

**BY THE WAY,  
MEET VERA  
STARK**

**BY LYNN NOTTAGE**



**DRAMATISTS  
PLAY SERVICE  
INC.**

BY THE WAY, MEET VERA STARK  
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Produced by Second Stage Theatre, New York, 2011  
(Carole Rothman, Artistic Director).

Originally commissioned and developed by  
South Coast Repertory and Center Stage.

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BY THE WAY, MEET VERA STARK was originally produced by Second Stage Theatre (Carole Rothman, Artistic Director; Casey Reitz, Executive Director) in New York City, opening on May 9, 2011. It was directed by Jo Bonney; the set design was by Neil Patel; the costume design was by ESosa; the lighting design was by Jeff Croiter; the sound design was by John Gromada; the film of *The Belle of New Orleans* was by Tony Gerber; the dialect coach was Stephen Gabis; the projections were by Shawn Sagady; the production stage manager was Lori Ann Zepp; the associate artistic director was Christopher Burney; the production manager was Jeff Wild; and the general manager was Don-Scott Cooper. The cast was as follows:

VERA STARK . . . . . Sanaa Lathan  
GLORIA MITCHELL . . . . . Stephanie J. Block  
LOTTIE/CARMEN . . . . . Kimberly Hébert Gregory  
ANNA MAE/AFUA ASSATA EJOBO . . . . . Karen Olivo  
LEROY BARKSDALE/HERB FORRESTER . . . . Daniel Breaker  
FREDRICK SLASVICK/BRAD DONOVAN . . . . David Garrison  
MAXMILLIAN VON OSTER/  
PETER RHYS-DAVIES . . . . . Kevin Isola

BY THE WAY, MEET VERA STARK received its West Coast premiere at the Geffen Playhouse on September 18, 2012. It was directed by Jo Bonney; the set design was by Neil Patel; the costume design was by Esosa; the lighting design was by Jeff Croiter; the sound design was by John Gromada; and the film of *The Belle of New Orleans* was by Tony Gerber. The cast was as follows:

VERA STARK . . . . . Sanaa Lathan  
GLORIA MITCHELL . . . . . Amanda Detmer  
LOTTIE/CARMEN . . . . . Kimberly Hébert Gregory  
ANNA MAE/AFUA ASSATA EJOBBO . . . . . Merle Dandridge  
LEROY BARKSDALE/HERB FORRESTER . . . . . Kevin T. Carroll  
FREDRICK SLASVICK/BRAD DONOVAN . . . . . Spencer Garrett  
MAXMILLIAN VON OSTER/  
PETER RHYS-DAVIES . . . . . Mather Zickel

## **CHARACTERS**

VERA STARK

GLORIA MITCHELL

LEROY BARKSDALE/HERB FORRESTER \*

LOTTIE McBRIDE/CARMEN LEVY-GREEN \*

ANNA MAE SIMPKINS/AFUA ASSATA EJOBBO \*

MR. SLASVICK/BRAD DONOVAN \*

MAXMILLIAN VON OSTER/PETER RHYS-DAVIES \*

\* Characters should always be double cast.

## **SETTING**

Hollywood, 1933, 1973, 2003.

## **NOTE**

In the tradition of the screwball comedies of the 1930s, Act One should be very fast-paced, whimsical and always buoyant. Breathless. Act Two should be no less fast-paced, but should reflect the comic sensibilities of 1973 and 2003.

// indicates places where dialogue overlaps.

For the final act of the play please visit [www.meetverastark.com](http://www.meetverastark.com)  
and [www.findingverastark.com](http://www.findingverastark.com)

# BY THE WAY, MEET VERA STARK

## ACT ONE

### Scene 1

*A living room. Deco stylish. Hollywood, 1933.*

*Gloria Mitchell, 28, "white" starlet, in a dressing gown, lies across the couch nursing a healthy glass of gin.*

*Vera Stark, 28, an African-American beauty wearing a maid's uniform, tentatively enters. She pauses, then ventures to speak.*

VERA. *(With Southern accent.)* Mis', Mr. Lafayette here to see ya. *(Gloria registers shock and dismay.)*

GLORIA. *(With sweet girlish Southern accent.)* Tell him I'm not here. I can't bear to face him, not like this, not now, not after all that has happened.

VERA. But, he already know ya here. Dat rascal Cassius dun tol' him.

GLORIA. Tell him to go. Tell him I'm sleeping. Tell him anything. I can't. No. No. I don't want to see him.

VERA. He ain't want me to say, but he missing ya sum'ting awful —

GLORIA. Oh, won't you tell him to go already! *(Vera reluctantly turns to leave.)* Wait. *(Tenderly.)* Does he look well?

VERA. He look real good, Mis'. *(Gloria smiles, wrestling with what to say.)*

GLORIA. Did he bring azaleas?

