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BY THE WAY, MEET VERA STARK
By LYNN NOTTAGE
Directed by CHUCK SMITH
Why *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*?

When you think of the great American screen actresses of the 1930s, who comes to mind? Bette Davis? Joan Crawford? Jean Harlow, perhaps, or Greta Garbo? Marie Dressler? How about Nina Mae McKinney? Fredi Washington? Or Alice B. Russell, Louise Beavers or the beautiful Dorothy Van Engle? Or perhaps the most enigmatic of them all, Vera Stark? If the images of those last six women don’t come readily to mind, it is likely because their careers were defined not by their beauty, their talent or their chemistry onscreen, but by their African American heritage. In a time when mainstream female screen stars could be blonde or brunette, sleek or full-figured, exotically foreign or all-American, there was one thing that they all had in common: they were white. For black actresses of that era, there were only a few choices. They could work in the relatively tiny world of all-black films, as did Russell, Van Engle and McKinney (reputedly one of that era’s great beauties). They could follow the example of dancer/singer Josephine Baker and seek fame in another country. Or they could toil in small roles in mainstream films, portraying maids, nannies or other types of domestics—the kinds of parts that brought minor fame (and steady employment) to Beavers, Ethel Waters and Hattie McDaniel, whose portrayal of Mammy in the iconic *Gone with the Wind* made her the first African American Oscar winner.

And what of Vera Stark? Her anonymity is actually the result of a different circumstance: she is the fictional creation of Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright Lynn Nottage, the centerpiece of Nottage’s newest play *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*. The story of Vera Stark mirrors that of dozens of ambitious, talented actresses of color in the 1930s: scoring unexpected success from a role as a maid in a ’30s historical blockbuster, she quickly disappears from the mainstream screen, leaving later generations of fans and critics to dissect her all-too-brief career and celebrate a presence that, in a different time, might have achieved greatness and lasting celebrity. By turns funny, poetic, smart and incisive, Vera’s saga becomes that of an entire generation of artists unknown to most of us, artists whose beauty and talent were lost in the racial marginalization of America in the mid-twentieth century. And, true to her reputation as one of our most inventive and eloquent writers, Lynn has created other platforms upon which to explore the story of Vera at greater length, particularly two websites (FindingVeraStark.com and MeetVeraStark.com) that flesh out in even greater detail the life and legend of Vera Stark. These websites, “created” by two fictional characters from the play, operate as though Vera were real—a storytelling method employed by the playwright as a commentary on the virtually anonymous treatment of African Americans in old Hollywood.

It is my great, great pleasure to welcome Lynn back to the Goodman and to pair her once again with Resident Director Chuck Smith, who directed Lynn’s *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* here in 2006. Together with a talented team of designers and actors, they will bring to the Goodman stage the truth behind the legend of one of Hollywood’s most elusive icons—and the society that created, then stifled, her.

Robert Falls
Artistic Director
Playwright Lynn Nottage
BY MARIA NELSON

Lynn Nottage was born in 1964 in Brooklyn, and is based in the borough today. On her website, lynnnotage.com, she describes herself as a “writer, thetremaker, activist.” Although this may be an accurate description, she also could have said a number of other things, including Pulitzer Prize winner, MacArthur genius, avid traveler or “Conjurer of Worlds,” the latter the title of an article about her on the Theatre Communication Group’s website at tcg.org. The subhead on the web page continues with: “From richly imagined epochs to unsparing satires, Lynn Nottage’s roving imagination channels history’s discards into drama.”

Nottage attended the High School of Music and Art in New York City, now known as LaGuardia Arts. From there, she moved to Providence, R.I., to attend Brown University, and finally the Yale School of Drama for her master of fine arts. Awards include the MacArthur Foundaion Genius Grant in 2007 and a Pulitzer Prize for her play Ruined in 2009, as noted above, as well as a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2005, an OBIE award in 2009, the Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award in 2010 and other prestigious grants and awards, not to mention rave reviews for productions of her works at several regional and off-Broadway theaters.

Works include A Stone’s Throw; Intimate Apparel—known widely as her most famous—Las Meninas; Mud, River, Stone; Por’ Knockers; Crumbs from the Table of Joy; and the one-act Poof! Two of her newest plays, Ruined and, of course, By the Way, Meet Vera Stark, have been produced at Goodman Theatre. For Ruined, which was in fact commissioned by the Goodman, Lynn traveled to Senegal and Gambia not once but twice. In response to her research process, she once said, “I overindulge myself when it comes to research, because for me that’s part of the joy of writing the play. Take the one I’m working on right now: This is my second trip to Africa, okay? Is that necessary? Would most playwrights go to this extreme to write a play?” Currently, she’s working on a screen adaptation of Ruined for Harpo Films. The Goodman’s production of By the Way, Meet Vera Stark will be the play’s Chicago premiere.

Nottage’s plays often deal with issues of race and gender, with a specific focus on African-American women. Although none of her plays is autobiographical, she acknowledges her own perspective. “I speak only for myself. When I look back at history, I’m very aware that I’m doing so through my own personal filter, which is that of an African-American woman living in the 21st century,” she said, according to TCG.

In addition to being a playwright, Nottage is also a board member for Theatre Communications Group, BRIC Arts Media Bklyn, Donor Direct Action, The New Black Fest, Voice and Vision and the Dramatists Guild. She also worked as a press officer for Amnesty International for four years.
In *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, a cast of seven actors portrays 11 roles. Three of the actors play dual roles, meaning they play more than one character. The actors who depict Anna Mae, Lottie, Leroy, Mr. Slasvick and Maxillian Von Oster in the 1933 setting of the play all double as another character in either the 1973 or 2003 settings as well. This distinction is made on the first page of the script, where the playwright lists the characters. Lynn Nottage makes a specific note: “The asterisks indicate characters that should always be double cast as specified by the playwright.” Many reasons could be behind Nottage’s decision to include dual roles.

One of the more simple explanations behind the choice to utilize dual roles bases itself on the genre of the play. Considered a comedy, *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* exhibits characteristics of a farce. Farces usually include extravagant situations, disguise and word play. Historically, many farces contain dual roles for comedic effect. The stark contrast between the dual characters the actors play in 1933 and their later time periods adds an element of humor. Essentially, audience members are aware of one actor playing two roles and find the dual portrayal funny.

Another possibility: Dual roles might be used in order to minimize cast size and save money. Certainly less romantic than the idea of dual roles serving a purpose for the integrity of the show, this reason provides a practical answer. Mounting a production of a play can become very expensive. Decreasing the cast size by having one actor play two or more parts makes the play more producible for theaters because they do not have to hire more actors. This way a show can have a large cast of characters that fleshes out the plot but is also cost conscious.

