

**THE NACIREMA SOCIETY
REQUESTS THE HONOR
OF YOUR PRESENCE
AT A CELEBRATION OF
THEIR FIRST ONE
HUNDRED YEARS**

BY PEARL CLEAGE



**DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.**

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THE NACIREMA SOCIETY REQUESTS THE HONOR OF YOUR PRESENCE
AT A CELEBRATION OF THEIR FIRST ONE HUNDRED YEARS

was originally commissioned, developed, and originally co-produced
by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Geoffrey Sherman, Producing Artistic Director.

The original co-production partner was the Alliance Theatre, Atlanta, GA,
Susan V. Booth, Artistic Director.

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THE NACIREMA SOCIETY REQUESTS THE HONOR OF YOUR PRESENCE AT A CELEBRATION OF THEIR FIRST ONE HUNDRED YEARS received its world premiere at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery, Alabama, opening on September 24, 2010, with co-producing partner the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia. It was directed by Susan V. Booth. The cast was as follows:

GRACE Trazana Beverly
JANET Jasmine Guy
CATHERINE Andrea Frye
BOBBY Kevin Alan Daniels
MARIE Chinai J. Hardy
ALPHA Tonia Jackson
LILLIE Karan Kendrick
GRACIE Naima Carter Russell
JESSIE Neda Spears

CHARACTERS

GRACE DUBOSE DUNBAR, African American woman, age 60

GRACIE DUNBAR, her granddaughter, age 18

MARIE DUNBAR, her daughter-in-law, age 40

CATHERINE ADAMS GREEN, African American woman, age 65

BOBBY GREEN, her grandson, age 21

ALPHA CAMPBELL JACKSON, African American woman, age 40

LILLIE CAMPBELL JACKSON, her daughter, age 21

JANET LOGAN, African American woman, age 33

JESSIE ROBERTS, African American woman, age 45

TIME

December 1964.

PLACE

Montgomery, Alabama.

ACT ONE

Scene One: Sunday, late afternoon

Scene Two: Monday afternoon

Scene Three: Tuesday, early afternoon

Scene Four: Tuesday, later

Scene Five: Tuesday, later

Scene Six: Tuesday evening

Scene Seven: Wednesday, 3 A.M.

ACT TWO

Scene One: Thursday morning

Scene Two: Thursday afternoon

Scene Three: Thursday evening

Scene Four: Friday evening

Scene Five: Friday evening

SETTING

There are three main playing areas: the formal living room and the library at Grace's house and the kitchen at the more modest home of Alpha Campbell's late mother. Only Alpha and Lillie enter this kitchen. Grace's living room, the main playing area, is tastefully decorated with antiques that have been in her family for generations, as has this house. On the walls are formal portraits of several generations of well-dressed African Americans who look back at the camera with complete confidence in their own beauty and an absolute awareness of their place in the world. There are the usual furnishings — couch, chairs, coffee table, etc. Everything is lovingly polished to a permanent shine.

There is a short stairway up to the library, which has floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, several leather chairs, a desk, a standing globe, etc. There are open books around and the room seems cozy and well used. There is one formal portrait in this room of a very handsome man dressed in white tie and tails. This is the late Dr. Louis Dunbar. His presence seems to dominate the room. There is a window. Also off the living room are a stairway exit to the unseen second floor of the house and another exit to a short hallway leading to the front door. This door should be visible when lit as if through a scrim. It is always answered by the fully uniformed maid who greets guests and family, takes their coats and exits without ever speaking an audible word. Guests ring the bell. The family doesn't ring a bell, but the maid somehow knows when they arrive and is always there to admit them. Jessie is a constant, albeit silent, participant in almost every scene; bringing coffee, refreshing sherry glasses, removing props, etc. Her active presence allows for scene changes to move quickly without the need for a total blackout since the audience can see her clearing up without taking them out of the play's real time.

