THE TALENTED TENTH

BY **RICHARD WESLEY**

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DRAMATISTS
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INC.

THE TALENTED TENTH opened at the Manhattan Theatre Club (Lynne Meadow, Artistic Director; Barry Grove, Executive Producer) on November 9, 1989. It was directed by M. Neema Barnette; the scenic design was by Charles McClennahan; the costume design was by Alvin B. Perry; the lighting design was by Anne Militello; the sound design was by James Mtume; and the production stage manager was Diane Ward. The cast was as follows:

BERNARD ..... Roscoe Orman, Richard Lawson
PAM ..... Marie Thomas
ROWENA ..... LaTanya Richardson
TANYA ..... Akosua Busia, Lorraine Toussaint
MARVIN ..... Richard Gant
RON ..... Rony Clanton
GRIGGS ..... J. E. Gaines, Graham Brown

Notes on *The Talented Tenth*

The Black Power movement effectively ended sometime around 1974, and in its wake a new strain of black leadership elites emerged. They came from the business sector and the more traditional urban-ward politics sector. They eschewed the confrontational antiestablishment posture of Black Power, played down any overt identification with the African diaspora, and positioned themselves, basically, as centrist pragmatists. They might present an Afrocentric façade when it suited them—wearing a dashiki here, quoting Malcolm or Martin there—but for the most part, they saw themselves part of the system, as much a part of the "American way of life" as any other citizens.

The Black Power movement, in many ways, had cleared their path. Nearly a decade and a half of successful efforts at raising consciousness among black people and working to consolidate what little economic and political resources there were within the community made it possible for this new class to emerge, particularly when the Black Power movement withered as the result of COINTELPRO; national weariness with the excesses of the radical left; and the arrests, incarceration, and/or forced or self-imposed exile of many of the radical left's leaders.

The Public Accommodations Act was passed in 1964, the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were both dead and safely elevated to a sainthood that rendered their memories powerless and therefore nonthreatening. Suddenly, the question became, "Where do we go from here?" And while that question was being pondered by millions of black Americans, a new generation of black leadership quickly stepped forward to seize the reins of power in black America. Some were well-educated graduates of schools like Harvard or Wharton. Others were veterans of the Black Power movement, and still others emerged from the back rooms of ward politics in the big cities or the boardrooms of large corporations. They may have come from different backgrounds, but they all had many things in common, particularly erudition, intelligence, and ambition. They had labored long and hard in the background and had been patient. And now, in the

aftermath of the hard-won social changes of the 1960s and 1970s, they were enjoying previously undreamed-of levels of success. I was a part of many of those circles, and had been since my very first day as a freshman at Howard.

By 1980, I was a man in his mid-thirties; married, with children; a homeowner; and in the middle of a successful professional career. I had not stood on a street corner with a crew since I was seventeen years old, and even then I had only been marginal. I would never know thug life the way Jay-Z or Biggie or Easy-E would later come to exemplify. But I noticed that there was not much discussion on our stages about the "other half" of American black life—the middle class, the professional classes—and this observation was what led me to write a play that would address some of my observations about the emergence of this new class of leadership.

I originally intended for Essex Braxton, a major character in *The Mighty Gents*, to be a protagonist in the new play. The new play would occur on the very night that Braxton is assaulted by Frankie, Lucky, Tiny, and Eldridge. I imagined that, seeking to move up from being a mere criminal to being recognized as a successful businessman and investor, Braxton was on his way home from a party hosted by a well-heeled black professional. But I soon abandoned the idea altogether. I wanted to move in another direction.

The task would take me nearly ten years. I had to grow as a person as well as a writer. There were nuances of business practices, political dealmaking, and even interpersonal relationships that I needed to understand, both on the micro and the macro level.

The Talented Tenth became my take on what had happened to the former young soldiers of the Black Power movement of the '60s and early '70s, who now found themselves in their forties and successfully integrated into the American Dream. They had spacious homes, the requisite expensive cars, overseas vacations, excellent pension packages, and political connections—and still, something was missing. The bridge between the past and the present—between generations, social classes, interpretations of history, mother and daughter, father and son—has always been important to me. It is a theme that reverberates through every play I have ever written, but *Tenth* may have been the first time since my one-act play *The Past Is the Past* that I was so overt with it.

