

WHITE

BY JAMES IJAMES



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WHITE was developed at the PlayPenn New Play Conference (Paul Meshejian, Artistic Director).

The development of this play was supported by the Philadelphia Theatre Company (Paige Price, Producing Artistic Director; Melissa Zimmerman, Interim Managing Director) through the Terrence McNally Award for New Plays.

WHITE received its world premiere at Theatre Horizon (Erin Reilly, Artistic Director; Molly Braverman, Managing Director; Jennifer Pratt Johnson, Executive Director) in Norristown, Pennsylvania, opening on May 3, 2017. It was directed by Malika Oyetimein, the scenic design was by Colin McIlvaine, the lighting design was by Mike Inwood, the costume design was by LeVonne Lindsay, the sound design was by Larry Fowler, the prop design was by Chris Haig, and the stage manager was Chelsea Sanz. The cast was as follows:

GUS Jamison Foreman
VANESSA Jaylene Clark Owens
JANE Jessica Bedford
TANNER Justin Jain

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CHARACTERS

GUS—An Artist. White male. 30s.

VANESSA—The Actress. A Black woman. 20s–30s.

Also ST. DIANA OF DETROIT—A vision.

Later BALKONAÉ TOWNSEND—An artist.

JANE—The Curator. White female. 30s.

TANNER—The Boyfriend. Asian male. Late 20s – early 30s.

NOTES

Unless otherwise indicated, dialogue should be continuous without pauses.

/ indicates overlapping text.

... indicates the attempt and the failure to complete a thought. Not so much a trailing off.

— indicates a cut off or interruption of a thought.

Beat—Exactly as long as it takes you to say *beat* in your head.

Silence—Speaking without words.

On style: This play should feel like a sitcom until it's not. Fast while remaining grounded. Broad while remaining specific.

On space: This play works best when the production does not attempt to place each location. Allow the actors to establish where, when, and what we are looking at. A big open space that can be everywhere and everything is ideal.

“...don’t be afraid of your shadows having white in them...”

—James Abbott McNeill Whistler

“Genius is personal, decided by fate, but it expresses itself by means of system. There is no work of art without system.”

—Le Corbusier

“You think you slick, but you ain’t slick enough to slide.”

—African American Proverb

Damn Skippy!

WHITE

1.

Jane stands holding a glass of champagne in a slash of stage light. She taps the side of the glass to get the room's attention.

JANE. Hello. Hi. I'm Jane Forsyth, senior curator here at the Parnell Museum, and I want to thank you all for coming tonight to the opening of this extraordinary exhibition of spectacular work by a group of very exciting new American artists. The Parnell Museum for Contemporary American Art has been the foremost museum of its kind in the country. Founded at the end of the Second World War the museum has showcased the works of the best and brightest. When I came to the Parnell, the perspective was decidedly homogenous. I have spent this year searching for new perspectives. New voices. New work! Challenging and interesting art that would keep the Parnell at the very front of the art world nationally and internationally. I would like to begin with some history. Lights.

She clicks a slide.

Slide: A painting of men standing in line. All dressed working class. Communist feeling.

This is Marshall Kaiterman. 1996. It's called *The Old Line*.

Slide: An actual cup of coffee. A half-eaten piece of toast.

This is Felix Mueller. 1999. It's called *mon petit déjeuner*.

Slide: A photo of a woman with no pants on trying to hail a cab.

Jensen. 2009. Called *Easy Breezy Beautiful*.

Slide: A chair with no seat.

Barvel. 2013. Called *Chair Étude No. 9*.

Slide: A painting of a child with enormous green eyes.

Schiele. 2012. Not to be confused with Egon Schiele. This one is called *Peek a Boo Boo*.

All of these artists have two things in common. They all have works that are permanent acquisitions of the Parnell and they are all white men. This show. This New America Exhibition is the first chapter in changing the current face of this institution. New America reflects the full range of America.

2.

Lights expand out to include Gus entering. He has a glass of champagne in one hand and a large painting under his other arm. We are instantly in his studio. This exchange should feel old and comfortable. They may have had a few drinks by now.

GUS. Hegemony.

JANE. Oh! That's a good one!

GUS. Heteronormative.

JANE. Yes! Oh I've got one! Unpack!

GUS. Wait a minute!

JANE. I know that's one of your go-to things to say...but...UGH!!!!

GUS. ExCUSE me! It's a good word.

JANE. If I hear that word one more time! Unpack! Aren't you people all moved in now! Must we continuously UNPACK everything?

GUS. Yes! The word bears repeating! UNPACK!

JANE. It's a buzz word! Like...

GUS. "Problematize"?

JANE. and..."curate"!

GUS. You're a curator!

JANE. So is everyone else! The barista this morning...? Curator. He told me that they were "curating" their pastries so I couldn't have the

apple fritter I have been getting for years! Curating pastries. Fucking idiocy in a green apron. I hate it.

GUS. You haven't changed one bit. Same Jane Forsyth! Storming the castle! Railing against misogyny and irony and...what else was it?

JANE. Paisley, I think!

GUS. And now you're burning barns at the FUCKING PARNELL!

JANE. Yes!

