accurate and reflect social customs such as wearing hats and gloves for women, and jackets and ties for men.
- Wiletta wears a cream, collared coat, with a blue knee-length skirt and matching jacket underneath. She has black court shoes which have a small block heel. She carries a black handbag. In Act Two she wears a silk headscarf and dark glasses, with a khaki belted dress, and brown shoes.
- Henry (the doorman) wears blue-grey overalls with a grey cardigan.
- John Nevins wears a white shirt, brown tie, and brown shoes. He has a brown overcoat over the top of his indoor clothes. He wears a light-coloured jacket which has patches on the elbows. He carries a leather briefcase.
- Millie Davis wears a coral two-piece suit, with black patent heeled shoes, a white and black hat, and a white chunky pearl necklace. She carries a white handbag. In Act Two she wears a brown fur coat, with a white belted jacket and black skirt underneath. Later, she wears black silk trousers and a black camisole under her white jacket. She wears black boots with a low heel.
- Judy Sears' costume comprises of a blue frock-style coat, under which is a white blouse and full skirt with a black belt. She has an orange scarf around her neck (kerchief style), and she carries a colourful straw bag. She has a pink collared cardigan with embroidered flowers. Her shoes are lace-up Oxfords, worn with white bobby socks. In Act Two she wears a black A-line cape-style coat over skinny fitted checked trousers and a russet sweater under a black cardigan.
- Sheldon's costume includes a brown suit and coat, with white and brown shoes and a mustard-coloured bow tie. In Act two he wears brown trousers and a light-yellow waistcoat and a checked jacket.
- Manners wears a white shirt and brown trousers, with a brown patterned tie and a paisley scarf. He wears a brown overcoat when he arrives. The script describes Manners as "a well-tweed product of Hollywood". In Act Two, Manners wears

a tweed blazer over a blue sweater, white shirt, and dark red tie. He has 1950s horn-rimmed glasses and wears grey socks and black lace up shoes.

- Eddie wears clothes of various shades of brown, including a checked black and brown jacket, and a patterned mustard brown jumper.
- At the beginning of Act Two, Bill wears a grey waistcoat and trousers with a cream jacket and a brown bow tie.
- There are several wigs in this production.
- Wiletta wears her hair formally, in curls and a chignon.
- Judy has a bob with curled ends and a fringe.



# Production Notes

## Key design Elements: Lighting

- At the beginning of the play there is a working 'ghost light' – a light that is left on all the time in a theatre so that the stage is not in complete darkness. It is then followed by a light chase sequence of spotlights in blue and warm yellow.
- In the earlier scenes of the play, a warm orange wash lights the stage.
- There is a sequence from 01.34.00 where moving lights and chase sequences suggest the passing of time.
- During Wiletta's monologue at the end of the play, a soft-focused spotlight is used on her as she sits on the edge of the stage.



# Production Notes

## Key design Elements: Sound

- During the opening moments there is jazz/blues style music that is played. At the beginning of the play we hear chimes, a drone note and various vocalisations to create the initial atmosphere.
- The recorded sound of theatre applause is used early in the play. We also hear the sound effects that are used in the rehearsals – for example, barking dogs, the sound of crickets at night. Later in Act Two we hear backstage announcements, calling actors to the stage, underscored by pizzicato string sounds and percussive beats.
- At the end of the play, we hear recorded applause again, which increases in volume as Wiletta stands on top of the stage in the closing moments of the performance.
- Percussion is used to create atmosphere – a drum brush underscore happens underneath a conversation between Wiletta and Judy, for example.



# Production Notes

## Performance Style

- Notice the pauses and repetitions which reveal the underlying tensions between the characters. At points this becomes a little heightened, in keeping with the subtitle of the play, 'A Comedy-Drama in Two Acts'. The play is a satire, and so there are moments in which the audience are forced to face difficult truths about the society in which they, and the characters, live.
- One of the issues that is being explored in *Trouble in Mind* is the stereotyping and typecasting of characters from different racial backgrounds. You will see these being heightened and satirized, particularly in Act Two as rehearsals begin. Notice too, how Wileta responds to Manners in a blend of trying to challenge him but also treading carefully in not wanting to upset him – underlining one of the playwright's main points about race relations in society.



