

KARAMU

A JOYFUL GATHERING PLACE

RESOURCE GUIDE

PURLIE VICTORIOUS

Written by: **Ossie Davis** | Directed by: **Treva Offutt**

KARAMU ARTS EDUCATION

Purlie Victorious: A Non-Confederate Romp through the Cotton Patch

Written by: Ossie Davis | Directed by: Treva Offutt

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KARAMU ARTS EDUCATION

Four Pillars of Arts Education at Karamu House

- 1. Sacred Space:** We create an environment in which any individual can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm.
- 2. Technique:** We provide professional technical training in performance art disciplines.
- 3. History & Culture:** We research, reflect on, and connect to historical events, cultural shifts and social issues to all developing art and established works. Artists will understand the societal context in which technical shifts and new works were/are created. .
- 4. Personal Expression:** Upon understanding and implementing technique students are encouraged to use artistry to express their individual views, culture, and stories.



Synopsis

ACT I Scene 1:

Purlie Victorious Judson returns to his small hometown in Georgia, with Lutibelle Gussie Mae Jenkins and a plan to win back his family inheritance from Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee, the plantation owner. Purlie's dream is to buy back Big Bethel, the community's church, so that he can preach freedom to the cotton pickers. Purlie shares his plan with his brother Gitlow and sister-in-law Missy, who despite their initial skepticism agree to help.

Scene 2:

Later that afternoon, in the back office of the village commissary (general store), Idella is tending to Charlie, Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee's son, who got a black eye in a barroom brawl the previous night over his support of racial integration. Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee does not share or respect his son's progressive values and arrives to punish Charlie. Charlie distracts his father by delivering the cotton and commissary reports. Every negro family is in debt, and Charlie challenges his father's "cheating" ways. Ol' Cap'n becomes agitated. Charlie holds his ground; Ol' Cap'n runs him off and then collapses due to the stress.

ACT II Scene 1:

It is time for Purlie's plan. Gitlow lets Purlie and Lutiebelle into the back door of the commissary. Lutiebelle is dressed up as Purlie's deceased Cousin Bee, whom she will pretend to be to win back the family inheritance. Purlie and Lutiebelle rehearse one last time before Ol' Cap'n arrives. All does not go according to plan, but Purlie jumps in and wins Ol' Cap'n over with flattery. Ol' Cap'n agrees to give the money and asks Lutiebelle to sign a receipt, which exposes their ruse, and a fight ensues. Purlie and Lutiebelle escape.

Scene 2:

Two days later, Purlie returns to Missy and Gitlow's shack. Idella is there looking for Charlie, who is missing. Missy thanks her for getting Ol' Cap'n to drop the charges against Purlie and encourages Purlie to ask Lutiebelle to marry him. He is determined to get his Church back. Gitlow returns bragging that he has secured the \$500 inheritance from Ol' Cap'n, in exchange for Lutiebelle working at the house. Purlie fumes. Lutiebelle enters in a disheveled state. Ol' Cap'n has cornered her in the pantry. Furious, Purlie heads up to the house to confront Ol' Cap'n.

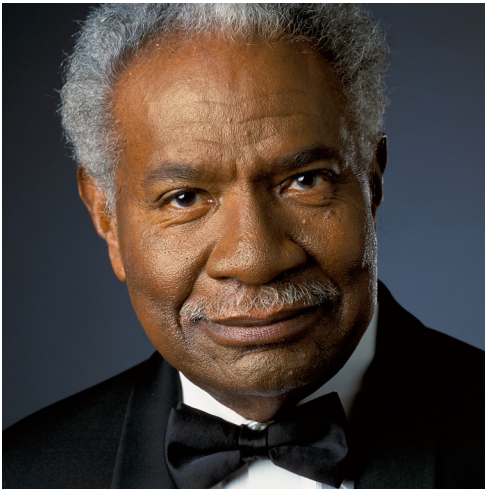
ACT III Scene 1:

Later that night, Lutiebelle and Missy wait at the shack for Purlie to return. Gitlow arrives without news. He suspects Purlie has fled rather than confront Ol' Cap'n. Lutiebelle and Missy worry. Finally, Purlie returns with \$500 and Ol' Cap'n's bull whip. Purlie tells the others how he sought vengeance on Ol' Cap'n. The others celebrate his victory until Idella arrives and reveals the truth about how Purlie has secured the money and won back Big Bethel.