When entering Grace's home, it is important to remember that even in the midst of massive social upheaval and revolutionary change, people still found time to fall in and out of love, to keep the family secrets or spill the beans and to embrace the great human chaos of their very specific lives. Fifty-four miles up the road from Montgomery in Selma, Alabama, plans are moving ahead for

a massive voter education drive that will culminate at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge on what came to be known as Bloody Sunday. In Oslo, Norway, the Nobel Committee has awarded the Peace Prize to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but in Grace Dubose Dunbar's downstairs parlor, the focus is on the upcoming one hundredth anniversary celebration of the founding of The Nacirema Society, a post-slavery social organization, *for ladies only*, dedicated to the uplifting of young Negro womanhood.

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ACT ONE

Scene 1

Lights up on Gracie Dunbar standing in the living room in a beautiful white ball gown. Her grandmother, Grace, is making one in a series of critical inspections of the dress. Her mother, Marie, is wiping down a Polaroid photo of the dress with the required developing agent. On the coffee table, there are a series of other photos of Gracie in various poses.

GRACE. Will you stand still?

GRACIE. I'm standing still! *(Grace raises her eyebrows.)*

MARIE. *(Trying to keep the peace.)* This one is lovely. *(Extends a photo toward Grace who ignores it.)*

GRACE. Turn! *(A command, not a request. Gracie obeys, but sighs loudly.)* There! Stop! *(She circles Gracie for a different view.)*

GRACIE. Do we have to do this now, Gram?

GRACE. When would you suggest we do it? If I don't get this dress back to Jennie by tomorrow morning, we'll never get it back in time. She hasn't even finished letting out Cheryl Harvey's bodice and she's still got Sandra Hoffman's sleeves to shorten. Cheryl's mother is beside herself, of course, even though she's partly to blame for letting that child eat the way she does. *Turn!*

GRACIE. It's fine, Gram. It fits perfect.

GRACE. Perfectly, dear. *Perfectly.*

GRACIE. It fits *perfectly*, Gram.

GRACE. I'm a little concerned about the neckline. A small glimpse of décolleté is fine, but you've gotten so busty, it's almost cleavage and that will never do.

GRACIE. (*Tugs at the dress impatiently.*) Maybe I'm just wearing the wrong bra.

GRACE. (*Ignoring this completely.*) Do your curtsy. (*Gracie does a perfunctory dip. Grace waits for the real thing.*)

GRACIE. *Mom ...*

MARIE. It looks lovely, sweetie. Just a few more minutes ...

GRACE. A few more minutes? What is the point of doing all this hard work and planning if your dress looks like we just ran up a couple of croaker sacks and sent you out the door?

GRACIE. I just can't get as excited as you do about it, Gram. At the end of the day, it's just a big ol' poofy white dress.

GRACE. (*A beat.*) A Nacirema white is no ordinary ball gown. There are only six of them in the world, designed and hand stitched by Jennie Turner fifty years ago and lovingly altered by her to fit each new debutante in each subsequent year.

MARIE. She didn't mean anything by that, Grace. It's just getting so late and ... (*A look from Grace silences Marie. Gracie is on her own.*)

GRACE. The Nacirema white is the essence of our tradition. It must not be simply perfect, but a standard of perfection, an unwavering beacon of light in a world of darkness. The Nacirema white, including this one, reminds us of why those two brave colored women — your great, great, great grandmother and Bobby's Green's great, great, great grandmother — stood there one hundred years ago in the ashes of everything they had ever known, clutching their baby girls and scratching out the words that you, as debutante of our centennial year, should know as well as you know your own name.

GRACIE. I do, Gram.

GRACE. Then say them.

GRACIE. *We do hereby found The Nacirema Society in order to uplift ourselves as free Negro women and to guide our daughters on the path of honor, chastity and truth.*

GRACE. So I don't think it's too much to ask that we take as much time as we need to make sure every Nacirema white reflects that intention.

GRACIE. Yes, ma'am. (*She executes a perfect curtsy.*)

MARIE. Beautiful! (*She takes another photo.*)

GRACE. See, right there on the left? There's just a little too much *round* for my taste.