# Production Notes

## Key Moments

- Watch from the beginning, when we are introduced to Wiletta and Henry, followed by Wiletta's advice to John Nevins which ends at 00.12.11. This is an important scene in which we begin to understand the racial issues that the play will deal with.
- Manners begins to direct the actors at 00.25.00, and we watch the acting of the other characters in response to his instructions. Various tensions emerge. The extract ends 00.35.07.
- The play's discussion of lynching begins at 00.49.50 and the scene continues until 00.56.30. Listen, too, to the use of recorded music at the end of the act.
- Manners continues directing, this time the Third Act from 1.10.45 until 01.19.06. Notice how the audience responds to the way in which the plot and acting style is being encouraged by Manners.
- Manners' patronising approach to Wiletta is particularly pertinent from 01.21.09 and becomes increasingly offensive with his clumsy and blinkered opinions. Sheldon then describes a lynching - **content warning for explicit descriptions** - the section ends at 01.30.41.
- Manners and Wiletta have more conflict from 01.41.04, discussing her role and the plot of the play. Wiletta explains the way in which black people have been forced into playing stereotyped character roles. Manners loses all company sympathy in his speech about his own son. Watch until the end of the performance (02.05.05) to see how the implications of what Manners has said become clear, and in particular, how Wiletta responds.

# Plot Synopsis with Timecodes

**(00:03:09)**

A woman enters after knocking on stage door for some time, she is followed by an older man holding keys. “My Lord, I like to have wore my arm off bangin’ on that door! What you got it locked for?” She exclaims. The older man defends his innocent mistake “I didn’t hear a thing... I didn’t know...” She brushes the moment off by taking in the stage. The man realises he recognises the woman as being Wiletta Mayer, a performer who used to sing at the Galy Theatre two decades ago, where he once was an electrician. He introduces himself as Henry and the ice is broken as they joke together about their ages before Henry leaves.

**(00:06:23)**

As Wiletta takes the stage singing a snatch of a song from her yesteryear, John enters, catching Wiletta in her private moment. After introductions, she realises John is the son of an old school friend from her hometown. Wiletta had once met John as a baby in a carriage.

**(00:11.28)**

After expressing to Wiletta that he plans to make it big in theatre, Wiletta takes John under her wing and begins explaining to him how to navigate ‘show business’ as a Black actor “White folks can’t stand unhappy negroes... so laugh, laugh when it ain’t funny at all”. John refutes suggesting that Wiletta’s ways sound ‘Uncle Tommish’. Wiletta does not take too kindly too this and suggests their white counterparts do the same but they call it being a ‘yes man’.

**(00:13.28)**

Millie makes a grand entrance to the room anticipating a warm response, and she does: “Walk, girl, don’t she look good?” Wiletta is encouraging as Millie parades the room and greets the two. The pair have a mock rivalry dynamic and provoke each other as Judy enters followed by Sheldon. Judy is noticeably the outsider and eventually connects with John who rescues her from Millie’s wrath. The room quickly becomes alive with banter, as the company get acquainted and discuss their thoughts on the play that they will be rehearsing. Wiletta and Millie go along with whatever opinion Judy has of the play - demonstrating the ‘Tommin’ Wiletta earlier discussed with John.

**(00:20.15)**

As the actors get settled, the director Al Manners, followed closely by Eddie the stage manager, enter and it’s clear Manners has been berating Eddie. He pokes fun at Eddie in front of the company. The company quickly assemble ready to greet Manners and there’s mutual admiration between director and actors. Manners sends Henry on a coffee and pastry run; shrugging off Sheldon’s suggestion for jelly doughnuts and instead requests Danishes.

**(00:21.14)**

Manners shows the company a plan of the set design for the show. As they all gather round the table to admire the design, Manners get close to Judy who recoils back once sensing him in her personal space. Judy’s reaction gives everyone pause to which Manners laughs it off “You wear a beautiful dress in the third act and wanted to see if you have nice shoulder. I wasn’t planning to attack you”. The moment passes as mutual flattery ensues in the room between Manners and the company, particularly between Manners and Wiletta who have worked together in the past, similarly with Sheldon. John, as a newcomer, is introduced to Manners as someone who played a small role as a child in Porgy and Bess. Manners believes he recollects, unknowingly to him, the story was a lie. Judy tries to impress Manners by sharing she studied at Yale university, the response is lukewarm. Manners eventually settles the room ready for work.

