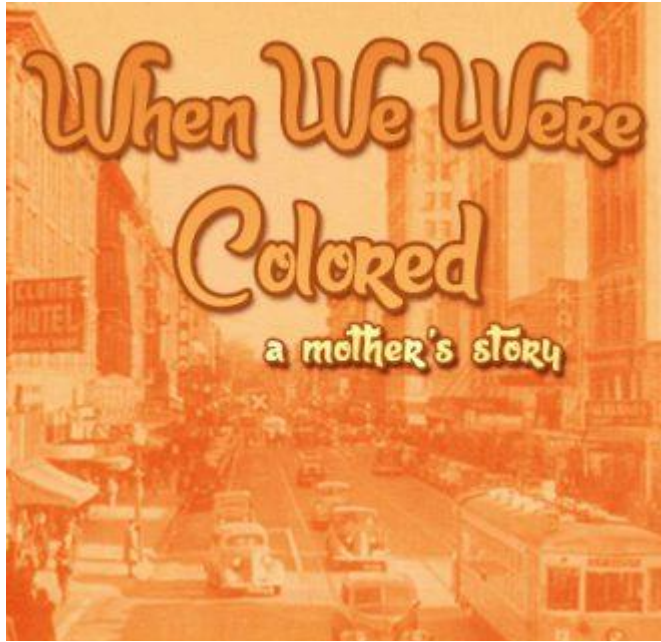


# **Sacramento Theatre Company**

## **Study Guide**



## **When We Were Colored: A Mother's Story**

**By Ginger Rutland**

**Study Guide Materials Compiled by Anna Miles**

# **Sacramento Theatre Company**

## **Mission Statement**

The Sacramento Theatre Company (STC) strives to be the leader in integrating professional theatre with theatre arts education. STC produces engaging professional theatre, provides exceptional theatre training, and uses theatre as a tool for educational engagement.

## **Our History**

The theatre was originally formed as the Sacramento Civic Repertory Theatre in 1942, an ad hoc troupe formed to entertain locally-stationed troops during World War II. On October 18, 1949, the Sacramento Civic Repertory Theatre acquired a space of its own with the opening of the Eaglet Theatre, named in honor of the Eagle, a Gold Rush-era theatre built largely of canvas that had stood on the city's riverfront in the 1850s. The Eaglet Theatre eventually became the Main Stage of the not-for-profit Sacramento Theatre Company, which evolved from a community theatre to professional theatre company in the 1980s. Now producing shows in three performance spaces, it is the oldest theatre company in Sacramento.

After five decades of use, the Main Stage was renovated as part of the H Street Theatre Complex Project. Features now include an expanded and modernized lobby and a Cabaret Stage for special performances. The facility also added expanded dressing rooms, laundry capabilities, and other equipment allowing the transformation of these performance spaces, used nine months of the year by STC, into backstage and administration places for three months each summer to be used by California Musical Theatre for Music Circus.

Sacramento Theatre Company can accommodate 292 patrons in the proscenium-style auditorium of its Main Stage, while the Pollock Stage offers a more intimate experience with only 87 seats in a black box-style theatre. Both provide good acoustics and sight-lines. This professional, Equity theatre presents seven professional productions per season with a reputation for excellent stage adaptations of classic literature. Three annual productions in the Cabaret Stage, which seats 100, round out the experience with high-quality Broadway musical revues.

The Young Professionals Conservatory, a training program for young theatre artists, was founded in 2003. The program, as well as the entire STC School of the Arts, is directed by Michele Hillen-Noufer.

**For further information about the Sacramento Theatre Company please visit us online:**

**<http://www.sactheatre.org>**

# **When We Were Colored: A Mother's Story**

## Sacramento Theatre Company Production Study Guide

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## About the Playwright: *When We Were Colored*

### Ginger Rutland

Ginger Rutland's play, *When We Were Colored, A Mother's Story*, is adapted from her mother's memoir of the same title. It tells the story of an ordinary black family living through extraordinary times in American history, from the Jim Crow South before World War II, through the war, the civil rights, and black power eras that followed and finally to the racially blended families of today. Born in Ohio in 1948, Ginger, the youngest of four children, moved to Sacramento with her family in 1952 at the age of 4. Her father, Bill was a civilian administrator at McClellan Air Force Base and her mother, Eva, a housewife and writer. Ginger attended public schools in Sacramento including McClatchy High School but she finished high school in Germany where her father's job was transferred in 1965. After a year in Germany and another in France, Ginger enrolled at Howard University, the historically black college in Washington DC where she studied history. It was a turbulent time. Vietnam War protests and Martin Luther King's assassination roiled the nation's capitol.

