



# A FREE MAN OF COLOR

BY JOHN GUARE



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Originally commissioned by The Public Theater.  
Original Broadway production by Lincoln Center Theater, New York City, 2010.

*For  
George C. Wolfe who put it into motion,  
André Bishop and Bernard Gersten who made it happen,  
and Adele C-T who gave it the spirit.*

A FREE MAN OF COLOR was commissioned by The Public Theater and produced on Broadway by Lincoln Center Theater at the Vivian Beaumont, New York, New York, under the direction of André Bishop and Bernard Gersten, opening in December 2010. It was directed by George C. Wolfe; the set design was by David Rockwell; the costume design was by Ann Hould-Ward; the lighting design was by Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer; the sound design was by Scott Stauffer; the original music was by Jeanine Tesori; and the choreography was by Hope Clarke. The cast was as follows:

JACQUES CORNET ..... Jeffrey Wright  
 CUPIDON MURMUR,  
 TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE ..... Mos Def  
 DR. TOUBIB ..... Joseph Marcell  
 REMY DORILANTE, JAMES MONROE ..... Arnie Burton  
 JONATHAN SPARKS,  
 MAJOR WALTER REED ..... Brian Reddy  
 LORD SIDNEY HARCOURT, LECLERC'S CAPTAIN,  
 GEORGES FEYDEAU ..... Robert Stanton  
 ACHILLE ALCIBIADE ..... David Emerson Toney  
 MME. MANDRAGOLA, DOÑA POLISSENA,  
 ROBERT LIVINGSTON ..... Veanne Cox  
 JUAN VENTURA MORALES,  
 NAPOLEON BONAPARTE ..... Triney Sandoval  
 TERPSICHORE, MRS. SPARKS,  
 THE INFANTA ..... Rosal Colón  
 CALLIOPE, DOÑA ATHENE ..... Sara Gettelfinger  
 EUTERPE, LADY HARCOURT ..... Wendy Rich Stetson  
 MELPOMENE, LEDA,  
 MME. DORILANTE ..... Teyonah Parris  
 ZEUS-MARIE PINCEPOUSSE,  
 TALLEYRAND ..... Reg Rogers  
 PYTHAGORE, GENERAL LECLERC,  
 KING CARLOS CUARTO ..... Nick Mennell  
 JOSEPHINE, DOÑA SMERALDA ..... Justina Machado  
 THOMAS JEFFERSON ..... John McMartin  
 MERIWETHER LEWIS ..... Paul Dano  
 MERCURE, COUNT ACHILLE CREUX ..... Peter Bartlett  
 MARGERY JOLICOEUR ..... Nicole Beharie  
 ORPHEE ..... Esau Pritchett

## CHARACTERS

JACQUES CORNET  
CUPIDON MURMUR  
DR. TOUBIB  
REMY DORILANTE  
JONATHAN SPARKS  
LORD SIDNEY HARCOURT  
ACHILLE ALCIBIADE  
MME. MANDRAGOLA  
JUAN VENTURA MORALES  
TERPSICHORE, CALLIOPE, EUTERPE, and MELPOMENE  
ZEUS-MARIE PINCEPOUSSE  
PYTHAGORE  
TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE  
NAPOLEON BONAPARTE and JOSEPHINE  
TALLEYRAND  
THOMAS JEFFERSON  
MERIWETHER LEWIS  
MERCURE  
MARGERY JOLICOEUR  
GEORGES FEYDEAU  
DOÑA ATHENE  
DOÑA SMERALDA  
COUNT ACHILLE CREUX  
DOÑA POLISSENA  
ORPHEE  
KING CARLOS CUARTO and THE INFANTA  
LEDA  
MRS. SPARKS  
LADY HARCOURT  
GENERAL LECLERC  
ROBERT LIVINGSTON  
MAJOR WALTER REED  
LECLERC'S CAPTAIN  
MME. DORILANTE  
JAMES MONROE

## **PLACE**

The play is set in New Orleans  
and other locations in Europe and America.

## **TIME**

1801–1806

## **NOTE**

In the New World at this time, there was a vocabulary of more than a hundred terms for people of mixed race, extending back seven generations in an individual's heritage. For example: "pure" white and "pure" black = mulatto; mulatto and black = sambo; mulatto and white = quadroon (*quarteron*); a *meamelouc* was "113 of 120 parts white," etc.

# A FREE MAN OF COLOR

## ACT ONE

*Jacques Cornet appears, a dazzling piece of work. His coat is made of purple satin and embroidered and laced with gold. His shoes have diamond buckles. His bewigged hair, powdered. His magnificence is overwhelming. Murmur accompanies him.*

JACQUES CORNET. The year is 1801. Alas. This is the last time men will dress like this.

All men equal? Clothes tell the ranks.

I have taste. For that I give my daily thanks.

If a book can't be told by its cover, what good's the book?

The world would be better if it followed my lead. If I'm a book, I'm a damned good read.

Murmur, introduce me —

MURMUR. His name used to be —

JACQUES CORNET. (*Cutting him off.*) My name is Jacques Cornet. New Orleans is my home.

MURMUR. I'm Cupidon Murmur, his administrative assistant.