GRACIE. (*She can't resist agitating her grandmother a little just for the fun of it.*) My anthropology teacher said some indigenous people won't let you photograph them. They think you're stealing their spirits.

GRACE. People indigenous to Alabama know better. *Walk!*

GRACIE. Gram! I swear the world could come to an end and if it wasn't on the society pages of *The Montgomery Advertiser* ...

GRACE. Don't say, *I swear*, darling. It's so low class. *Walk!* (*Grace and Marie watch her intently.*)

MARIE. Maybe it is just a little bit ... *round*.

GRACE. There used to be lace all around the neckline, but it just got so old and delicate, all you had to do was breathe on it and *poof!* So Jenny took it all off, but it does leave the neckline a little bare. *Sit!* (*Marie pulls over a small chair and smiles at her daughter encouragingly. Gracie sits.*)

MARIE. Maybe you could ask her to ...

GRACE. ... and get my head snapped off? No, thank you! You see what I mean about the cleavage? There it is again.

MARIE. (*Suddenly sentimental.*) Our little girl is growing up.

GRACE. Growing up is fine. Busting out all over is not fine.

GRACIE. Are we almost done?

GRACE. How can you possibly have someplace to go? It's Sunday evening!

GRACIE. I told you, Gram, I'm interviewing a woman who was part of the maids' committee during the bus boycott.

GRACE. At six o'clock on Sunday night?

GRACIE. She lives in, Gram. Sunday is her only day off.

GRACE. What are you doing talking to such a person anyway?

GRACIE. She's not *such a person*. She's just a person.

GRACE. My question remains the same. *Turn!*

GRACIE. It's for my senior project.

GRACE. I thought you were doing your senior project on the history of The Nacirema Society.

GRACIE. It would give me an unfair advantage if I write about The Nacirema Society since I'm part of it.

GRACE. I thought that was the whole point.

GRACIE. Well, my teacher didn't see it that way so I'm doing an oral history instead. (*Dramatically, with a flourish.*) *The Montgomery Bus Boycott Ten Years After: Lasting Change or Business as Usual?*

MARIE. That sounds interesting.

GRACE. Interesting is not the word I'd use.

GRACIE. It's been ten years, Gram. Don't you want to know if it worked?

GRACE. They wanted to sit at the front of the bus. Now they can.

GRACIE. Now *we* can.

GRACE. I've never ridden a city bus in my life, so it's all relative isn't it?

GRACIE. Don't worry, Gram. The interview won't take that long, I promise.

GRACE. Where does this woman even live? Is it safe?

MARIE. I'm going to drive her, Grace. She'll be fine.

GRACE. You should get Joseph to take her.

GRACIE. No way! I'm not going to pull up to interview these people in a big old Lincoln with a chauffeur in a uniform!

MARIE. I thought I'd run by and check on Lillie's since it's just around the corner.

GRACE. Why on earth would you do that?

MARIE. Catherine called while you were out this afternoon and said when she went by to see Francine yesterday, the lights were on even though they've still got the "For Sale" sign out and nobody's supposed to be living there.

GRACE. I told Catherine there was no need for her to be hovering over the woman every other day. Doesn't Francine have family who can look in on her?

MARIE. Francine worked for the Greens for thirty years, Grace. I think it's entirely appropriate that Catherine should visit her.

GRACE. Why didn't she just call the police about Lillie's?

MARIE. She called me.

GRACE. Suit yourself. (*Returning to the fitting.*) Wave your left arm. *Slowly.* (*Marie takes another shot, smiling encouragingly at Gracie.*)

GRACE. I'm sorry you're going out. I was hoping we could have supper together and catch up a little.

GRACIE. Catch up on what, Gram? We see each other every day.

GRACE. Just something a little bird told me about a certain person being engaged by Easter.

GRACIE. You can tell that little bird I wouldn't marry Bobby

Green if he was the last Negro on earth.

GRACE. He may not be the last one, but he certainly represents a dying breed.

GRACIE. He looked healthy enough last time I saw him.