By the end of the 1970s, it was clear to everyone that an initial phase of the Black Power movement had run its course. There was not going to be a "revolution" in the streets. "The System" was not going to be overthrown and replaced by a more humane democratic socialism. That "fire in the belly" that had driven us in our youthful twenties and early thirties had now given way to a more practical sense of reality. The playwright Ed Bullins once said, "The most revolutionary thing any black man in America could do was to take care of his family." The truth of Ed's comment was borne out not only in statistics chronicling the deteriorating living conditions so many black Americans were facing at the time, but also in the police assassinations and arrests of scores of "militant black leaders and followers," as well as the personal failings of some of those leaders (cronyism, misogyny, and greed). And there was another factor equally important: fatigue—intellectual as well as physical and spiritual—giving way to cynicism and even despair. A new kind of strength was needed, a new vision. We came to realize that we were not going to save the world—at least, not yet.

One day, sometime in 1980–'81, I was invited by a good friend to attend the photography exhibition opening of another good friend (and former Howard classmate) who had developed a fine career for himself as a photographer. It was to be held in a suburban town just outside Newark, New Jersey. While I was there, chatting and talking with guests and friends, I suddenly became very aware of just who these people were: professionals in education, government, business, medicine, law, and law enforcement. Some of them came from families that had been established in the black communities of Essex County, New Jersey, for generations. And here I was, a working-class kid from Newark, rubbing shoulders with them. I'd only seen most from afar, or perhaps I'd read about them or heard them discussed while growing up. I may even have partied with some of their children in earlier years, but I never expected to really know much about them. But there I was. And just as comfortable and at ease as if I'd been with them all my life.

Ten years before, I'd have dismissed them as the "Black Bourgeoisie" and "Enemies of the Revolution." But the revolution had ended—or had it? Many of the young people in the room had marched, attended rallies; a few had even joined the Black Panthers.

Others had actually lived in Africa, something I'd never done. Some of the young women there had straightened their hair; others still wore it *au naturel*. Some of the men wore dashikis, while others preferred Brooks Brothers.

Howard University, the Movement, and a professional writing career that had allowed me to travel all over the country and to points overseas had all combined to mature me, and expose me to possibilities many other young black men my age were never destined to see. As I stood in that gallery on that long-ago day, I realized that I needed to write about these "new Negroes," because I was one of them.

The deaths of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, combined with the end of "Black Power," created a leadership vacuum in the black American body politic. Into this stepped a new wave of young (and not so young), educated, sophisticated, and ambitious men and women, who saw themselves as less ideological than their forebears and more practical and pragmatic. They didn't want to destroy the system or overturn it. They wanted to assimilate into it.

Black Americans were as American as anyone else. All of the *Sturm und Drang* of the '60s was about just that. Our ancestors were in America centuries before the forebears of more than seventy percent of all the white people who called themselves Americans. Only the Native Americans had a greater claim to the American ideal than we did. We didn't need to go back to Africa. As James Brown famously said, "America is our home."

I decided to write a play about black, middle-class professionals, all of them former activists, who had settled into comfortable lives and were reaping the benefits of successful professional careers. But something is missing, and one of them, our protagonist Bernard, is determined to find that "something," so that he can reclaim the part of his life he feels he has lost.

W. E. B. Du Bois, in his seminal 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, discussed the creation and elevation of a university-educated leadership class—roughly ten percent of the black population of the country, steeped in the liberal arts, enlightened philosophy, and science—who would lead the black masses to a stronger position in American society. They would establish the infrastructure for a newfound freedom. Realizing almost immediately how elitist this

idea appeared, Du Bois abandoned it and never sought to promote it. But the "talented tenth" became part of the language of black communities for the next century. When I arrived at Howard in 1963, just one year after Du Bois' death, I remember some of my classmates and myself joking, upon realizing that so many of us were the first members of our families to go to college and that great expectations were held for all of us, that we were "The Talented Tenth."

I spent the entire decade of the '80s writing and rewriting this play. It was finished and placed into production—first at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1989, and later, in 1990, at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta as part of the National Black Arts Festival. Productions have followed all over the country since then. It would be the last full-length play I'd write for more than twenty years.

—R. W.

CHARACTERS

BERNARD
African American; late thirties, early forties.

PAM
Light-skinned African American; late thirties, early forties.