Epilogue:

The play concludes with Purlie at the pulpit in Big Bethel, offering a unique and heartfelt blessing for unity and freedom for all.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION:



About the Playwright:

Ossie Davis was an American writer, actor, director and social activist. Born December 18, 1917, Davis graduated in the top 5% of his class, but didn't have enough money for college. He hitchhiked from Georgia to Washington D.C. post-high school to live with his aunts and be near Howard University. Once there, he received the National Youth Administration scholarship and enrolled at the esteemed HBCU in 1935. However, Davis left Howard for NYC in 1939, and that same year he became a member of the Rose McClendon Players.

He made his Broadway debut in *Jeb* in 1946, and there he met his future wife, Ruby Dee. Together, they were very involved in the civil rights movement throughout both of their illustrious careers. They helped to organize the 1963 March on Washington and were even the master and mistress of ceremonies. His stage credits include *Anna Lucasta*, *The Wisteria Trees*, *Green Pastures*, *Jamaica*, *Ballad for Bimshire*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Zulu* and *the Zayda*, *I'm Not Rappaport*.

Davis is the recipient of many accolades, including a Grammy Award, a Writers Guild of America Award and several nominations. In 1994, Davis was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame, and, together with his wife Ruby Dee Davis, received the National Medal of Arts in 1995 and a Kennedy Center Honors in 2004. Davis continued to have a very large presence in African American film and theatre until his death in 2005.



Major Production History | Previous Productions

1961

- Cort Theatre → Longacre Theatre
- September 28 - May 13
- Directed by Howard Da Silva
- Cast: Ossie Davis (Purlie), Ruby Dee (Luttiebelle), Sorrell Brooke (Ol' Cap'n), Godfrey M.

Cambridge (Gitlow), Beah Richards (Idella), Helen Martin (Missy), Alan Alda (Charlie),

Roger C. Carmel (The Deputy), Ci Herzog (The Sheriff)

- Godfrey Cambridge won the Tony Award for

1962

- Edgewater Beach Playhouse
- July 9 - August 5
- Cast: Ossie Davis (Purlie), Ruby Dee (Luttiebelle), Godfrey Cambridge (Gitlow)

2023

- Music Box Theatre
- September 27 - February 4
- Directed by Kenny Leon
- Cast: Leslie Odom Jr. (Purlie), Kara Young (Luttiebelle), Billy Eugene Jones (Gitlow), Jay O. Sanders (Ol' Cap'n), Heather Alicia Simms (Missy), Vanessa Bell-Calloway (Idella), Noah Robbins (Charlie), Noah Pyzik (The Deputy), Bill Timoney (The Sheriff)
- Kara Young won the Tony Award for Best Performance by an Actress In a Featured Role In a Play in 2024.



Taking a step back in time...

WITH EACH NEW LAW ENACTED AND EVERY STEP TOWARDS RACIAL PROGRESS, BARRIERS WERE CONTINUALLY PUT INTO PLACE TO RESTRICT THE ADVANCEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES.

Black Codes

When slavery was abolished at the end of the Civil War, southern states created black codes, laws which aimed to keep white supremacy in place. Black codes attempted to economically disable freed slaves, forcing African Americans to continue to work on plantations and to remain subject to racial, social and economic hierarchies within the southern society. Black code laws varied from state to state, but all were designed to restrict the civic participation of freed people; the codes deprived them of the right to vote, the right to serve on juries, the right to own or carry weapons, and, in some cases, even the right to rent or lease land.

Sharecropping

At the end of the Civil War, former slaves needed jobs, and plantation owners needed laborers to work their land. A new hierarchical system was born, sharecropping. Sharecropping is a farming system, where a landlord allows a tenant to plant and harvest his land in exchange for a share of the crop. In the South, after the Civil War, many black Americans, though free continued to live in rural poverty. Given their economic circumstances and lack of education, which was denied to them during slavery, many ex-slaves were forced to rent land from former white slave owners. There, they continued to raise cash crops such as cotton, tobacco, and rice.

In many cases, the landlords or nearby merchants would lease equipment to the sharecroppers, providing them with seed, fertilizer, food, and other necessities on credit until the harvest season. High interest rates, unpredictable harvests, and corrupt practices of landlords and merchants often kept sharecropping families severely indebted. Laws favoring landowners made it difficult or even illegal for sharecroppers to sell their crops to others besides their landlord, or prevented sharecroppers from moving if they were indebted to their landlord. The system severely restricted the economic mobility of black laborers.