JACQUES CORNET. Last time I looked, you were my slave.

MURMUR. Which is why I stopped looking. Didn't you used to be a slave?

JACQUES CORNET. Don't be fresh, Murmur. Even though born of a slave, I purchased my freedom and became my father's heir.

MURMUR. "My father's heir." A very rich, very white father, left my boss everything. Including me. I do all the work. He does nothing.

JACQUES CORNET. I beg your pardon. Each morning I can be found in my atelier, writing my play.

MURMUR. Where'd you get the nerve to write a play?

JACQUES CORNET. Brocade gave me confidence.

MURMUR. Does your masterpiece have a title?

JACQUES CORNET. *A Free Man of Color.*

MURMUR. What would it be about?

JACQUES CORNET. The sanctity of surfaces. The value of veneer.

Lift the curtain. We begin.

Lift the curtain. Is being deaf your latest claim?

MURMUR. I thought you'd like to know some crates just came.

JACQUES CORNET. Crates? Get them! You slow beast! Freedom's not for you.

MURMUR. What happened to the show must go on? (*Murmur rolls in wooden crates.*)

JACQUES CORNET. A shipment has arrived! Persia! Asia Minor!

My only prayer some evil moth  
hasn't gnawed his way through sacred cloth.

Open, Murmur!

MURMUR. (*Opening crates.*) I'm hurrying! I'm hurrying!

JACQUES CORNET. Look — grosgrain for trimming!

Bolts of cloth never come with regret.

Ahh! To be tickled by the feather of an egret.

What genius hands in Samarkand wove this silk,  
encasing my legs like a glove in milk.

The legs are so important. Revere their line,  
especially with a golden calf as shapely as mine.

Poor innocent silks — suppose you were lost!

How many years did your treacherous voyage cost?

MURMUR. Here's a date! They left Shanghai in 1798!

JACQUES CORNET. Three years for silk to travel? I could have frozen to death. Bring out my maps! Unveil my maps! (*Which Murmur does. The maps glow.*)

MURMUR. He collects these maps —

JACQUES CORNET. Murmur, know your place. I collect these maps. One of them must reveal the magic route to deliver me the treasures that I need like bread and water. The future is always about speed. That's the true subject of my play. An inland river must cross this vast unknown land. A river from the isle of California that somehow meets the Mississippi — but where? It has to be there. The stakes are too high. (*Jacques starts to undress.*)

The iridescence of this pink moiré  
will dazzle the fools who flock to my soirée.

Murmur, undo this cuff. Murmur, remove this shoe.



Take these crates to my chamber. Faster! Faster!  
MURMUR. Yes, master master. (*To us.*) I'm taking up a collection to buy my freedom. Spare change?

JACQUES CORNET. Murmur! Open the curtain or I'll damn you to perdition.

MURMUR. Don't the dumbest plays need exposition?

JACQUES CORNET. My play speaks for itself.

MURMUR. I'll tell them what they need to know.

JACQUES CORNET. I wouldn't trust you as far as a rat might speed.

Dr. Toubib? Tell them what truths they need. (*Jacques Cornet goes, trailing clothes, which Murmur picks up. Dr. Toubib enters, of African descent, a man of reason.*)

MURMUR. This is Dr. Toubib. He ministers to the health of the town. One day I'll write a play. Act One, Scene One. (*Murmur lifts the curtain and wheels off the crates. Music plays: Haydn's "Trio in G Major, Third Movement." Remy Dorilante, Jonathan Sparks, Lord Sidney Harcourt, Achille Alcibiade, and Mme. Mandragola play faro, a card game.*)

DR. T. The home of Jacques Cornet on the Rue de la Levée in New Orleans. Every Tuesday, he opens his home to men who come selling maps that might unmask the unmapped continent and get his clothes here quicker. (*Murmur deals cards at the faro table.*)

DORILANTE. I *mase double*.

MME. MANDRAGOLA. I set that.

SPARKS. *Mase double* again!

MME. MANDRAGOLA. I set that and I win.

DR. T. No one comes to the New World because they want to. This one's been deported, this one disinherited, this one escaped the police. They spy, steal, smuggle, sometimes even work honestly, until the day their fortune will surely appear. They come to the house of Jacques Cornet to gamble what little they have. Double it. Triple it.

MURMUR. Or lose it to Jacques Cornet. The cards are fixed. My boss leaves nothing to chance.

DR. T. Today is Tuesday, February 24th — the feast of Mardi Gras. The few social barriers that exist in New Orleans are down tonight — white — black — everything in-between —

MURMUR. — And there's a lot of in-between.

DR. T. Take off your twenty-first-century glasses. See New Orleans as we who live here see it in 1801. The free-est city in the world.

Imagine the unimaginable. Race is a celebration! See the lush palette of skin tones in New Orleans.

DORILANTE. Remy Dorilante. I am a shade called *meamelouc* — white and *metif*.

SPARKS. Jonathan Sparks! I'm *quarteron* — white and *meamelouc*.

HARCOURT. Lord Sidney Harcourt. I send furs from Quebec down the Mississippi to New Orleans and out to the world. I'm truly white, which gives me no privilege. Here it's just another color.