VERA. You know he always do. (*Gloria gasps dramatically.*)

GLORIA. And does he know? Did you tell him I'm dying? (*Gloria coughs.*)

VERA. I don't know, what he know. But I do know dat he here. Miss, dat man out dere love you. And if you send him away now, it gonna be a real shame. Ya can't keep hiding from de worl'. Talk to him, tell him how ya feel. Tell him ya love him. 'Cause ya and I know dere ain't no other man in your heart but him.

GLORIA. How do you put up with me? (*Gloria reaches out for Vera's hand.*)

VERA. Mis', whatcha want me to tell him? (*A long pause, Gloria is thinking.*) Whatcha want me to tell him? (*Another long pause. Irritated.*) Whatcha want me to tell him?

GLORIA. (*Dropping the southern accent.*) Oh damn. What the hell am I supposed to tell him? (*Vera stares at Gloria, then consults the film script tucked away in her apron.*) Oh, give me the line already ...

VERA. Tell him —

GLORIA. Wait! (*Gloria presses her fingers to her forehead, finally — With accent. Excited.*) Tell him to remember me on that warm summer —

VERA. (*Correcting.*) Spring —

GLORIA. — Day we went boating on the bayou. I was wearing that blue —

VERA. (*Correcting.*) Violet.

GLORIA. Sweater —

VERA. (*Correcting.*) Cardigan.

GLORIA. (*Exasperated — dropping accent.*) Oh God, how am I supposed to remember these lines? They just pour out of my head like water. I reach for them and they're gone. It's impossible. I can't do it. (*Gloria stands theatrically.*) These words. "Sweater." "Cardigan." Who gives a goddamn? The woman is dying, why does she have to make so many speeches about it?

VERA. Because that's what's written, honey. And as you know, the writer likes for you to say what's written. That's how it works.

GLORIA. Oh, I know that. Don't you think I know that? (*Vera snatches the glass out of Gloria's hand, and sniffs it.*)

VERA. Gin? Now, let's do it again. (*Gloria snatches the glass back.*)

GLORIA. The indignity, really! Why should I have to screen test for this film? I've played this role, I practically invented it. Tragic

Jane with consumption, Lydia with the hole in her fragile heart, and who can forget poor stupid little Maybelle who was slowly being poisoned by her diabolical, but “winsome” husband.

VERA. Yes, we know! But honey, this is different. It’s Marie, (*Grandly.*) “the Belle of New Orleans.” I don’t have to tell you, every actress with halfway good teeth wants this role. And believe me, they’ll do whatever it takes to get it. (*Vera suggestively wipes the corners of her mouth, and slaps her butt.*)

GLORIA. Hussies, I bet they will. Shame on them.

VERA. Now c’mon, pull yourself together, won’t ya. And remember what Maestro used to say in New York.

GLORIA. Yeah, yeah, the king of the pratfall dispensing wisdom like pellets of cyanide.

VERA. Then, never mind. I have a half-dozen things I can be doing. (*Vera ventures to leave.*)

GLORIA. Where are you going? Vera! Vera! Vera! (*Gloria grabs the script.*) Okay, okay. Wait. Yes, I love him, but all I can think about is “boating on the bayou,” and how utterly ridiculous that sounds. (*Gloria tosses the script.*)

VERA. Then, missie, think about the fact that you’ll be working with the most important director in pictures.

GLORIA. Important? Von Omelette or whatever his name is, the man barely speaks English. Important? Says who?

VERA. Says the people who pay for all of this. The studio. Your agent. Everyone! But who are they?

GLORIA. Oh blah, blah, blah. I don’t want to hear anymore.

VERA. I’m not gonna argue with you, honey. Tick-tock, it’s already one o’clock.

GLORIA. (*Panicked.*) What? No, no. It ... It can’t be.

VERA. Tick-tock. One-oh-one.

GLORIA. No. No, it can’t be. Won’t you call Alfred and have him put this off until tomorrow. I’m not ready. Tell him I have a fever, I’m —

VERA. Ready or not, you’re due at the studio in an hour, and we haven’t even gotten you dressed yet. Remember what Alfred said, there won’t be a next time if you don’t show up on time.

GLORIA. (*Overly dramatic.*) You’re being overly dramatic. You’re making me nervous. I’m feeling faint. (*Gloria makes a dramatic show of growing faint. Vera is unmoved.*)

VERA. If you’re late, don’t blame it on me. And I shouldn’t really say —



GLORIA. (*Suddenly alert.*) What?

VERA. Oh nothing, there's just been some talk.

GLORIA. Talk? Who? // What are they saying? (*Vera actively ignores Gloria, who does her best to pretend she doesn't care.*)

VERA. I promised myself I wouldn't —

GLORIA. Oh, don't be coy. Spill it! (*Vera holds out the dish of chocolates. Gloria digs into the dish and bites into a chocolate.*) Mmmm.

VERA. Well, it seems people at the studio have been gossiping, and ... and —

GLORIA. And?