Perhaps the most scholarly and thought-provoking reason behind dual roles is the idea of a playwright specifically doubling parts for thematic importance. Nottage comments on the Hollywood life and how the entertainment industry treats African-Americans, specifically actresses. The specific choice to have the actress who plays Anna Mae also play the role of Afua Assata Ejibo, whom Nottage describes as “a very hip and slightly masculine woman,” could call attention to the shift in how African-American women are viewed in Hollywood. The same train of thought applies to Leroy, a chauffeur in 1933, being doubled with Herb, a prominent film scholar in 2003. These all potentially serve the specific purpose of illustrating the theme of African-American growth in Hollywood that Nottage integrates in her work.

Many possibilities exist for why some shows have dual roles. The playwright’s motive often is unknown and those who see the play are left to decide why. Whether it be just for fun, money or a more thought-provoking reason, dual roles serve an important purpose in the world of a play.

How do the dual roles affect your perception or reading of the play?
The 1930s brought a changing landscape to film. With the advent of sound in motion picture, or the talkies, new waves of technology in movies emerged. Just as the film industry underwent change then, so does the theater world now.

Projections are a general term used for any images, film or text shown on a screen as part of a theatrical production. Its uses are wide and varied. At its simplest manifestation, they are surtitles projected above or onto a stage like in Goodman’s productions of *Pedro Paramo* or *Chinglish*. Projected surtitles often are seen at operas as well. More complex projections can create the scenery of a production. Sometimes, the projected image works together with existing scenery. In Timeline Theatre’s 2012 production of *A Walk in the Woods*, projections designer Mike Tutaj added depth to the set by overlaying images of bark on top of Brian Sidney Bembridge’s tree scenery. Other times, projections work as the entire scenery for the show. For shows with multiple locations, they can change the setting instantaneously—far faster than traditional scenery. They also serve as sources of light on stage or are utilized to represent another character on stage. The malleability and ethereal qualities of projections help when introducing omnipresent persons or ideas on stage, like the ghost in *Hamlet*, or an overarching idea or thing, like the place of the woods in *A Walk in the Woods*. In Goodman’s production of *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, director Chuck Smith and designer Mike Tutaj will use projections to help set the tone of 1930s Hollywood, in addition to using it as medium to show clips of Vera through her acting career. As in any design aspect of a production, they help enhance the story and world of the play.

Although audiences have seen an increased use of projections in the last five to 10 years, projections have been utilized in theaters for at least the last century. Originally no more than screens, a light source and slides, innovations in technology have allowed projection work to prosper to the point where image changes are seamless and often used as transitions from one scene to another. Try and identify this use of projections in *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*. However, even with all its uses, projection designers have a rather unique set of problems in the theater. In addition to meeting the needs of the director and show, the designer must work around the parameters of the set and the theater. Thus, a projections designer needs the mathematic and engineering know-how to adapt to each new environment and project he is working on.

Projection designers must work closely with set designers and lighting designers to make sure that their work enhances the production as intended but does not draw attention away from the central action of the play. Even though today’s technology is far more advanced than where it was 10 years ago, one of the greatest challenges with projections is brightness. At this point in the time, the strongest projector produces 30,000 lumens, which is the amount of visible light to the naked eye. A single theater lighting instrument can produce at least twice that amount. Thus, the lighting and projection designers collaborate to ensure that the actors and set are lit without washing out the projected images.

*By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* uses a rectangular white screen as the projection surface, but not all sets have such a traditional aspect. The designers work together to create usable surfaces for projections in a set design and even sometimes look at how projectors can be incorporated or masked in the set design itself. These lighting and scenic obstacles require skills in geometry and physics, especially light science. Depending on the size of the set, the stage, the height of the actors on stage, and the strength and brilliance of the light emitted from the projector, designers decide at what angle and distance projectors need to be from the stage to achieve the desired effect. Often, productions may have more than one projector at a time for a single image or effect or to fill a rather large screen. This provides a whole new set of geometric challenges to make sure the image is seamless while maintaining a constant luminosity across the whole surface. When employing multiple projectors, the point where areas of projection intersect can become muddled.

*By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* uses theater to talk about film. Projections can bring film into the theater. Still growing, the future of theater is clearly in projection design. The possibilities are endless when using it as a world creation tool on stage, and new technology can only add to the magic that is the theater.
Beyond Vera Stark: Hollywood’s Forgotten History of African American Actresses

By Jamila Woods

She wears a white apron tied around her plump frame, a kerchief knotted to her head, and sports a wide-toothed grin. James Baldwin once asked, “How many times have we seen her?” From twentieth-century minstrel show stages to pancake mix boxes to Hollywood screens, her name has changed but her characteristics have always remained about the same. The housemaid, servant or “Mammy” character has become one of the most iconic portrayals of African American women in US media to date. But while audiences know her character well, the names and faces of the actresses who portrayed her in Hollywood’s early years are often not recognized by the general public, instead lost in time and obscured by an industry that confined them to the background for decades.

Lynn Nottage’s *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* introduces contemporary theater audiences to one of these overlooked talents in a two-part tableau that examines the life and afterlife of little-known black actress Vera Stark*. The play begins in the days leading up to her Hollywood film debut in 1933, then jumps forward to a modern-day academic panel that pores over footage of her final television appearance in 1973 on *The Brad Donovan Show*—right before she disappeared without a trace—in an attempt to shine light on her life and unravel the mystery of her later years. Like most black Hollywood actresses of her time, many of the details of Vera’s story are still largely unknown. And though Nottage’s play focuses primarily on one actress’
The end of the silent film era led to a revolution of “talkies,” or films with sound. During this time was the introduction of larger audiences and profit margins came from new technologies. White masters. Commercial filmmakers and highlighted the growing tensions between racial groups. In response, American cinema began to provide opportunities to find rewarding work and decent representation in the film industry.

In the years leading up to the 1930s, two major developments in American society had critical effects on the role of African American women in Hollywood films. The first was the stock market crash in 1929. Hollywood’s pre-Depression era representation of blacks had been blatantly negative, often portraying slaves as evil insurgents threatening the white race—notably in 1915’s The Birth of a Nation, a silent film set in Reconstruction era South that depicts an anarchistic black militia takeover of a South Carolina town. But the devastating effects of the Great Depression left the American economy in shambles and highlighted the growing tensions between racial groups. In response, American cinema began to provide much-needed escapism for the masses during a time of crisis and churned out a series of Southern epic films set on peaceful plantations, meant to remind viewers of the “good old days” of American prosperity. These films portrayed slavery in a gracious light, and often featured happy slaves who sang spirituals and all but worshipped their white masters. Commercial filmmakers of the time learned that larger audiences and profit margins came from depicting the ease, wealth and benign race relations of plantation life, and the ever-present “Mammy” figure became an integral part of this image.