ROWENA
African American; late thirties, early forties.

TANYA
African American; mid-twenties.

MARVIN
African American; late thirties, early forties.

RON
African American; late thirties, early forties.

GRIGGS
African American; sixty-five to seventy years of age.

YOUNG MAN
African American; early twenties.

THE TALENTED TENTH

Scene 1

The early 1990s. Lights up on a beach in Jamaica. Bernard, Pam, Marvin, Rowena, and Ron relax in the sun.

Bernard stands apart from the others. Lights change and we enter Bernard's memory. Griggs, here in his mid-fifties, appears, dressed in a business suit.

GRIGGS. Says here you went to Howard University.

BERNARD. *(Prideful smile.)* Just graduated.

GRIGGS. Fine school. Lotta good people have come out of there. You know Professor Spaulding?

BERNARD. History Department?

GRIGGS. Yes.

BERNARD. I know of him. Never had him as a teacher.

GRIGGS. Good man, Spaulding. His father and I served in World War II together.

BERNARD. I didn't know that.

GRIGGS. Course you didn't. It's not important. Tell me, Evans, what are your goals in life?

BERNARD. My goals?

GRIGGS. Yes. I mean, what do you plan to do with your life?

BERNARD. *(Thinks a moment.)* Be a success.

GRIGGS. And?

BERNARD. Make lots of money.

GRIGGS. So I should hire you because you want to make lots of money.

BERNARD. Well, uh—

GRIGGS. See, what you're talking about is a desire; it's not a goal. You have no concrete plan in place. Just some vague notion about lots of money, and you expect me to be the one to give it to you.

BERNARD. Well, no, Mr. Griggs. You see—

GRIGGS. Don't tell me, boy. I know what I see: Just one more pie-in-the-sky youngblood. "Be a success." "Make lots of money." I've heard that kind of talk before. It's Negroes daydreaming, that's all. Fantasizing. And fantasizing's dangerous for black people. Especially when they're young, like you. You want to work for me, you learn to look at this world with hard, cold eyes.

BERNARD. I think I understand, Mr. Griggs.

GRIGGS. Make sure you do, Mr. Evans, because school days are over. I run a successful business precisely because I have always understood how this world we live in is constructed. Especially for our people.

BERNARD. Things are changing, Mr. Griggs.

GRIGGS. And how would you know, youngblood? You just got here.

BERNARD. Well, sir, I know I can relax more in my life than my parents could in theirs.

GRIGGS. Relax? Hmph. Relax. So, that's what all our struggling has come down to: so you kids can relax.

BERNARD. Messed up again, didn't I?

GRIGGS. Hopeless. Just hopeless. The Race is in trouble. What is the primary arena in which our people's struggle must be won?

BERNARD. Civil Rights.

GRIGGS. Wrong. Generals who persist in using the tactics of the last war are doomed to defeat in the present one. Remember that. The correct answer is Economics, boy. Money begets power, and power can make anything possible in America.

BERNARD. Yes, Mr. Griggs.

GRIGGS. You don't believe me, but what I'm telling you is the truth. No individual in this country is more powerful than the ethnic group from which he comes. Don't you ever forget that. As long as the Negro is an economic cripple in America, I don't care how many

laws are passed telling him what rights he has, I don't care how many of you colored whiz kids come dancing out of the Howards and Harvards of the world, it won't mean a thing if the majority of our people are outside the economic mainstream. Our job as Negro businessmen is to make money, be successful, and be a springboard for whatever is to follow. We have to be practical…and willing to hold on to our heads while everyone else around us is losing theirs. You understand what I'm saying to you?

BERNARD. I think so, Mr. Griggs.

GRIGGS. I'm talking about hard work, Mr. Evans. Really hard work. You young Negroes today have to understand that you have no rights, no privileges, no nothing.

BERNARD. Sir?

GRIGGS. All you've got is duty, responsibility, and the self-discipline that goes with it. It's the first seven generations after slavery that will suffer the most. They're the ones who have nothing to look forward to except struggle. They're the ones who have to bear the pain, make the sacrifices, and fight the battles that have to be fought and won. Your trouble will always come when you begin to think that you deserve a good time; when you begin to think that the world is your oyster. You're generation number six, Mr. Evans. Your grandchildren can have the good time. Not you. For you, there's only struggle. Understand?