Furthermore, the Black Codes often required black sharecroppers to sign annual labor contracts with white landowners. If they attempted to violate or evade these contracts, they could be fined, beaten, or arrested. Upon arrest, many “free” African Americans were made to work for no wages, essentially being reduced to the very definition of a slave. In addition, through “apprenticeship” laws, many young African American orphans were bound to white plantation owners who would then force them to work. Although slavery had been outlawed by the 13th Amendment, it effectively continued in practice in many southern states.

Jim Crow Laws

Black Codes were just the beginning of what were known as Jim Crow laws, a collection of state and local statutes that legalized racial segregation. Named after a Black Minstrel show character, the laws—which existed for about 100 years, from the post-Civil War era until 1968—were meant to marginalize African Americans by denying them the right to vote, hold jobs, get an education or other opportunities. Those who attempted to defy Jim Crow laws often faced arrest, fines, jail sentences, violence, and death. In the 1880s, as freed Blacks began moving to the cities, Jim Crow laws expanded. The laws affected almost every aspect of daily life, mandating segregation of schools, parks, hospitals, libraries, drinking fountains, restrooms, buses, trains, building entrances, theaters, restaurants and more. “Whites Only” and “Colored” signs were constant reminders of the enforced racial order. African Americans were not allowed to live in white neighborhoods. These laws lasted for decades.

Voter Suppression

Following the ratification in 1870 of the 15th Amendment, which barred states from depriving citizens the right to vote based on race, southern states began voter suppression tactics such as poll taxes, literacy tests, all-white primaries, felony disenfranchisement laws, grandfather clauses, fraud, and intimidation to keep African Americans from the polls. The Supreme Court upheld many of these tactics until Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Little Rock Nine

The “Little Rock Nine” refers to the nine Black students who volunteered to integrate Little Rock’s Central High School as a test case for desegregation in the South following the ruling of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. As in most of the Southern states, the idea of integration was met with much bitterness and opposition.

On September 3, 1957, three years after the historical ruling, the nine students arrived at Central High School, where they were met by a threatening white mob as well as the state’s National Guard, who had been deployed by Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, to block their entrance on the pretense of their safety.



Two weeks later, a federal judge ordered the National Guard removed. On September 23, the Little Rock Nine tried again to enter the school escorted by the local police, but again, they were met by an angry mob. School official, fearing for the lives of the nine students, once again sent them home.

Finally, on September 25, 1957, following a plea from Little Rock’s mayor Woodrow Mann, President Dwight D. Eisenhower federalized the National Guard and sent US Army troops to Little Rock. Guarded by the soldiers, the Little Rock Nine began regular class attendance at Central High.

Character Breakdowns

Due to the satirical nature of the show, many of the characters follow exaggerated stereotypes for both comedic and observational effect.

Purlie Victorious Judson

Purlie is a charismatic and eloquent preacher who has returned to his home with the singular goal to buy back his family's church, Big Bethel. Purlie hasn't been able to decide on a career, but proclaims that his current pursuit is his last one. Due to Purlie's naturally restless personality, his objective → hatred for the white man = nat??

Luttiebelle Gussie Mae Jenkins

A young, uneducated woman from Alabama. Throughout the show Luttiebelle begins to learn what it means to have a sense of self, and self-love. She had no identity outside what she was told by previous employers, and through Purlie was able to connect deeper to her faith and her identity as an African American woman.

Missy Judson

Missy is Purlie's sister-in-law, Gitlow's wife, and the matriarch of the family. She is a tough yet loving woman of God who will do anything for her family. Where Purlie, Luttiebelle, and Gitlow are much more chaotic and external, Missy brings a grounded energy to the household and any scene she's in.

Gitlow Judson

Gitlow, a self-proclaimed "Uncle Tom", is Purlie's brother and Missy's husband. Although at first he appears to be everything Purlie (and most black Americans) resent, he proves to possess more knowledge about how to survive in his circumstances than previously expected.

Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee

Stonewall Jackson Cotchipee is a proud Southern-Confederate plantation owner. Having grown up on the plantation and inheriting it from his father, all that Ol' Cap'n knows is to run the cotton patch. Although his son tries to educate him about moral discrepancies of owning a plantation and forcing labor onto the black residents, Cotchipee is stuck in his ways and refuses to see reason.

Charlie Cotchipee

Shockingly, young Charlie Cotchipee is nothing like his father. He has no problem adhering to the new laws set forth by the Supreme Court concerning black Americans and their rights.

Idella Landy

Idella works in the Cotchipee house as the housekeeper and nanny. Nothing can happen in the Cotchipee household without Idella, and she knows it.

The Sheriff

The Sheriff is so dumb that at times he can be the funniest character, and then you remember he's the one holding the gun. Both he and the Deputy struggle with their jobs and...