The second major development in film during this time was the introduction of “talkies,” or films with sound. The end of the silent film era led to a push for verisimilitude and authenticity in pictures, and audiences came to expect real black bodies and voices on screen. As a result, producers finally started seeking African American actors to play African American characters in their films. Gone were the days of minstrelsy and white actors silently mimicking “black” motions and facial expressions in blackface. But even with the increase in acting roles opening up for blacks in Tinseltown, the variety of roles available for African American actors was still severely limited.

As Ralph Ellison once noted, “Movies are not about blacks but what whites think about blacks.” In the 1930s and onward, African American actresses in mainstream Hollywood films had no choice but to portray stereotypes largely constructed by the white imagination. To achieve the supposedly authentic “Negro dialect,” many movie studios hired white dialect coaches to teach African American actresses to speak in an exaggerated Southern drawl. Black actresses were also often typecast to specific roles based on their skin tone and physical appearance. Darker skinned, heavy-set women were frequently cast as “Mammy” characters. Hattie McDaniel, most famous for her role as Mammy in Gone with the Wind (1939), became known for her portrayal of sassy, opinionated maids in motion pictures. “I loved Mammy,” McDaniel once said in an interview. “I think I understood her because my own grandmother worked on a plantation not unlike [Mammy’s].” McDaniel’s screen presence was a force to be reckoned with, often putting white film critics on edge with her energetic, witty performances, which some claimed threatened to

“I’d rather play a maid and make $700 a week than be a maid and make $7.”

—Hattie McDaniel

But these actresses often found their own ways of existing as artists within a restrictive industry; some embraced the available roles and tried to breathe a semblance of humanity into otherwise one-dimensional characters. Hattie McDaniel, most famous for her role as Mammy in Gone with the Wind (1939), became known for her portrayal of sassy, opinionated maids in motion pictures. “I loved Mammy,” McDaniel once said in an interview. “I think I understood her because my own grandmother worked on a plantation not unlike [Mammy’s].” McDaniel’s screen presence was a force to be reckoned with, often putting white film critics on edge with her energetic, witty performances, which some claimed threatened to
No matter how many films African American actresses appeared in, they were inevitably most remembered for their work in servile supporting roles.

upstage her white co-stars. Vera Stark is also said to be one of the actresses who deliberately breathed new life into an otherwise flat stereotypical role. Unlike McDaniel, her most famous film was made in pre-code Hollywood, before strict rules governing onscreen race relations were enacted in 1934. Vera was dubbed “cheesecake served in a brown paper bag: a leading lady in a maid’s uniform,” and her nuanced and genuine performance as Tilly in *The Belle of New Orleans* (1933) disrupted the traditional image of black maids as simple-minded subservient characters, imbuing her with a depth which suggested she was “at once in the role and commenting on it.” Still, these performances were not always valued as revolutionary or subversive by the wider black community.

Although McDaniel won an Academy Award for her performance in *Gone with the Wind*—the first black actor to ever do so—she faced heavy scrutiny from the NAACP and black audiences for what they saw as perpetuating negative and demeaning images of the race. McDaniel infamously responded to these critics by saying, “I’d rather play a maid and make $700 a week than be a maid and make $7.” Louise Beavers, known for her portrayal of maid Delilah in *Imitation of Life* (1934), faced similar criticism from the NAACP, to which she responded, “I am only playing the parts, I don’t live them.” But the distinction between the roles they played in pictures and their off-screen identities was unfortunately never that simple. No matter how many films African American actresses appeared in, they were inevitably most remembered for their work in servile supporting roles. Prominent black actresses of the 1930s and ’40s interviewed later in their careers frequently fixated on their early work in maid roles, even if they moved on to star in all-black films or portrayed other types of characters. As Vera Stark stated in her 1973 interview with Brad Donovan, “It’s been the subject of my life for the past 40 years; yes I am trying to change the subject.”

This kind of treatment eventually drove some African American actresses to push back against Hollywood’s representation of black women. Butterfly McQueen, who acted alongside...
McDaniel as a maid in *Gone with the Wind*, was very outspoken in her rejection of the negative portrayal of blacks in the film. “I was suffering the whole time,” she said, “I didn’t know that I’d have to be just a stupid little slave. I wouldn’t let Vivien Leigh slap me, and I wouldn’t eat watermelon. I was very sensitive about that.” Others resisted the restrictions of their roles in subtler ways. Vera Stark recounts having to “fight tooth and nail” to utter the last line in *The Belle of New Orleans*, as the producers originally “didn’t want a Negrowoman to have the final word.” Many African American actresses eventually found such treatment intolerable and sought political outlets for their frustrations. Fredi Washington, who played Louise Beavers’ daughter in *Imitation of Life*, quit acting early on, became a civil rights activist and co-founded the Negro Actors Guild of America, where she worked to create better opportunities for black actors. Vera Stark also eventually shunned stereotypical roles and became involved in the civil rights movement as an avid supporter of other Negro artists, fashion designers and musicians. But others reacted less constructively, and many black actresses ended up turning to drugs or alcohol, or simply disappearing into uncredited extra roles. Such was the quandary often faced by black women in Hollywood: work demeaning roles (and often risk alienating their own community), or not work at all.

In Lynn Nottage’s play we are reminded of an important set of histories that have long remained unspoken. Vera Stark’s character operates as a stand-in for all of the forgotten or uncredited African American actresses throughout Hollywood history who never had the chance to be properly introduced to the American public. *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* presents a story that refuses to be swept into a “dusty old trunk,” in hopes that today’s audiences might be inclined to look more critically at representations of African American women not only in early Hollywood, but on today’s screens and in films for years to come.

Vera would nevertheless go on to make over 55 films in Hollywood, including *God’s Fitful Chilluns*, *Five Stolen Kisses* and *Songs of Dixie*. Later, she would have a modest though undistinguished career on television, playing stereotypical black characters in shows such as *Lumen and Larry*.
As a form of entertainment, movies reach most people in the country. They have the capability to influence and impact people’s lives. The wish to control the topics movies include is a touchy subject for both people in the film industry and people who view the movies produced. From the beginnings of the film industry with the Hays Code, to the film industry of today and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) Rating System, provisions have been put in place to try and keep certain material out of movies.

The transition from silent movies to “talkies” expanded the possibilities of what movies could do. Despite the existence of a Hollywood censorship office, there weren’t regulations for what could be addressed in movies. Hollywood studios employed William H. Hays to run the office in 1922 after movies began to become more risqué. Much of the content was left to the hands of producers and directors, despite Hays’ employment. However, in 1930, groups threatened a protest of the movie industry if censorship did not occur.