After graduation from Howard, Ginger began her career in journalism, first working as a television reporter for 17 years. She started as a general assignment reporter for KCRA-TV in Sacramento, and then began a decade long stint as the Capital Bureau reporter for San Francisco's NBC affiliate KRON-TV. There she earned an Emmy for her documentary about the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant. In 1988 Ginger joined The Sacramento Bee Editorial Board as an Associate Editor – covering transportation, criminal justice, the courts, public employee pensions, foster care, the census among other topics of the day. In 1993 she won the National Council on Crime and Delinquency PASS award for her editorials on juvenile justice.

Ginger Rutland is once more using her writing skills to benefit the Sacramento community by adapting her mother's memoir, *When We Were Colored, A Mother's Story*, into a play for the Sacramento Theatre Company. She currently lives in Sacramento with her husband, Donald Fields. They have an adult daughter, Eva Schwartz and, according to Ginger, the world's most beautiful grandson, Isaac.

## **Synopsis: *When We Were Colored***

The play opens with Ginger Rutland and her daughter Chelsea, who are visiting Ginger's elderly mother, Eva. Ginger has come to assist Eva at a book event for Eva's memoir, also titled *When We Were Colored: A Mother's Story*. At the event, Ginger shares the stage with her mother, and together they tell Eva's life story, with the aid of slides and pictures from the past. As they remember the events, Bill, Eva's late husband, appears, and takes Eva back down the journey of her life.

The story begins when Bill and Eva meet playing cards, and continues when Bill joins the Air Force (then known as the Army Air Corps) in Tuskegee during World War II, at which time the two marry and begin their family. While in Tuskegee, Bill transitions to working in logistics in the civilian sector and the couple has their first child. Bill is then transferred to Ohio, where the rest of their children, including Ginger, are born.

In 1952, Bill gets a good job opportunity in Sacramento, California. Despite Eva's desire to raise her children in the South, the family decides to make a new life in the west. There the family continues to struggle with racism and segregation, including difficulty buying a house and racist classroom practices at the children's schools. Despite this, the family thrives- Eva becomes a successful writer of women's interest articles and romance novels, and the children do well in school. Ginger attends Howard University and becomes a reporter at the urging of Bill, then marries a white man and has a daughter of her own, Chelsea.

It is while Ginger is away at college in the 1960s that Eva begins to go blind. Eva is in her mid-50s, and it takes several doctors to reach a correct diagnosis- retinitis pigmentosa, an incurable disease. In an attempt to beat the blindness, Eva starts visiting various alternative medicine doctors, which Bill scoffs at. Eva finally accepts her new life once the treatments become too expensive.

The play ends with Ginger taking Eva back to her home and tucking her into fresh sheets- after Ginger leaves, Eva is once more visited by her late husband Bill, reunited once again.

## **Characters: *When We Were Colored***

**Eva-** The main character of the play, and the author of the book *When We Were Colored: A Mother's Story*. The play spans Eva's life, from the time she was a child in the South to when she became a celebrated author and loses her eyesight in her old age.

**Ginger-** Eva's adult daughter, who helps with her mother's book lecture.

**Bill-** Eva's husband and Ginger's father- though he has already passed away, we meet him as we explore Eva's past through the story.

**Chelsea-** Eva's young daughter. (Also plays Eva and Ginger in their youth)

**White Man-** Plays various white male characters throughout the play, including several of Ginger and her brother's school teachers, several of Bill's employers, and a hotel clerk.

**White Woman-** Plays various white female characters throughout the play, including a Woolworth's clerk, a school administrator, and some of Ginger's and her brother's teachers.

# **The Civil Rights Movement and The Black Middle Class**

## **An Overview**

While the American Civil Rights Movement, which aimed to secure equal rights for African-American citizens, gained the most traction in the 1950s and 60s, the movement actually spanned decades, with its roots tracing back to the Reconstruction era after the Civil War in the late 19th Century. But it was during the mid-century that the Civil Rights Movement had its biggest legislative impact, with the passing of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, and 1964, as well as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

The most notable characteristic of the Civil Rights protests of the 50s and 60s was nonviolence- led by Martin Luther King Jr., African-Americans across the nation participated in acts of nonviolent civil disobedience, including:

- 1.) The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-56)-** This campaign began after the arrest of Rosa Parks, an African American woman, when she refused to give up her seat in the front of the bus to a white person. Prior to the boycott, racist Jim Crow laws which upheld segregation and claimed things could be “separate but equal” prohibited African American people from sitting in the front of any bus. To protest this policy and in solidarity with Rosa Parks, African Americans across the country refused to ride buses until the practice was changed.
- 2.) The Greensboro Sit-ins (1960)-** “Sit-ins” in general are referenced often in the play, and the Greensboro Sit-in is referenced specifically. This protest involved sitting at Woolworth’s Department store and refusing to leave when asked. The idea (and the successful result) was to call enough attention to the store’s racist policies, thus pressuring the company to end their segregation practices. Sit-ins were a popular and effective form of protest during the Civil Rights Movement and occurred across the country at all kinds of businesses.
- 3.) The Selma to Montgomery Marches (1965)-** Three protest marches took place along the 54-mile highway between Selma, Alabama and the state capital of Montgomery, to show African American’s desire to exercise their constitutional right to vote and to end segregation.