The Deputy

There's not much to be said about the Deputy, just think Barney Fife. But racist...

LESSON SEQUENCE:

Step 1: REVIEW and DISCUSS

- Identify themes found within this piece.
- Are any of these themes relevant today?

Step 2: SELECTING

- What is the role of Charlie in the story?
- Why do you think Ossie Davis chose Charlie as the one to save the church?
- Do you see Charlie Cotchipee as an ally or as a white savior? Why?
- How has his relationship with Idella shaped him? Consider the year in which the play was written vs. now in its revival over six decades later.

Step 3: RESEARCHING

- Consider the time; gather, select, and read historical documents during this time period and identify key events. Research those events. What was happening around them, possibly influencing or inspiring their actions. Were there other people of historic significance that were important to this time period?
- Select a scene that is especially meaningful and that you find particularly compelling. This scene will be the foundation of your playwriting,

Step 4: WRITING

- Think about the structure of your scene – the beginning, middle, and end. What is the main story you want to tell? What are the essential questions you want to address? Where do you want your story to take place?
- With your selected scene, add a character. Think about who they are in the realm of the scene? What role do they play? Are they an antagonist or protagonist? Is your character funny, serious boisterous, meek? What do they want? How are you allowing them to push the scene along? Do you want the audience to be directly addressed, or are they witnessing or overhearing the passages from this character?
- Create a draft of your scene and read it aloud to yourself, making adjustments.

Step 5: REFINING

- Share your written draft with a partner, reading aloud the narrative while they read along with the text. Discuss and refine based on their suggestions.

Step 6: DEVELOPING YOUR CHARACTER

- Consider the character you are creating? How do they carry themselves? What is their posture like? How do they sit/stand/gesture/walk? How do they dress? Gather any props or costumes that you can find to help you embody the character.

Step 7: REHEARSING

- CAST YOUR SCENE! Practice your scene with your cast to learn your lines. Many people find it helpful to write their scene out by hand to put it in muscle memory. Work with your cast and rehearse in class in front of others, allow them to share constructive (positive) feedback, and suggestions for improvement.
- Practice monologues in front of a larger group and practice constructive feedback, gradually preparing for a larger audience.
- Discuss if there are any set pieces needed. Consider digital projections as a backdrop in a classroom (or on a stage.) Discuss where you would like the presentation to take place.
- Discuss who you would like the audience to be. Another classroom? Family and friends? Invited guests? All the above?

Step 8: PRESENTING / PERFORMING

- Present/Perform monologues within the classroom.

ASSESSMENT TOOLS:

Rate your understanding of each concept from 1 to 5. 1 being poor understanding; 5 being deep understanding.

- Student Pre-Self-Assessment

1. I understand the definition of a monologue.

2. I understand how characters express their feelings and opinions through a monologue.

3. I understand historical performances can be an important tool in teaching/learning history.

Rate your ability to explain or perform each concept from 1 to 5

- Student Post Self-Assessment

1. I can explain and clearly identify the themes of this text and articulate their relevance within the piece.

2. I can explain the characters actions based on the circumstances present in the text.

3. I can create a scene based on an historical time period.



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OHIO CORE STANDARDS (8-12)

ELA-LITERACY--L.6.1.e
 ELA-LITERACY--L.6.3a
 ELA-LITERACY--L.9-10.1a
 ELA-LITERACY--RL.8.10
 ELA-LITERACY--RL.9-10.1
 ELA-LITERACY--RL.11-12.1
 ELA-LITERACY--RL.9-10.3
 ELA-LITERACY--RL.9-10.4
 ELA-LITERACY--RL.11-12.4
 ELA-LITERACY--RL.11-12.5
 ELA-LITERACY--RL.11-12.7

NATIONAL CORE STANDARDS:

ELA:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

NATIONAL CORE STANDARDS:

Creating:

TH:Cr1.1.I. HS Proficient
 TH:Cr1.1.II. HS Accomplished
 TH:Cr1.1.III. HS Advanced
 TH:Cr2-I. HS Proficient
 TH:Cr2-II. HS Accomplished
 TH:Cr2 -III. HS Advanced
 TH:Cr3.1.I. HS Proficient
 TH:Cr3.1.II. HS Accomplished
 TH:Cr3.1.III. HS Advanced
 TH:Cr1.1.I. HS Proficient
 TH:Cr1.1.II. HS Accomplished
 TH:Cr1.1.III. HS Advanced
 TH:Cr2-I. HS Proficient
 TH:Cr2-II. HS Accomplished
 TH:Cr2 -III. HS Advanced