A way to censor movies was created in 1929 when a magazine editor and Jesuit priest wrote the Motion Picture Production Code, commonly known as the Hays Code. Studio heads accepted the stipulations of the document, which was adopted by the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). After its creation, implementation did not go smoothly. From 1930 to 1934, known as Pre-Code Hollywood, filmmakers and studios did not abide by guidelines and largely ignored them. The code’s enforcers were also part of the film industry. They realized racy, violent films resulted in more ticket sales and money for the studios.

In 1934, the MPPDA could no longer ignore the code and began implementation. An organization associated with the Catholic church declared that the film industry was corrupt and filled with filth. Its members created a petition, and to protect revenue, Hollywood agreed to their terms. The petition resulted in the Production Code Administration (PCA) and an amendment to that code required that all films released on or after July 1, 1934 obtain a certificate of approval. Joseph Breen, an avid Catholic, became the head of the PCA and rigidly enforced the code. Wanting to prevent government regulation and censorship, the film industry agreed to the new amendment, believing it could maintain control through self-regulation.

What exactly was included in the Hays Code? The three main principles were:

1. No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.

2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.

3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

It was then separated into 12 subsections outlining how filmmakers could achieve the principles. They addressed everything from violence to dancing.

Perhaps the greatest impact was on the sexual content of movies. The largest subsection addressed how sex should be approached in movies and included thoughts on adultery, stating that it was sometimes necessary plot material but it must not be treated, justified or presented attractively. The section also addressed scenes of passion and instituted a time limit on the length of a kiss. Interestingly, it was under this subsection of the code that the topic of race was addressed. Miscegenation, the sexual relationship between white and black races, was forbidden to be shown in any movie.

Under the Breen era of Hollywood, films contained a moral lesson and adhered to a conservative and traditional set of standards. Breen remained head of the PCA until 1954 and only at the end of his tenure was leniency allowed in film content.

The demise of the code was due largely in part to a 1952 Supreme Court decision that movies were protected under the First Amendment. The document still existed, but in name only. It was officially abandoned in the late 1960s, when the MPAA, formerly the MPDAA, began to use the rating system.
In 1968 the MPAA instigated the rating system. Unlike its predecessor, the rating system does not require studios to submit their films for rating and allows for more freedom in the content. For the first year of its existence, the system had four ratings. The G rating was for general audiences and all ages were allowed. The M rating was for mature audiences and parental discretion was advised. The R rating was restricted, which meant no one younger than the age of 16 was admitted without an adult. Finally, the X rating was adults only and no one younger than 16 was admitted at all. In 1969 the MPAA removed the M Rating because audiences became confused as to whether M-rated films or R-rated films contained more adult material. To solve this problem, the MPAA added the GP rating, which would be renamed the PG rating in 1972. The GP and PG ratings meant that parental guidance was suggested. The system remained largely unchanged from 1972 until 1984 when the PG-13 rating was added because of public unease with violent material being included under the PG rating. The new rating established a class of films where parental guidance was strongly encouraged for children younger than the age of 13.

The last change to the rating system came in 1990, when the NC-17 rating was introduced as a replacement for the X rating. Films with this rating were intended for mature audiences only and no one 17 and younger were to be admitted to a movie with this rating. The NC-17 rating was created because of the stigma of having an X rating. Because the MPAA did not trademark the X rating, many movies with pornographic material began using the rating. The X rating soon became a synonym for pornographic movies and resulted in nonpornographic films not being viewed.

With the implementation of the NC-17 rating, we now have the MPAA rating system that is in use today. The Classification and Rating Association (CARA) oversees the administration of the system today. This nongovernmental agency views films, discusses them and then forms ratings based on its opinions.

The system bases the ratings on the specific content of the film. Each rating has specific requirements. A G-rated movie contains nothing in theme, language or other matters that are unsuitable for younger children. There is no nudity, sex scenes, strong violence or drug use in G-rated films. PG-rated films can contain some profanity, some violence or brief nudity, but no drug use. Any movie containing drug use initially requires the rating of at least PG-13. More than brief nudity also requires an automatic PG-13 rating at the least.

When it comes to language, PG-13 rated movies can use one sexually-derived expletive, but any more means the film will get an R rating. R-rated movies have adult themes, hard language, intense violence, sexually-oriented nudity and drug use. The NC-17 rating can be based on any of the previously mentioned behaviors or any other element that parents would deem off-limits to their children.

The system allows filmmakers to appeal to the Ratings Board in order to achieve their desired rating. This occurs mostly with NC-17-rated films whose makers want them distributed as R-rated films, as well as R-rated films whose makers want them released with a PG-13 rating. CARA is required to provide a list of reasons as to why a film receives a specific rating. This list is made available to the studios and the public.

The rating system has received its fair share of criticism, the main complaint being that the system is out of touch with the social mores of the American people. Filmmakers lead the charge in this particular complaint. The system also has been criticized for being inconsistent in its ratings. For example, “The King’s Speech” garnered an R rating solely for the use of more than one expletive. This occurred in one scene in a nonsexual situation. Most film advocates pushed for a PG-13 rating, but CARA and the Ratings Board gave the movie the R rating.

The desire to censor is a tale as old as time for the film industry. Regardless of the name—Hays Code or Rating System—there always will be people wanting to establish what is suitable for others to see. Of course, as society evolves, so do the ideas of what is acceptable and appropriate. As we progress, so too will the content allowed into the different rating classifications. Will the current rating system become obsolete just like the Hays Code did?
In the 1930s, there may not have been Top 40 charts or radio stations that play Top 40 hits by artists such as Mackelmore, Justin Timberlake, Bruno Mars, Taylor Swift and Beyoncé. But that’s not to say there wasn’t popular music. In fact, in the second half of the 1930s, a radio show debuted with the title “Your Hit Parade,” broadcasting on Saturday nights the most popular songs of the time. The 1930s were the years of economic downturn with the Great Depression, but as Arnold Shaw recalls in his book, “Let’s Dance: Popular Music in the 1930s”: “In this troubled and turbulent atmosphere, the thirties nevertheless succeeded in becoming an extremely creative era.” Changes in one sector of the entertainment industry led to changes in others, such as music feeding off of film. Shaw writes, “In the thirties, the popular song acquired new stature, as few films were produced without a specifically written theme song that gave identity to the film. The popular song also became notable as the signature of each of the big bands.” Big bands (ensembles of 12 to 25 musicians that we might think of today as jazz bands), musicals, blues and underground jazz—these are popular types of music many have come to associate with the 1930s.