GUS. Yeeeeeee! That show of yours is getting a lot of buzz!

JANE. Mmhmm...

Silence.

So...Where's Tanner?

GUS. Staying late at school. He's directing the middle-school production of *Julius Caesar*.

JANE. That sounds supremely terrible. Aaaaaaaaw. I was hoping to see him! You know you lucked up right?

GUS. Fully aware.

JANE. Good! Don't screw it up!

GUS. So...

JANE. Yeah?

GUS. Your first big show!

JANE. Yeah. Oh! There is this kid out of CalArts that is just dynamite. He can't be more than like 23.

GUS. Wow...that's...young.

JANE. I know. He's Colombian and Chinese!

GUS. Really?

JANE. Right! How does that happen? Anyway he's great!

GUS. Clearly.

JANE. What's new with you?

GUS. Been painting a lot.

JANE. I can see. A lot of new stuff around here.

GUS. Yeah. I got that Meredith Fellowship.

JANE. That's right. Congrats! I'm sorry I meant to say that when I arrived.

GUS. No worries.

JANE. So you're not teaching right now?

GUS. Yeah. I've taken the year off.

JANE. Good for you! Good! You should be painting full time. I love your stuff, Gus! Oh my god! Do you remember that performance art thingy we did in grad school in the library! We were crazy!

GUS. Yeah. We were. Wheeeewww.

JANE. Wacky!

GUS. Yeah.

They go silent. They sip their champagne.

JANE. Glad you're being prolific!

GUS. Thanks. Hey. Check this one out.

Gus grabs the painting he brought in and props it up for Jane to look at. Jane examines the painting. The painting is very white. Metallic raised white lines moving from the four corners of the canvas towards the center. They are laid out on a matte-finish white canvas. The work is minimalist and striking.

JANE. Oh Gus.

GUS. It's good, right?

JANE. Yeah! Although this feels...like...it could use more color?

GUS. Okay.

JANE. You use white a lot and that's great...I just wish there were more...blue. Or something.

GUS. Blue?

JANE. Yes. The color blue.

GUS. Why blue?

JANE. Hey...We're honest with each other. We tell each other the truth right?

GUS. Yes!

JANE. More blue.

GUS. Oh okay. Well...I'm trying to explore the intersection between

my white body, hence the abundance of white, and my gay body, hence...

He points out something phallic perhaps in the paint?

These two parts of me are ever in conversation with each other but are never totally listening to each other. The ability to have access and also restriction all in the same being. I'm trying to find this in the line and the starkness of the canvas. It's all building to converge at the center. Here.

JANE. I can see that.

GUS. The Fellowship has given me so much time! I can really push the boundaries of the work.

JANE. Mmhmm.

GUS. I was thinking this could be good for the New America Exhibition.

JANE. Oh...ha...yeah...no.

GUS. Jane you want this piece in the show!

JANE. Gus, I love it. It's really minimalist. And you know how much I love minimalist.

GUS. Yes.

JANE. With that said, I...may I be frank?

GUS. Of course.

JANE. This work is terrific. All of your work is terrific.

GUS. Thank you.

JANE. But it's not actually about that.

GUS. It's not.

JANE. I gave myself a charge when I took this job. I would fundamentally change the face of this museum to truly reflect America.

GUS. Great!

JANE. I'm committed to that Gus!

GUS. Right on Sister!

JANE. So...I can't put you in my first exhibition at the Parnell. You're the exact opposite of what I'm looking for.

GUS. I am?

WHITE

by James Ijames

2M, 2W

Gus is an artist. Vanessa is an actress. Gus wants to be presented in a major exhibition for artists of color, so he hires Vanessa to perform as Balkonaé Townsend, a brash and political artist that will fit the museum's desire for "new voices." Everything is great, until Balkonaé takes over and Gus has to deal with the mess he's made. This plays spins out of control as it explores issues of race, gender, sexuality, and art.

"This funny...work draws on both life and art to examine racial tourism, power, and identity. ...WHITE bursts with humor...the best of which come at the expense of the institutionalization of art... The ending adds a surreal twist, driving home Ijames' exploration of black women's exploitation by feminism, by contemporary culture, and by white women."

—**The Philadelphia Inquirer**

"Much of Ijames' new play...unspools as a sharp examination of white privilege, especially as it pertains to creation, representation, and exhibition in the art world. But thanks to skillful writing and one of the most perfectly executed red herrings I've ever seen, WHITE morphs into possibly the strongest theatrical statement on the commodification of black bodies since Suzan-Lori Parks' Venus."

—**Phindie.com**

"WHITE is pure gold. ...Ijames' audacious and hilarious play takes on racism, sexism, and a handful of other isms. ...It's bold, outlandish, insightful, and exciting... a sharp deconstruction of racial, ethnic, gender and social stereotypes, examined from multiple points of view. ...Subverting expectations, cracking wise and opening eyes, WHITE is quite a statement. Ijames fills it with twists, right up to its final moments. You'll want to be along for the ride."

—**DCMetroTheaterArts.com**

Also by James Ijames

MOON MAN WALK

THE MOST SPECTACULARLY

LAMENTABLE TRIAL OF MIZ

MARTHA WASHINGTON

DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC.

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