As a result of these protests and of the efforts of sympathetic politicians, several laws were passed granting more rights to African Americans. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 explicitly banned employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or nationality, equalized voter registration requirements, and prohibited racial segregation in schools, workplaces, and public accommodations. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 protected minority voting rights, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 prohibited discrimination in the sale or rental of housing.

In the play, Ginger describes her family as being part of the “Black Middle Class.” Prior to 1961, African-Americans had very little chance to advance into the middle class because of discrimination and segregation- for example, in 1960, 43% of the country’s white population finished high school, while only 20% of African Americans made it to graduation. Because of racial discrimination, black Americans were often relegated to unskilled industrial or labor jobs and domestic servant jobs. But the Civil Rights Movement paved the way for the rise of the Black Middle Class in the 1960s, as African Americans were able to find more skilled jobs and

have access to better educational opportunities: by 1980, over 505 of the black population had graduated high school. But the biggest factor in allowing African Americans to enter the middle class was homeownership, and in particular the migration of African Americans to the suburbs.

While the Civil Rights Movement made great strides toward making our country more equal for all of its citizens, as you will learn in the play, there was (and is) still a long way to go before racism is eliminated and equality is achieved for all.

### **The Black Power Movement**

In *When We Were Colored*, when Ginger goes away to college at the historically black college Howard University, she becomes attracted to the Black Power movement. Growing out of the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement advocated racial pride, economic empowerment, and the creation of unique cultural institutions for American black people. The goal became for black people to build their own power, rather than wait to be given power by the white supremacist structures already in place. It also took the stance that pacifism was not singularly effective in solving the problems with race relations. The movement championed black self-sufficiency which included starting black-owned businesses. Influenced by leaders like Robert F. Williams and Malcolm X, black power's cornerstone was the Black Panther Party.



## Memory Play and Memoir

The play version of *When We Were Colored: A Mother's Story* is an adaptation of Eva Rutland's memoir of the same name. While a memoir, which is defined as "an historical account or biography written from personal knowledge," is often written in book form, a play that falls under a similar definition becomes what is known as "a memory play."

The term "memory play" was coined by Tennessee Williams in the production notes of his 1944 play *The Glass Menagerie*, in which he says, "being a memory play, *The Glass Menagerie* can be presented with unusual freedom of convention." Since then, the term has come to refer to a play in which a main character narrates the events of the play, which come from that character's memory. Other examples of memory plays include *Landscape* and *Betrayal* by Harold Pinter, *Dancing at Lughnasa* by Friel, and *Da* by Hugh Leonard.

The most notable difference between Pinter's plays and Williams' play is that in Pinter's, often multiple characters recite their own separate versions of the past. This is similar to *When We Were Colored*, which could be called a "shared" memory play- Ginger, Eva, and Bill all narrate the story together, and often disagree about the way some things went. This device is effective in showing the inherent subjectivity of human memory. We've all heard the saying, "there are two sides to every story." But of course, in reality, there are an infinite number of sides to every story, an infinite number of experiences, and including as many as possible adds a depth and richness to those narratives.

Unlike memoir, memory plays are not bound to the rigid expectations of factual narrative- while the events in *When We Were Colored* also happen to be true, the play uses the "unusual freedom of convention" which is characteristic to memory plays. For example, Bill appears onstage, despite being dead in the present day. Time weaves in and out of itself, and we see characters age despite the actors staying the same. Arts Edge at the Kennedy Center describes memory play as a "non-linear structural pattern in modern American drama." *When We Were Colored* sticks primarily to a linear storyline, but peppers in more unconventional storytelling devices to remind the audience that the story is unfolding through Eva's unique and personal perspective.

In *When We Were Colored*, Ginger says, "It's not THE black story. There's no such thing." But *When We Were Colored* is her black story- it's her mother's and her father's story. *When We Were Colored* combines the factual narrative of memoir with the personal storytelling of memory play to create a uniquely personal exploration of the African-American family experience.

## **Activity: Write Your Own Memoir**

Pick a moment in your own life that had a significant impact on you, and turn it into your own short memoir. Keep the moment you choose small and specific so you can get detailed about the memory in your writing. Remember to:

### **1.) Write in the first person:**

The most important part of a memoir is that it's personal, and comes directly from you, so make sure you use the first person voice when telling your story.