**(00:24.17)**

Manners explains to the actors why the playwright has written the play they are rehearsing, *Chaos in Bellville*. “What’s in the headlines these days?” Manners asks, to which Sheldon brings up the bus boycotts in Montgomery Alabama. A debate ensues between the company, particularly Judy and Millie about the boycotts whilst Manners continues but fails to keep the conversation on track. Finally, Manners snaps at Judy “Yale, please” which instantly quietens the actors.

**(00:26.20)**

Manners instructs the actors to open their script to a point in the play. He scrunches up a piece of paper and throws it downstage and instructs Wiletta to pick it up. When Sheldon and John volunteer to pick it up, Manners demands that Wiletta should be the one to do it. Wiletta initially thinks it’s all a joke and then in a flare of temper snaps “Well, hell! I ain’t the damn janitor!” embarrassed, she tries to laugh off her outburst and after an awkward pause in the room, she relents and sorrowfully goes to pick up the paper. Before her hand can get it, Manners calls ‘cut!’ and explains that what the room had witnessed is an acting exercise in truthfulness of reactions. The company are relieved whilst Wiletta is still agitated.

**(00:29.21)**

Manners instructs the actors to begin rehearsing a scene from *Chaos in Belleville*. The acting leans towards melodrama and the character tropes of the era. Judy pauses the rehearsal to ask Manners whether she must use a racially offensive word written in the script. Manners turns to the Black actors in the room, whilst Sheldon and Wiletta deflect in answering the question, John articulates; “I don’t like the word but it is used, it’s a slice of life”. The response satisfies Manners, to which he proceeds with the scene.

**(00:35.50)**

After an occasionally tense start to the rehearsal, Manners calls for a tea break as Henry enters with coffee and pastries. Henry brings jelly doughnuts instead of Danishes, which Manners refuses to eat. He shouts, “Take your coffee and leave”. Once again, the actors are visibly stunned by the interaction. A call comes in that Eddie picks up, it’s Manners’ ex-wife. Before Manners goes to take the call, he scolds Eddie for not screening the call. Seeing the embarrassment on Eddie’s face, Millie encourages Wiletta to cheer Eddie up, she offers him a doughnut, and this breaks the tension. They all discuss their recent summer plans. Judy, trying to fit in begins talking about her parents and the racial inequality, her attempts fall flat with Wiletta and Millie.

**(00:42.44)**

As the rehearsal recommences, Manners directs Wiletta to sing a mournful song from the play. After Wiletta sings a verse, he prompts her to share what her characters’ motivation was, when Wiletta can’t answer to his satisfaction, he insists on doing a word association game to direct her. Manners uses the words “Montgomery”, “Coloured”, “children” and “killing” to which Wiletta responds “Alabama”, “Lights changin’ colors all around me”, “Pick up that paper” and “It’s the man’s theatre, the man’s money, so what you gonna do?” Manners becomes frustrated at Wiletta’s responses which are clearly not what he wanted. When the reluctant and equally frustrated Wiletta is then prompted to sing the verse again, she bellows the song angrily, exhausted, and humiliated. With the mood in the room tense, Manners calls a break and he, Eddie and Judy exit, leaving John, Millie, Wiletta and Sheldon to debrief and bicker about the morning’s rehearsal.

**(00:51.30)**

Sheldon and Wiletta now alone, Sheldon attempts to shrug off the younger cast members arguments: “You and me, we don’t mind taking low ‘cause we tryin’ to

accomplish somethin'. Now offended by this sentiment, she dismisses Sheldon: "I mind, I do mind... I mind". Sheldon leaves the room, leaving Wiletta to sit in her feelings.

**(00:52.40)**

Wiletta now alone in the empty theatre, Henry stumbles across her crying. He shares his anger over the prior altercation he had with Manners, over the jelly doughnuts. This softens Wiletta and the two share stories of the Home Rule and the 'soft shoe step'. The pair dance side by side doing the soft shoe step. Wiletta breaks down; "Every damn body pushin' me off the face of the earth! I want to be an actress". It occurs to her on the wind of a song in her mind that she *can* be: "Hell, I'm gonna be one, you hear me?" she takes her script and coat and exits leaving Henry to lock up.