One of the songs that the characters sing in *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, “I’m Just Wild About Harry” from the musical *Shuffle Along*, reflects a trend not only of the 1930s but as early as 1920 and late as 1980—the popularity of show tunes or songs from musicals. Perhaps the most well-known musical of the 1930s, and the first musical of the decade, is Gershwin’s “Strike Up the Band.” Shaw writes, “Although the title referred to a marching or military band, it was most apropos as the kickoff show of the decade that soon became known as the Swing Era or the Era of the Big Bands.” Some challenge the importance of the musical in the 1930s as compared to other decades in the 20th century. Author Ethan Mordden of “Sing for Your Supper: The Broadway Musical in the 1930s” boldly claims, “In fact, the 1930s was the least enterprising decade in the musical’s Golden Age.” Often, when we think of musicals, we look back to the 1920s or the 1960s. But even for Mordden, the presence of musicals in the ‘30s was still significant enough for him to write an entire book on the topic.

The most popular music of the 1930s, of course, was jazz. However, jazz styles changed over the course of the decade, influenced by Hollywood and the entertainment industry, the Great Depression, and black and underground culture. As a page titled Manufacturing Memory: American Popular Music in the 1930s on the University of Virginia’s website notes, “Over the course of the thirties American taste in music changed dramatically. In the mainstream it moved from the bland and unchallenging ‘sweet’ sound of Guy Lombardo and the Jazz Age dance bands to the more rhythmically involved and aggressive horn arrangements of the bandleaders of the Swing Era.” As elements of black and underground music made their way into the popular ear,
Although *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* is not a musical, the characters in the play frequently sing popular songs of the era. Below is a list of the real songs they reference.

- “I’m a Little Blackbird Waiting for a Bluebird,” written by Grant Clarke and Roy Turk, music composed by Geo W. Meyer and Arthur Johnson, popularized by singer Florence Mills with Louis Armstrong (cornet), Charlie Irvis (trombone), Sydney Bechet (soprano saxophone), Clarence Williams (piano), Buddy Christian (banjo), and Eva Taylor (vocal).
- “Go Down Moses,” a spiritual also known as “Oh! Let My People Go,” originally written down by the Contrabands, but also made famous by Paul Robeson and later Louis Armstrong.
- “Gimme a Pigfoot (And a Bottle of Beer),” written by Wesley Wilson and popularized by blues singer Bessie Smith.
- “Dixie,” possibly written by Daniel Decatur Emmett, and made famous by black-face minstrel shows as early as the 1850s.
- “Fly Me to the Moon,” also known as “In Other Words,” written by Bart Howard in 1954 and covered in recordings more than 50 times since, including by Frank Sinatra in 1964.
- “I’m Just Wild About Harry,” written in 1921 by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake for the Broadway musical “Shuffle Along,” an all-black musical that ran for more than 500 performances, according to a book by Floyd Levin.

Manufacturing Memory on the University of Virginia’s site summarizes the popular music of the 1930s with the statement: “Popular music of the thirties reflected and shaped American society and identity during a decade of economic crises and industrial development, as it resonates with the memories of events and experiences and creates a sense of self for the listener.” Swing, the blues and show tunes from the time appropriately depict a mix of both optimism and struggle.

Even today, we see elements of popular music from the 1930s in our top hits. Musical renditions of popular songs have become common with the popularity of “Glee.” Although guitar solos and heavy percussion that we often hear have roots in rock ‘n’ roll, which came later, music with a strong vocal line, horn accents or improvisation take these elements from one form of jazz or another.
Hollywood has often been dubbed “The Boys Club.” The majority of people who control the business of Hollywood are overwhelmingly male and white. Opportunities for women in the movie industry do not come easily—only one woman has ever won the award for best director at the Academy Awards. This rings even more true for African American women in film. Throughout the history of Hollywood, African American women have been relatively absent from award-winning roles in front of and behind the camera. The continued cinematic stereotyping of African-American women contributes to and perpetuates the obstacles they must overcome to succeed in Hollywood. Although African American women certainly have more opportunities in today’s film industry, there has not really been an evolution in how they are regarded in Hollywood.

In the 1930s and ’40s, the Golden Age of Hollywood, African American women were relegated to supporting roles—stock characters conceived by the white, male Hollywood bigwigs directing and financing the films. Coupled with strict guidelines as to what was socially acceptable to portray on film, Hollywood pigeonholed African-American actresses into playing stereotypical characters such as The Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire and The Tragic Mulatto. The Mammy, one of the most portrayed stereotypes in film, embodied a matronly, faithful servant. On the other hand, Jezebel and Sapphire were depicted as sassy, loud and overly sexualized African American women. The Tragic Mulatto earned sympathy from white moviegoers. Played by African American women who looked like and could pass as Latina or white, Tragic Mulatto characters often were considered the leading lady of a film. The one stereotype that would allow an African American actress to star in a movie was perhaps the most hurtful to the progression of African-American women in cinema.

Despite African American women appearing in film more frequently, many did not receive accolades for their contributions to the industry. The Academy Awards show, created to honor the work done in cinema, was held first in 1929. An African American actress was not nominated for an award until 11 years later. In 1940, Hattie McDaniel became the first African American woman to win an Academy Award for best supporting role.

### African American Actresses Academy Award Winners and Nominees

#### Best Supporting Actress Nominees
- Ethel Waters, “Pinky” (1949)
- Juanita Moore, “Imitation of Life” (1959)
- Beah Richards, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” (1967)
- Alfre Woodard, “Cross Creek” (1983)
- Margaret Avery, “The Color Purple” (1985)
- Oprah Winfrey, “The Color Purple” (1985)
- Taraji P. Henson, “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” (2008)
- Viola Davis, “Doubt” (2008)

#### Best Supporting Actress Winners
- Hattie McDaniel, “Gone with the Wind” (1940)
- Whoopi Goldberg, “Ghost” (1991)
- MóNique, “Precious” (2009)
- Octavia Spencer, “The Help” (2011)

#### Best Actress Nominees
- Dorothy Dandridge, “Carmen Jones” (1954)
- Diana Ross, “Lady Sings the Blues” (1972)
- Cicely Tyson, “Sounder” (1972)
- Diahann Carroll, “Claudine” (1974)
- Whoopi Goldberg, “The Color Purple” (1985)
- Angela Bassett, “What’s Love Got to Do With It” (1993)
- Gabourey Sidibe, “Precious” (2009)
- Viola Davis, “The Help” (2011)

#### Best Actress Winners
- Halle Berry, “Monster’s Ball” (2001)
actress for her portrayal of Mammy in “Gone with the Wind.” She was also the first African American to win an Academy Award. The role garnered criticism of McDaniel because some believed that she should not have agreed to take a role as a maid. At the time, no other roles were really available to African American actresses. It took another 14 years for Dorothy Dandridge to receive a best actress nomination—the first time an African American actress was nominated for that award. Dandridge was nominated for her role in “Carmen Jones,” where she played a “sultry factory worker who seduces a young soldier, then dumps him for another man.” Her character fed into the Jezebel stereotype.