VERA. And —

GLORIA. And? Yes? (*Gloria grabs another chocolate from the dish, and pops the chocolate into her mouth.*)

VERA. They're questioning when, if ever, you'll lose the baby fat. (*Gloria sucks in her gut and spits out the chocolate.*)

GLORIA. Ha! The nerve of them. I'll have you know some women wear baby fat well into their thirties.

VERA. But it appears you're wearing it rather more comfortably than they'd like. Umm-hmm.

GLORIA. How dare them! (*Gloria lights a cigarette and regains her composure. Vera drapes a glamorous green gown over the couch.*) Baby fat?! I'm not the least bit bothered. Well, I don't care! I'm "America's Little Sweetie Pie." *Photoplay* called me one of the most beautiful "young" starlets on the scene.

VERA. Yeah, swell article, honey. I remember reading it five years ago.

GLORIA. Don't talk to me! Don't you dare talk to me! Honestly. And I've told you I'm not wearing the green dress. I wore that to an opening three weeks ago, and everyone made such an awful fuss. It will seem redundant. Oh, bring me the red dress already.

VERA. The red makes you look coquettish.

GLORIA. Coquettish? Where ever did you learn that word? (*Vera smiles with a sense of satisfaction.*)

VERA. Did you read the script?

GLORIA. Of course I did! ... Well, I read my lines.

VERA. If you'd bothered to read the entire script, you'd know that Marie's not supposed to appear "coquettish."

GLORIA. Who cares? I think the red says warmth and fire.

VERA. Or that you're horny and desperate.

GLORIA. So?

VERA. You're playing a dying virgin.

GLORIA. (*Beneath her breath.*) All the more reason to be horny and desperate, don't you think?

VERA. Then do what you'd like. I'll go "fetch" the red dress. (*Vera makes a show of leaving.*)

GLORIA. Whatever is the matter with you?

VERA. How much time do you got?

GLORIA. Oh, what are you prattling on about?

VERA. Um ... did you —

GLORIA. Yes?

VERA. Mention —

GLORIA. What?

VERA. Well, the role of Tilly, you said they're casting Tilly the maid, and, and, and, you know, well, I know the role and —

GLORIA. And, and, and, you know. What are you asking?

VERA. You promised you'd put in a word with the studio.

GLORIA. Oh Vera, I have so many things to worry about. Why on earth are you bothering me with this?

VERA. Never mind. I'll go "fetch" the dress.

GLORIA. Oh boo-hoo. Sometimes it would do you a bit of good to remember the distance you've travelled from there to here.

VERA. You'll never let me forget, honey. Will you? And you might remember there's a lot I could say about your daddy, my mother's —

GLORIA. Then say it already and let's be done with it.

VERA. Is that what you really want? (*Gloria rolls her eyes and pretends to be unfazed.*)

GLORIA. Enough, Vera. I'm tense as it is. And really, no one has ever been a hundred percent sure he was my daddy.

VERA. And what exactly does that say about your mother? (*Gloria feigns shock. Gasps.*)

GLORIA. Vera Stark, you're wearing far too much wicked this morning.

VERA. Oh, hush your mouth, and go put on this dress. (*Gloria feigns exhaustion.*)

GLORIA. (*Truthfully.*) I'm feeling rather fragile, would you mind being a little kinder to me? Darling. Friends?

VERA. I'm all hugs and kisses. I adore you, really. (*Vera gives Gloria a perfunctory hug.*) There! Now, honey, whatcha want me to tell him?

GLORIA. (*Affecting an emotional Southern accent.*) Tell him to

# BY THE WAY, MEET VERA STARK

## by Lynn Nottage

3M, 4W (doubling)

In a new comedy from the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright of *Ruined*, Lynn Nottage draws upon the screwball films of the 1930s to take a funny and irreverent look at racial stereotypes in Hollywood. *BY THE WAY, MEET VERA STARK* is a seventy-year journey through the life of Vera Stark, a headstrong African-American maid and budding actress, and her tangled relationship with her boss, a white Hollywood star desperately grasping to hold on to her career. When circumstances collide and both women land roles in the same Southern epic, the story behind the cameras leaves Vera with a surprising and controversial legacy scholars will debate for years to come.

*"That this show is so informed and incisive while being wildly entertaining may be Nottage's biggest achievement here: In a way, she's beaten Hollywood at its own game."*  
—The New York Post

*"A satisfying screwball comedy in which Nottage uses stereotypes to expose them, tapping into a current of rueful emotion beneath the surface."*  
—Vogue

*"[Nottage's] play has fangs. It gnaws at racial typecasting and at smarty-pants who build myths and think they understand all there is to know about someone by reviewing films."*  
—The New York Daily News

*"VERA STARK breezes by with the playfulness of a Russian nesting doll, each image reflecting on the previous ones while entertaining on its own."*  
—New York Newsday

### Also by Lynn Nottage

CRUMBS FROM THE TABLE OF JOY  
INTIMATE APPAREL  
RUINED  
and many others

DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC.