Griggs begins moving away.

BERNARD. You frightened me when you said that.

GRIGGS. I know.

BERNARD. I've been frightened ever since.

Griggs is gone. Lights change. Pam, Rowena, Marvin, and Ron sun themselves on beach towels. Bernard remains standing to the side, staring out to sea. Easy-listening jazz plays on a portable cassette player.

PAM. You say something, honey?

BERNARD. Uh…no. Just thinking out loud.

ROWENA. I just love Negril.

MARVIN. I could stay here forever.

ROWENA. Shoot, you'd still have to work to make a living. Then, it wouldn't be fun here, anymore. Jamaica'd just be another place to work.

MARVIN. I'll take that chance.

PAM. I don't know. The poverty here depresses me. It's so pervasive. I couldn't stand it, every day.

BERNARD. Hmph. Seems like everywhere you go in the world, black people are suffering.

ROWENA. At least here, black folks are in control of their own lives.

BERNARD. No, they're not. The World Bank is.

RON. Actually, the Bahamas is what's happenin'. I'm planning a hook-up with some foreigners I know—an Arab and two Italians. I'm looking at some beachfront property on one of the outer islands—a resort.

ROWENA. But, Ron, you need contacts in the Bahamas, and you don't know anybody in Nassau.

RON. Rowena, there are black folks in Nassau with money and power. Wherever there are black people with money and power, there you will find a Howard graduate. All I need to do is knock on a few doors at Government House and do a little alumni networking.

MARVIN. Smart move.

RON. Only move there is, my man. Only move there is.

PAM. You make it sound so easy.

RON. No, it's not easy. It's hard work. But things have a way of coming together when you know what it is you want and how to go about getting it.

PAM. Business and money. Ugh! Please, we're on vacation. It's so vulgar to talk about that stuff when you're on vacation.

RON. It's in my blood. I can't help it.

ROWENA. We need to get you married off, Ron.

MARVIN. Oh, oh, marriage: the ultimate business entanglement.

ROWENA. Hardy-har-har. Very funny.

RON. I've been that route. No, thanks.

ROWENA. You need an anchor in your life.

RON. In my life, not around my neck.

PAM. What a sexist thing to say.

RON. All I'm saying is, I tried marriage. It was a disaster, for me *and* Irene.

PAM. That was ten years ago.

ROWENA. Then it's time you jumped in the waters again. All these intelligent eligible women out here and you walking around single. It's criminal.

RON. I'm doing fine, y'all.

PAM. Bernard, what do you think?

BERNARD. About what?

RON. They're trying to marry me off again.

BERNARD. *(Disinterested.)* Well, you'll do what you want to do, Ron. You always have.

ROWENA. Don't you want to see little carbon copies of yourself running around?

RON. One of me in the world is enough.

BERNARD. You won't get any argument from me on that score, brother.

Ron looks at him. Others laugh.

Sorry, Ron, but you walked right into that one. I couldn't resist.

RON. I owe you one, Bernard.

BERNARD. I'm sure you'll be paying me back first chance you get.

RON. Count on it.

BERNARD. Hey, let's leave Ron's social life alone. Surely, there must be some more interesting things we can talk about, or do.

ROWENA. Why? We're on vacation. We're not *supposed* to do anything or talk about anything interesting or "relevant." Too taxing.

RON. Yea, Bernard, chill out. Empty your brain, bro. Plenty of time to fill it up once we get back home.

BERNARD. Yea, that's right. Just lie around in this sand all the damned time doing nothing and talking inanities. We do this year after year.

RON. It's never bothered you before.

THE TALENTED TENTH
by Richard Wesley

5 men, 3 women

THE TALENTED TENTH spans the life and career of Bernard Evans, a successful African American radio executive whose midlife crisis has reached critical mass. A civil rights activist and Howard University graduate, Bernard settled into a comfortable life and reaped the benefits of a successful professional career, enjoying a state of prosperity and power. But something is missing, and Bernard is determined to reclaim the part of his life he feels he has lost.

"Wesley makes a compelling statement about the guilts, doubts and compromises of those African Americans who have escaped the soul-deadening grind of economic marginalism and achieved—at least ostensibly—the American dream. …Wesley's dialogue is epigrammatically brilliant, his drama far-ranging and moving, his themes universal." **—Los Angeles Times**

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