## **Act 2**

**(01.00.15)**

Bill rehearses a monologue from the play in front of Manners as Eddie cues in canned applause. Once the speech has finished, Manners asks Bill to mingle more with the rest of the cast expressing "Unity in this company is very important". Bill responds about preferring to eat lunch alone because of his ulcer.

**(01.06.44)**

Wiletta enters with renewed energy. She has spent time reading the script and "justifying" her characters' actions. She recites "The third act is not the natural outcome of the first" which was suggested to her by her neighbour Miss Green who puts on plays in their local church. Manners brushes Wiletta off; "Make me a solemn promise, don't start thinking".

**(01.09.00)**

Bill spots in the newspaper a friend of Manners, Gary Brewer, is going into a new show after being under a 'Hollywood investigation'. Manners dismisses the idea that he and

Gary were ever acquainted. There's tension in the air as the company file in, discussions about the McCarthy allegations and being 'named' are quickly hushed.

**(01.11.26)**

Judy arrives with a new air of confidence; John also has a new swaggering spring in his step which surprises the older cast members. Wiletta steps between conversations where Sheldon and Millie talk about mutual friends passing away whilst Manners, Judy, John and Bill banter about the talent of actors in the industry.

**(01.12.51)**

They begin rehearsing act three of *Chaos in Bellville*. Throughout the rehearsal, Wiletta is not her usual self, visibly struggling to deliver with her usual commitment, unlike the rest of the cast. As the scene is rehearsed, Manners is active in directing her and re-directing of the actors. Occasionally, Wiletta attempts to get the attention of Manners to ask a question but is dismissed.

**(01.21.07)**

The scene ends and everyone stands down. Once the bustle of the room settles, Manners throws around notes to the actors and runs through the plot of act three for Sheldon who has only been paying attention to his own lines. Wiletta has been keenly waiting to discuss her character with Manners, which when he finally does get round to her, she blurts "You don't ever listen to me". Eventually Manners kneels in front of Wiletta and gesticulates: "You are pretending to act, and I can see through your pretence. I want truth". Wiletta queries the messaging of the text. Manners responds, "We're dealing with simple, backward people but they're human beings". Wiletta, John, Sheldon and Millie all look at Manners quizzically "Cause they colored you tellin' me they're human beins'... I know I'm a human bein'" Wiletta retorts. The room breaks out into a chaos as tension surfaces until Sheldon snaps for quiet in the room.

**(01.27.00)**

Manners, in an angry rant, describes what the characters' emotions are in the scene. He states how fortunate everyone is to not have witnessed the things the characters in the play have, such as a lynching. Sheldon utters that he has indeed seen a lynching. In a hasty moment, Manners encourages Sheldon to share his story with the group to perhaps help Wiletta understand her character. Sheldon does share the story, and is thrown back to that incident, which makes him panic when Bill touches his shoulder. In an instant, Manners calls for lunch. Everyone still reeling from Sheldon's story, Eddie asks: "Makes my blood boil, but what can you do?" Manners responds, "We're doing a play". As Millie and Judy try to lift the mood discussing lunch, there is still an air of discontent as Wiletta pleads with Manners to change her character's lines.

**(01.34.45)**

As everyone files out to lunch Wiletta pulls John aside remorsefully "You right, don't make sense to be bowin' and scrapin' and tommin'...No, don't pay attention to what I said". Posturing, without regard to Wiletta's seriousness, John jovially pacifies "I love you madly and I think you're wonderfully magnificent!" and exits. Meanwhile, Judy, who witnessed the whole event is suddenly disenchanted with John's, and her own, posturing. Wiletta takes a moment to rehearse her lines until she eventually gives in and leaves.

**Act 2, Scene 2**

**(01.36.10)**

The stage moves, time passes, and we hear Stage Manager beginners calls, round of applause, soundbites of various productions in the theatre.

**(01.37.50)**

The company returns from lunch. Bill enters first, followed by Manners and Eddie. It seems Bill made a joke a lunch that Manners and Eddie didn't feel was appropriate.

Sheldon, John, Millie and Judy return in high spirits. Judy tipsily apologises for calling him a puppet. When she gets a little too handsy with Manners, he suggests she get a coffee to sober up.