It would be 51 years before another African American woman would win another Academy Award. In 1991 Whoopi Goldberg won the best supporting actress award for her role as psychic Oda Mae Brown in the movie “Ghost.” Goldberg previously had been nominated for best actress in 1985 for her role as Celie in “The Color Purple.” While half a century had passed between Hattie McDaniel’s and Goldberg’s wins, the stereotypical roles still prevailed. The character of Oda Mae Brown can be classified as a “coon” or trickster and comic relief.

In the 84-year history of the Academy Awards, only 10 African-American women have been nominated for best actress. Only one of those 10 has won. Halle Berry became the first African American woman to win the Academy Award for best actress for her depiction of Leticia Musgrove, the struggling wife of a prisoner on death row, in 2001’s “Monster’s Ball.” In her acceptance speech, Berry acknowledged what a momentous achievement and shift her winning best actress was:

“Oh, my god. Oh, my god. I’m sorry. This moment is so much bigger than me. This moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, Diahann Carroll. It’s for the women that stand beside me, Jada Pinkett, Angela Bassett, Vivica Fox. And it’s for every nameless, faceless woman of color that now has a chance because this door tonight has been opened. Thank you. I’m so honored. I’m so honored. And I thank the Academy for choosing me to be the vessel for which His blessing might flow. Thank you.”

While reflecting on the progress made and recognizing a step forward, it’s apparent pigeonholing African American women into certain roles still exists. Sixty years after McDaniel claimed the best supporting actress award for her role as Mammy, Octavia Spencer received the award for playing Minny Jackson in “The Help.” Minny is a maid.

If actresses are impaired by the Hollywood Boys Club, then women directors are basically kept out of the industry altogether—especially African American female directors. Only four women have been nominated for
the best director award at the Academy Awards and only one has ever walked away with the award; all of them where white. Even a starker statistic, the top six Hollywood studios—Warner Bros. Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Walt Disney/Touchstone Pictures, Columbia Pictures, Universal Pictures and 20th Century Fox—have produced only five major motion pictures that have been directed by African American women. The lack of African American women in the director’s chair has become a hot topic since Ava DuVernay won the best director award at the Sundance Film Festival. DuVernay was the first African American woman to receive this honor.

Just like their actress counterparts, African American female directors are pigeonholed into directing certain types of films—films about African American women. “Black women writers and filmmakers are frustrated because we want to tell good stories. We don’t always want to write about black women, but often we are boxed into that category, so often that’s all there is. If we can’t tell other people’s stories or our own, then what’s left for us,” says producer Arlene Gibbs. It’s interesting to note that their male colleagues encounter more success, recognition and funding for their filmmaking endeavors.

Hollywood’s focus on money and profit also fosters the lack of African American woman directors. The producers and backers, all mostly white and male, do not invest in projects headed by women in general, much less women of color. They believe the risk is too great in the current economic climate to produce films directed by African American women, the scarcity of which leads to a misrepresentation of African-American culture and women on the movie screen.

Despite all of the barriers in place for female African American directors, they have found ways to make films that adhere to their integrity. Julie Dash released “Daughters of the Dust” in 1992; it is considered to be the first independent film directed by an African-American woman to be distributed nationally. Following in the footsteps of Dash, many directors have established their own distribution company or personally reached out to funders to make their projects happen. Most of their films are produced independently; therefore, recognition and public awareness is hard to come by for most African-American female directors.

African American women in Hollywood have been fighting for recognition in the film industry for a long time and the fight is nowhere near over. Actresses have made considerable leaps in the roles they play, but directors still do not receive recognition or chances. Both have learned to create their own opportunities and chances. They are doing what needs to be done in order to tell their stories. What do you think? Have the roles of African American women in Hollywood evolved?

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### African American Female Directors

- Darnell Martin, “I Like it Like That” (1994)
- Dee Rees, “Pariah” (2009)
- Tina Mabry, “Mississippi Damned” (2009)
- Ava DuVernay, “Middle of Nowhere” (2012), Best Director Prize at the Sundance Film Festival
During the period of Reconstruction following the end of the American Civil War, the former Confederate states struggled to recuperate their losses and rebuild. Preying upon the fears of white farmers that newly emancipated slaves would overthrow their social and economic dominance, white Democrats pushed legislation that practically denied African Americans their right to participate in the political process. Although the 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, prohibited states from denying citizens suffrage based on their race or class, southern legislators created new laws designed to circumvent the constitutional legislation. These laws included the establishment of “poll taxes,” fees one had to pay before voting, and literacy tests, which often were assessed subjectively by prejudiced evaluators.

An additional measure that several southern states enacted to prevent African Americans from participating in the political process was known as the Grandfather Clause. The Grandfather Clause stipulated that any persons whose grandfather had been permitted to vote prior to the Civil War would themselves be allowed to vote in contemporary elections even if they did not meet other necessary qualifications. This effectively allowed poor and illiterate whites to participate as voters while continuing to exclude African Americans.

With African Americans essentially barred from the political process, discriminatory voter laws gave way to a flood of state legislation designed to oppress and segregate the African American population. These laws came to be known as Jim Crow laws. The Jim Crow laws varied by state and were based on the ideology that African Americans could be segregated from white society by having “separate but equal” facilities and services of their own. “Separate but equal” was applied to everything from restaurants and schools to public transportation and nurses—even burial grounds.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s finally brought about an end to formal Jim Crow laws with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The effects of the Jim Crow laws, however, have been long lasting. Today, African-Americans continue to face discrimination in the job market. Although this discrimination is less flagrant than that which took place in the early and mid-20th century, numerous studies consistently demonstrate a significant gap in job placement and earnings between Caucasians and African Americans. According to the Council of Economic Advisers, for example, African Americans are twice as likely as white Americans to be unemployed. This inequity continues for employed African Americans who earn nearly 25 percent less than do white Americans in similar positions.

Troubled by these glaring figures, numerous researchers have conducted studies over the last 10 years to help determine why such a gap exists. When faced with two equally qualified candidates, one white and one black, do employers give preferential treatment to the white applicant? Or is the employment and earnings gap reflective of a gap in skills between the two groups?