ALCIBIADE. (*Heavy Norwegian accent.*) Achille Alcibiade from Norway. I have come to New Orleans to start a new life as a dealer in furniture. I am white.

MURMUR. How come you look like a mahogany table?

ALCIBIADE. All right — not Norway. Barbados. (*Back to the accent.*) But in New Orleans you can be whatever you declare yourself to be. (*Juan Ventura Morales bangs on the bedroom door. He's quite chubby, dressed in some sort of gold armor.*)

MORALES. I command you to open this door for Juan Ventura Morales, appointed by His Royal Majesty Carlos Cuarto, King of Spain, as the Supreme Intendente of New Orleans.

MURMUR. Tax collector.

MORALES. I am Castilian! Pure blood!

MURMUR. His maternal grandmother had a touch of the brush.

MORALES. Among other divinely ordained powers by the kingdom of Spain, I control travel on the Mississippi.

DR. T. The Mississippi being North America's link to the world.

MME. MANDRAGOLA. (*To us.*) I am Mme. Mandragola. From Buenos Aires. Like Joseph in the Bible, I am a coat of many colors. I supply New Orleans with the comfort of the most luscious kaleidoscope of flesh. (*From behind the bedroom door we hear:*)

GIRLS. (*Off.*) Ohh! Ohhhhh! Ohhhhhhh! Jacques, Jacques, Jacques!

MORALES. Why do you let Jacques Cornet hoard your girls?

MME. MANDRAGOLA. He has more money than any of you. Are you going to the Mardi Gras ball tonight?

MORALES. I already have on my costume.

MME. MANDRAGOLA. Are you Sancho Panza?

MORALES. I am El Cid! The greatest hero Spain has ever known! And I am a direct descendant! (*Knocking on Jacques' door.*) Have some consideration. I can't keep my wife waiting. (*The door to the bedroom opens. Mme. Mandragola's girls appear, en dishabille. Terpsichore [TERP-si-kor], Calliope [KAL-ee-ope], Euterpe [You-TEP],*

*Melpomene* [Mel-pom-EEN]. They run to the table and eat hungrily.)

MORALES. Finally! Murmur, find me a *chambre d'amour*. Presto!

EUTERPE. No! This is just a break to catch my breath. I am Euterpe —

CALLIOPE. Calliope —

TERPSICHORE. Terpsichore —

MELPOMENE. Melpomene —

MME. MANDRAGOLA. (*To us.*) We locals name ourselves after Greek gods and demi-gods and muses but give it a French twist.

MORALES. (*To Terpsichore.*) I have decided to honor you with my body.

TERPSICHORE. Sorry! I've just experienced the greatest happiness of my life and don't want to ruin it.

MORALES. Common whores refuse the Supreme Intendante of New Orleans?

TERPSICHORE. Put me in jail. Jacques Cornet has a key that unlocks the world. Dr. T, what's the Latin word for key?

DR. T. *Clavis!*

TERPSICHORE. I am the portal. Jacques Cornet is the *clavis*.

CALLIOPE. Imagine the arm of a needy five-year-old reaching out to you, holding a bright red juicy apple —

MELPOMENE. — The neck of a flamingo flying home — and you're the *nest*.

EUTERPE. — The trunk of a mandingo tree that goes up, up, up and at the top, there's a gorgeous red blossom flowering. (*They sigh.*)

MORALES. I could show you a thing or two.

GIRLS. You have!

MORALES. Like the present size of the United States, I'm perfectly happy with what I've got. (*Beats on Jacques' door.*) Cornet, you will pay for your disrespect! (*Zeus-Marie Pincepousse appears, ignored by all.*)

PINCEPOUSSE. (*To us.*) I am Zeus-Marie Pincepousse.

MURMUR. Who the hell invited you?

PINCEPOUSSE. (*Pushing Murmur aside.*) I am extremely white and my blood extremely blue. I hate being in this house, which is rightfully mine.

MURMUR. He is half-brother to Jacques Cornet. They share the same white father.

PINCEPOUSSE. But my mother was a *duchesse*. His mother a mere possession. I am also the plot. I'll be back. (*Pincepousse goes.*)

# A FREE MAN OF COLOR

by John Guare

16M, 6W (doubling)

Before law and order took hold, New Orleans was boisterous; before class, racial and political lines were drawn, it was a parade of beautiful women and good-looking men, flowing wine, and pleasure for the taking. At the center of this Dionysian world is Jacques Cornet, who commands the men, seduces the women, preens like a peacock, and cuts a wide swath through the city and the province. But, it is 1801 and the map of New Orleans is about to be redrawn. The Louisiana Purchase will bring American rule to New Orleans, challenging the chaotic, colorful world of Jacques Cornet and all that he represents.

*"A 10-door farce salted with so many laughs that you won't have time to catch your breath ... [until] a terrible denouement described by Mr. Guare in language that approaches the condition of poetry ... [A FREE MAN OF COLOR] just might be a masterpiece."*

—The Wall Street Journal

*"Wildly ambitious ... like all great, mad manifestos, there are sweet rewards for those willing to take the plunge."*

—New York Magazine

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