### **(01.40.05)**

Wiletta enters. She proclaims that she wants to speak to Manners after the rehearsal. The company pick up the scene where they last left off, this time Wiletta forcefully and pointedly articulating her lines, much to Manner's dismay. She eventually breaks out the scene "This aint sayin' nothin', doesn't make sense... I don't believe this...I'm his mother and I'm sending him to his death. This is a lie". Manners insists that the roles he has given Wiletta in the past, have been good, and they haven't been stereotypical mammy roles, to which Wiletta begins listing the roles she, and others like her, have had to play that aren't in fact well rounded or believable characters. Bill interjects that he also has played questionable roles to which she responds "...That's your stereotype. Suit yourself but I'm sicka mine. I'm full, my cup runneth over".

### **(01.49.20)**

Both Wiletta and Manners go head-to-head trying to get the other to see reason. Wiletta finally declares "You don't want to hear, you are a prejudiced man, a prejudice racist". The room freezes. Manners explodes in a rant stating he knows about struggle. He eventually admits "The public is not ready to see you the way you want to be seen". Wiletta finally asks again, "Would you send your son out to be murdered?" Manners furiously explodes "Don't compare yourself to me!" In that moment both he and the company realise the gravitas of what he has said. Manners leaves, with Eddie following. The company bicker amongst themselves about how the whole moment should have been handled and the next steps, Wiletta defending herself. The company toy with the idea that they may be now out of work.

### **(02.00.28)**

Once notified by Eddie that the rehearsal has been called to an end for the day, the company decide to head to a café to discuss things further. Wiletta stays behind, and

when she thinks they have all left, she bursts into tears. Once again, Henry spots her crying and asks her what is troubling her. Wiletta explains that she thinks she won't be called for the next day, but she will show up anyway to see what Manners will do. Wiletta proclaims, "I've always wanted to do somethin' real grand... in the theatre... stand forth at my best... to stand up here and do anything I want..." Henry asks her to recite a chapter from the bible for him to which she obliges and recites Psalm 133. When she's finished, Henry puts on the canned applause machine, pats Wiletta on the shoulder and leaves. Wiletta gets a notion which brings her to her feet. With almighty strength, Wiletta pushes the stage further forward singlehanded. She takes centre stage as the applause from the machine grows and soaks it in, a smile spreads across her face, and she begins to extend her arms wide with a joyful laugh.

**THE END**

# Suggestions for Further Activity

- You can find out more about Alice Childress and *Trouble In Mind* online, starting here:  
<https://www.historymatterscelebratingwomensplaysofthepast.org/plays/view/Trouble-In-Mind/>
- Read this review from *The Guardian* after you have watched the production. To what extent do you agree with the criticisms about “the comic exaggerations undercutting rather than compounding the tension”? Do you think, for example, that sometimes comedy can be the most effective way of making an important political point? <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/dec/10/trouble-in-mind-review-national-theatre>
- Other plays deal with issues surrounding race and who’s right and responsibility it is to tell people’s stories. Winsome Pinnock’s *Rockets and Blue Lights* (which is available on the NT Collection) examines the role of art and heritage in perpetuating or challenging historical narrative. The musical *Hamilton* also asks these important questions in its performance style, casting, and lyrical content.

# Find out More

## Watch

An Introduction to Alice Childress: Nancy Medina and Tanya Moodie on the American Playwright

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ERqLFxiEg>

"You think it's funny?" Rehearsing Change: Comedy and Irony in Trouble in Mind by Alice Childress

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvK0y1kagbY>

The Invisible Wall of Opportunity: Tanya Moodie on Acting

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0s1OIIMSJ9c>

## Learning Hub

You can find more resources for schools and teachers on the National Theatre's Learning Hub. Search by key stage, subject, theatrical style or practitioner and discover an ever-growing library of short films, learning guides and digital exhibitions. Find out more: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/learn-explore/schools/teacher-resources/>

## National Theatre Archive

More materials relating to the production including the costume bible, poster, prompt scripts, programme, stage management reports and more are held at the National Theatre Archive, which is free to visit.

Find out more: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/archive>

We hope that you have enjoyed watching and studying **Trouble in Mind**. Don't forget that there are many more fantastic productions to explore as part of the NT Collection. We hope that watching this recorded production has made you feel inspired to see and make live theatre. [Why not find out what's happening at your local theatre and how you can get involved?](#)

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**Thank you**