### **2.) Stick to the facts:**

While a little creative embellishment in your memoir is ok, remember that memoirs are supposed to be true stories, so try not to stray too far from the facts.

### **3.) Show how your memories and experiences changed you:**

Every good story needs an arc, including a good memoir- so make sure you demonstrate through your writing how the experience changed you, and how you were different at the beginning of the story than you are at the end.

### **4.) Write with style:**

Again, memoirs are meant to be personal- so do your best to let your unique voice shine through your writing. If you're a sarcastic, humorous person, add that flavor- or, if you're more serious and poetic, mix that vibe in!

# Study Guide Questions: Engage With the Play

By Anna Miles

Take charge of your theatre-going experience and make it your own by asking yourself questions before, during, and after watching a play.

## Questions to ask before the play:

If you **HAVE** read the play:

How did you envision the set, or the visual world of the play, while reading?

How did you imagine the characters looked while reading the play?

What themes did you notice repeating throughout the play?

What images jumped out at you while reading the play?

How would you describe the central theme of the play in one sentence?

If you **HAVEN'T** read the play:

Do you know anything about the play? If so, what do you know?

In General:

When you think about "theatre," what impressions come to mind? What does "theatre" mean to you?

What do you expect your experience to be when you watch a play? Do you expect to be bored? Excited? Engaged? Curious? Angry? Tired?

## Questions to ask after the play:

If you **READ THE PLAY BEFORE SEEING IT:**

How did the production set differ from what you had imagined while reading the play? How was it similar? How did these changes affect your understanding of the story?

Did the characters look different from how you envisioned them looking while reading the play? Did they sound different? Act differently? How did these changes affect your understanding and

opinion of each character? How did these changes affect your understanding of the overall story?

How did the themes and images you noticed while reading translate to performance? Did the same themes and images jump out at you? Did you notice new ones?

Did this particular production seem to have the same central theme, or a different central theme from the one you discovered while reading? What elements of the staging, acting, or design helped convey the theme?

Did they play gain or lose anything in performance? Did you enjoy reading it more, or watching it?

If you **DIDN'T READ THE PLAY BEFORE SEEING IT:**

How did the play live up to your expectations? Did it turn out the way you thought it would? Was your knowledge of the play correct?

Were you able to follow the story?

Which part of the story did you most respond to? What themes and images jumped out at you?

Which character did you most relate to? Why?

In General:

How did this production change or confirm your original impressions of "theatre"?

How did your experience watching the play differ from how you expected it would go?

In your own words, how would you summarize the plot of the play? How is the plot different from the story, or the thematic implications, in the play?

Did you feel the story was relevant to your life? How and why?

Did you feel the story said something about our society, or about the world at large? If so, what?

Do you feel this story is an important one to tell and keep telling? How and why?

What kind of stories do you most respond to?

# Theatre Etiquette

- Arrive at the theater on time.
- Visit the restroom before the performance begins.
- Turn off your cell phone. Do not speak on the phone or text during the performance.
- Pay attention to announcements that are made prior to the show about the rules of the theater you are attending and the location of the fire exits.
- Don't speak during the performance unless you are encouraged by the performers to participate.
- Remember that the Overture (introductory music) in musical theater is part of the performance, so be quiet when it begins.
- Do not take pictures during the performance. It can be very distracting to the actors and can cause a mishap. It can also be a violation of an actor's contract.
- Remain in your seat for the entire performance. If you must leave, exit during intermission. In an emergency, wait for an appropriate break in the show. It is rude to get up in the middle of a quiet moment.
- Do not eat or drink in the theater.
- Do not put your feet up on the seats or balcony and do not kick the seat in front of you.
- Don't put or throw anything on the stage.
- Do laugh when the performance is funny.
- Do applaud when it is appropriate during the performance.
- Do applaud when the performance is over... this tells the performers and crew that you appreciate their work.
- Stand and applaud if you really thought the show was great (a standing ovation).
- Do not whistle, stomp your feet, or scream out to the performers except for a Bravo or Brava.

## Additional Resources

*When We Were Colored: A Mother's Story* by Eva Rutland

*Black Picket Fences* by Mary Pattillo-McCoy

<https://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/649288.html>

*The Civil Rights Movement*

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement>

*The Civil Rights Movement: Freedom's Story*

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1917beyond/essays/crm.htm>

*Black Power*, National Archives

<https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/black-power>

*Black Power*, The Martin Luther King Jr. Institute

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/black-power>

*Slavery in America*

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/slavery>

*Slavery and Remembrance*

<http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/?id=A0011>