

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As a playwright, I prefer to let the “play” inform me of the title. Normally, the first draft is completed before the play is titled. Such was the case with *No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs*. In my naïveté, I never thought the title would cause such a brouhaha. So, needless to say, I was taken aback when I was asked to consider changing it for the then-upcoming premiere at the Philadelphia Theatre Company.

At first, I could not understand the controversy. This was not something I had made up. This title (sign) was a part of our history, not a very endearing part, but a part of American history nonetheless. It took me a while to gather my thoughts, which included thinking of a new title. After a lot of thought and support from colleagues and friends, such as playwright Romulus Linney, singer/actor Larry Gaitlin, who informed me that he would come up from Austin, Texas, and “kick [my] big behind if [I] changed that title,” and Eugene O’Neill biographers Arthur and Barbara Gelb, I decided to stick with it, to the chagrin of a few people. Another contributing factor was, during the writing of the first draft of *No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs*, I was blessed to be reading *Trouble in Mind* by Leon F. Litwack. In his book about the Jim Crow South, Mr. Litwack draws attention to other signs (in various forms) that peppered the South during that period. (Since the beginning of the “controversy” about the title, people of all ethnicities have been volunteering information about seeing such a sign, or variations thereof.) This is when I realized how much of the history of African-Americans the title represented.

However, what had the greatest impact on my decision was the comfort and confidence I garnered from a lot of prayer over the matter. That is when the sign became the title. Because of my belief that a creation, any creation, is imbued with its own spirituality, its own soul, I believe that the title is an inexorable part of the soul of this play. In this particular case, the title is also a part of my personal history; therefore, if I deny the title, I deny my personal history, my experience, my memories, which, I believe, is tantamount to negating myself.

In the early 1960s, during my travels throughout the South and the Midwest, on the outskirts of a Mississippi town, I first saw the sign “No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs.” At that time I had no way of knowing the enduring effect that sign would have on my psyche. It was not that I had not seen these badges of “Jim Crowism” before on trips from Brooklyn, New York, to my parents home state of North Carolina almost every summer of my childhood; but this sign, which somehow seemed more despicable, lay quiescent in the recesses of my mind. Years later, while in graduate school, I came across a picture of the sign in a magazine (to this day I chide myself for having not recorded the name, volume, etc., of the magazine, as we historians are taught. For I have been searching for that magazine and that picture since the summer of 2000, to no avail).

As mentioned above, when confronted with the controversy over the title, it took me by surprise. Then I came to realize that most of the concern was deriving from the white sector of our society. (That is not to say that some African-Americans did not have a problem with the title, but to my knowledge, they have been far and few between.) While in Pittsburgh to give a speech, I was mentioning the problem a lot of white people were having with the title to an African-American woman who owned an art gallery. I reiterated to her that I felt the title was part of my/our history. She very succinctly told me that what I did not realize is that “the sign is part of their (whites) history, too, of which they do not like to be reminded.”

The Philadelphia Theatre Company, while supporting my decision not to change the title, had to come up with some “creative marketing” to sell the play. A very good friend and supporter of mine, Ms. Marolyn Bailey of Philadelphia, suggested that the script be sent to various African-American organizations. As a result of Ms. Bailey’s suggestion, endorsements and sponsorships for the play, with title intact, were garnered from the Philadelphia branch of the NAACP; The Black Clergy Alliance of Philadelphia; WDAS FM radio and the Philadelphia *Tribune*, to name only a few. All affixed their logo to the flyer and poster. However, total

vindication came for me when the best endorsement a playwright can get was bestowed upon the play, and that was the endorsement of my biggest critic, the audience.

My personal writing philosophy is to write from a foundation of love, about the triumph of the human spirit. Thus, for those who have a problem with the title, for those who think the play is an angry play because of the title, the audiences in Philadelphia have asserted that with *No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs*, I have been true to my philosophy for writing. It's a play about love ... title notwithstanding.

—*John Henry Redwood*