A benchmark study conducted in 2004 by Bertrand and Mullainathan sought to answer these very questions. Researchers submitted hundreds of resumes to various employers throughout the cities of Boston and Chicago, with only one appreciable difference: the name of the candidate. Half the resumes were given stereotypically African American sounding names, while the other half received names associated with an Anglo-Saxon background. The researchers then recorded which resumes received a call from an employer inviting the candidate to move forward in the hiring process. Remarkably, resumes with white sounding names were 50 percent more likely to receive a call back than nearly identical resumes submitted with black sounding names. The study also found that it took an additional eight years of experience before resumes with African American names received the same call-back rate as did white resumes.

The study also found that these results were consistent across all the different industries that were involved in the experiment. Organizations typically associated with affirmative action hiring, employers at very large companies and equal opportunity employers demonstrated the same preference for white resumes as small companies located in predominately white suburbs.

The results of this research and subsequent studies that have confirmed its results demonstrate a pervasive bias, whether conscious or unconscious, against nonwhite job seekers, despite the existing legislation designed to promote equitable hiring practices.
Supporting Actresses vs. Leading Actresses—What’s the Difference?

BY MARIA NELSON

And the Academy Award goes to ... Anne Hathaway.

The Academy Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role, that is. This category, along with its counterpart, the award for best performance by an actor in a supporting role, was first awarded in 1937 (for movies created in 1936). With this addition, actors and actresses other than the few big-time stars could be competitive contenders for awards. But what exactly is the difference between a leading role and a supporting role in film? In By the Way, Meet Vera Stark, is Vera—or Tilly—a supporting or leading character?

For the Academy, at least, there really are no rules delineating which roles are supporting and which roles are leading in film; technically, leading roles don’t have to have more screen time or more lines, or be more important in the plot than do supporting roles. In fact, once in 1934, actor Barry Fitzgerald won both Oscars for the same performance, Father Fitzgibbon in “Going My Way.” The rules have since changed to prevent that; an actor or actress can only be nominated for one or the other award. However, according to Rule Six on oscars.com, all performances (barring some special cases, such as when the performance is dubbed) still can be considered for both categories in the prenominations phase. To determine nominations for a category, members of the Academy submit votes for any performance by an actor or actress in any film that has already been approved by the Academy. The votes for nominations in both categories are tabulated simultaneously, and a performance is nominated for whichever category it receives five votes for first. Moreover, more than one actor or actress from a single film can be nominated for Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role—and this has happened several times in the history of the Academy Awards. In a nutshell, the Academy decides on a case-by-case basis which roles are supporting and which are leads, for each film.

Determining whether an actor or actress’s career as a whole appoints him or her as either a supporting actor or lead is more difficult. In the mid-20th century film industry, actors who frequently played supporting roles but not leads were known as character actors.

This term still sometimes is used today. According to authors Alfred E. Twomey and Arthur F. McClure of “The Versatiles: A Study of Supporting Character Actors and Actresses in the American Motion Picture, 1930-1955”: “The character actor is someone who appears in a kind of role so frequently that he practically creates the role itself.” In “Actresses of a Certain Character,” author Axel Nissen writes, “About the character actress, we might use the well-worn adage ‘Always a bridesmaid, never a bride.’ Come to think of it, though, a character actress was more likely to play a housemaid than a bridesmaid.” One recent example of a “character actor” is Martin Landau. IMDb.com describes him as “the Oscar-winning character actor”; he won the Oscar for Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role in 1995 for playing Bela Lugosi in Tim Burton’s “Ed Wood.” A New Yorker article from April 3, 1995, notes, “He played more one-dimensional villains than he cares to remember.”

For some character actors, it may seem as if they are stuck playing only those roles that fit their certain “character”—the lanky clown; the housemaid—never moving into leading roles or receiving recognition. Nissen describes the typical Hollywood character actress of 1930-1950 as “uncredited, unrecognized, unawarded if not unrewarded, appearing in maybe a dozen or more films a year, the first to end up on the cutting room floor, the last to be photographed or interviewed.” Interestingly, this idea seems to fit many leading actors and actresses, as well as supporting actors and actresses. Both Vera Stark and Gloria Mitchell in By the Way, Meet Vera Stark tend to play specific character types in film. Thus, character actors and supporting actors are not always the same, but it seems they overlap more often than not.

Now, and in the late 20th century, many actors and actresses have played both supporting and leading roles. Even in the era of 1930-1955, the era “The Versatiles” was written about, the author prefaces the book with the disclaimer, “The process of selection [for inclusion in the book] also proved difficult. Many times there was a fine line between what could be called feature players, supporting players and those actors who crossed over into a degree of stardom later in their careers in movies.
and television.” On the other hand, some authors suggest that the ambiguity between the two categories is instead a late-20th century development. Ron Smith, author of “Comic Support: Second Bananas in the Movies,” wrote in 1993, “It seems that some of the people who would have been supporting players in the thirties or forties are being given starring roles in movies and sitcoms today.”

Moreover, many supporting actors and actresses have been very successful, despite rarely or never playing a leading role. Smith writes, “Over the years, many stars have made careers out of playing the wisecracking pal, the long-winded associate, the befuddled uncle, the finicky aunt, and a host of odd and endearing others.” He adds, “In the case of the great support players, they spent years perfecting their craft and brought to their roles the same dedication, professionalism, timing, and comic instincts as performers who received top billing.”

About Hattie McDaniel, one of the only black women to win an Oscar and known for her performances of Mammy characters, Nissen writes, “In truth, though, Hattie McDaniel was herself a star and had historic talents to match any of the white actresses she performed with.”

In many cases, supporting actors are possibly even more essential than the stars of film. Twomey and McClure argue, for example, “These characters were often more than supporting players. Frequently they were as important to the story as the stars.” Perhaps this is why they are called supporting actors now more frequently than character actors. Twomey and McClure in fact continue: “During the 1930s and 1940s every good movie and most of the bad ones had several vivid portrayals of character actors that literally supported the entire production. The young stars were backed up by these very proficient actors who in turn could make the stars and the pictures themselves highly successful.” Alternatively, their roles could have less to do with the plot but add depth and technical acting elements to the performance. Nonetheless, the importance of supporting actors and actresses, and the hard work they put into each performance, is not to be overlooked.

So, is Vera Stark a supporting or a leading actress? Certainly if we look at the play By the Way, Meet Vera Stark as a whole, she is the lead, the title character. But if we look at her role in the film—Tilly in “The Belle of New Orleans”—she would have been considered a character actress. Yet, Herb and Carmen praise her performance in film in a way that makes her seem like the star. On page 62, Herb says, “Marie is played by Gloria Mitchell, America’s Little Sweetie Pie, and Tilly is played, of course, by Vera Stark in her first major screen appearance. Vera does her best to bring life and complexity to the underwritten role of Tilly, and it’s in many ways her performance that elevates the film to … dare I say it … art.”
Playwright Lynn Nottage describes the character, Gloria Mitchell, with a brief stage note on the first page of dialogue in By The Way, Meet Vera Stark: “HOLLYWOOD, 1933...GLORIA MITCHELL, 28, ‘white’ starlet, in a dressing gown lies across the church nursing a healthy glass of gin.”