GRACE. That's not what I mean and you know it. There are just so few young men around anymore who even know the basics. These girls we're reaching out to are challenging enough, but the escorts they're choosing? Impossible! We're going to have to start having classes. They need everything from basic etiquette to appropriate grooming and they've never even seen a waltz!

GRACIE. Where would they?

GRACE. My point exactly.

GRACIE. Don't feel bad ... *badly*, Gram. They do that for the Motown people, too.

GRACE. Do what?

GRACIE. Teach them what fork to use and stuff so that when they visit the Queen, they won't embarrass themselves.

GRACE. I hope somebody is going to teach them how to dress.

GRACIE. They already know how to dress, Gram. You've seen the Supremes. How classy can you get?

GRACE. Don't say *classy*, and those wigs are ridiculous.

GRACIE. (*Teasing.*) I'm going to get one. A great big one with bangs in the front and a *poof* on the top and a saucy little flip all around.

GRACE. I'll saucy you! Leave your hair just the way it is. (*Studying the photos of Gracie that Marie has arranged neatly on the table.*) And I don't care what you say, it would be a great feather in your cap to arrive on campus at Fisk with a beautiful engagement ring to show everybody you're already spoken for.

GRACIE. Do you ever listen to a word I say?

GRACE. No, dear, not if I can help it. Now let me see your waltz and I think we're done.

GRACIE. (*Groans.*) *Mom!*

MARIE. Come on, sweetie. I'll be Bobby. (*She strikes an exaggerated formal pose. Gracie giggles and moves into her mother's arms. They waltz under Grace's watchful eye.*)

GRACIE. Did you ever want to be part of it, Gram?

GRACE. Part of what?

GRACIE. The boycott.

GRACE. I was part of it.

GRACIE. Sending Granddaddy across town to pick up Lillie

THE NACIREMA SOCIETY REQUESTS THE HONOR OF YOUR PRESENCE AT A CELEBRATION OF THEIR FIRST ONE HUNDRED YEARS

by Pearl Cleage

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In the winter of 1964, ten years after the Montgomery bus boycott, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is planning a massive voter registration drive that promises to put the city back at the center of the Civil Rights Movement. Among those watching closely is Grace Dunbar, pillar of Montgomery's African-American aristocrats and doyenne of the Nacirema Society, an organization poised to celebrate its 100th anniversary by presenting an exclusive group of debutantes at their annual cotillion. Assisting Grace is her lifelong friend, Catherine, who hopes the cotillion will prompt her grandson to propose to Grace's granddaughter. Of course, neither woman considers the fact that their grandchildren have their own plans. The anticipation is overshadowed by the arrival of Alpha Campbell, daughter of the Dunbar family's late maid. Alpha has plans to blackmail the Dunbars into financing her own daughter's education. But Alpha's story is closer to the truth than anyone could have imagined, and Alpha is surprised. So is Janet Logan, a visiting reporter from the *New York Times* who finds herself in the middle of a story that Grace will do anything to suppress.

"It's always intriguing to discover a social enclave seldom depicted . . . Cleage realizes her theme's rich potential through clever plotting, smart dialogue and beautifully delineated characters."

—The Houston Chronicle

"It's so rare when a new play makes an impression that when it does, you feel like you're walking on air. Pearl Cleage's romantic comedy . . . makes you giddy. It's a singular pleasure. What gives this lighter-than-air play such reverberation is that we've hardly ever seen Cleage's subject on stage. That she delineates it with such wit, charm and substance only adds to the enjoyment. Her characters are upper-crust African-Americans in 1964 Montgomery, Alabama. The Dunbars and the Greens are doctors, lawyers, college-educated, successful, and proud of it. They've been pillars of society for decades and plan to stay that way . . . Cleage's comedy is as warm as a Southern evening and we bask in the play's moonlit maternal glow and laugh with those indelible characters. Every now and then this tired world needs a gentle prod of sweet romance. Nothing wrong with that."

—The Houston Press

Also by Pearl Cleage

BLUES FOR AN ALABAMA SKY

BOURBON AT THE BORDER

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DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC.

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