Pretty simple description, if you know exactly what a starlet is. We did not, and so our questions began. Is Gloria Mitchell a star? Or is a starlet less famous than a star? Is a starlet a celebrity? Or is a celebrity a starlet? Is famous synonymous with celebrity, and if it is, is starlet a synonym for both terms? Or are starlet, celebrity and fame all terms that lie on different points of a sliding scale? And was all of this different in 1933, 1973 and 2003—the three very different eras in which By the Way, Meet Vera Stark is staged?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines starlet as a small star, presumably referring to the shining, astronomical body in the night sky, or a young performer (usually an actress) in the world of entertainment. The Film Encyclopedia defines starlet, specifically in the entertainment industry, as: “A young actress promoted and publicized as a future star.” The term frequently is used to describe actresses from the 1960s. In the 1930s, other synonymous terms, such as baby star, were more well-known (the Western Association of Motion Picture Advertisers released a list of 13 WAMPAS Baby Stars each year between 1922 and 1934). Today, although people apply it in reference to a historical era, starlet probably wouldn’t be used to describe a 21st century actress. Author Rebecca Mead, in a New Yorker article from 2003, notes, “In an earlier era, when Hollywood was as yet unembarrassed by its pervasive depreciation of women, [Jaime] Pressly would have been called a starlet—one of those multitudinous young women whom the studios groomed and kept on their rosters from whose ranks true stars would through a coincidence of talent and luck, emerge.”

Interestingly, the fashion world sometimes associates “starlet” with the 1930s, with many listings for 1930s starlet dress populating vintage retail websites and eBay.com. Other uses of the word exist. There is a genus of starfish named Starlet, and between 1973 and 1999, Toyota produced a subcompact car called the Starlet.

The diminutive suffix “-let” connotes that, in any case, starlet is in some way smaller or less important than star. Certainly starlets were young actresses. Susan Hart, an actress from films of the 1960s, was quoted once saying, “We were called starlets. I guess you were a starlet, I don’t know, until you played opposite somebody over 30.” Glamour, but often accompanied by flightiness, seems characteristic of the type. A New York Times blog responded recently to Emilia Clarke as Holly Golightly in the Broadway version of Breakfast at Tiffany’s with the headline, “Theater Talkback: The Season of the Sputtering Starlet.” With starlets, there was also always an element of uncertainty as to their success, since they were so young. In “The Wampas Baby Stars,” author Roy Liebman writes, “There were of course a large number of Baby Stars who had entirely undistinguished careers, but many others were to become top celebrities—if not necessarily top actresses—with their fair share of Academy Awards.” Liebman continues later, “There were also many who attained second rank but nevertheless respectable stardom.” Sometimes, the idea of starlet connotes that an actress never really became a full-fledged star.

But what, then, is stardom, and what does it mean to be a star?

A New Yorker article titled “The Iron Law of Stardom” from 1997 claims, “Stardom is … the name for a discrete and recognizable episode in the life of a star … Stardom is what makes people stars, but although stars may shine forever, stardom always fades. It’s the difference between being recognized in restaurants and being talked about in restaurants.” The article also claims that there is an unbreakable—“Iron”—of stardom: that it lasts no greater than three years. 1930s starlet Jean Harlow once predicted stardom length: “Two years in the spotlight if you make it—and when that’s over, you’re nothing but a has-been for the rest of your life.” A tabloid in 2009 then concluded that hers was “The first celebrity car-crash life.”

Certainly, this short time frame to make it or break it applies to starlets: Mead writes, “The life cycle of a starlet, like that of a gymnast or figure skater, is a short one, and though some actresses do break through … most are obsolete before they have had a
chance to render themselves essential." But even when challenged with stars of generally higher esteem such as The Beatles, author Louis Menand of “The Iron Law of Stardom” writes, “The Beatles didn’t overcome the three-year limit; They simply enjoyed two consecutive three-year terms. In order to do this, they effectively had to be two different groups: lovable mop tops (1964-67), followed by hippie artistes (1967-70).” Stardom, certainly, is dependent on common opinion, and perhaps “a reciprocal act of faith, in which the star’s duty is to make abundance incarnate and the audience’s duty is to keep believing in the star’s image,” as John Lahr writes in a 1996 profile of actress Sharon Stone titled “The Big Picture Starlet.”

Fame, if not celebrity, contains an element of entertainment industry politics as well. Reality television stars are famous, but are they celebrities? The children of Hollywood celebrities are famous, but are they celebrities, or even starlets while they’re still young? In her article, Mead quotes Pressly saying, perhaps with a hint of resentment, “[Kate] Hudson is the daughter of Goldie Hawn. But had she not been her mother’s daughter, would she have been given ‘Almost Famous’ for her first role? Probably not.” The designation celebrity seems to come with a cultural value. Beyond simply knowing a celebrity’s name, we expect to be entertained by him or her. In this way, celebrity is almost synonymous with stardom, as is fame with star. It’s the difference between being recognized and being talked about, though this analogy is yet imperfect.

In By the Way, Meet Vera Stark, Gloria Mitchell is a starlet, but does she grow to become a star? Based on the reactions of Herb, Carmen and Afua in 2003 in the play, Vera seems like the real star.

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“We vant it to feel thoroughly authentic ... It is time for cinema to take bold new leap. It is time to capture the truth ... I vant actors that ... no, I don’t vant actors, I vant people.”

Maximillian von Oster’s lofty goal of obtaining actors who actually understand the antebellum world of “The Belle of New Orleans” in Lynn Nottage’s new play, By the Way, Meet Vera Stark, calls into question the role of truth in acting, in film and in theater. In a profession of make-believe, does one need to maintain the facts of a story to convey the emotional sentiments?

Makers of movies and plays based on actual events often take a certain amount of artistic license with their telling, sometimes adding details to enhance the drama of the story or excising events considered inconsequential to the movement of the plot. Other times, multiple anecdotes on a certain topic are gathered together and optimal details are taken from each to create a new narrative. The idea and theme of the topic remains true while the story is fabricated. Even 2nd Story, an oral personal narrative theater company in Chicago, will take some amount of poetic license with their stories. The tellers who share their personal life events at these monthly shows go through an extensive curation process where their stories are edited for the best possible performance. This may include some judicious reordering of events for the most dramatic effect.

Documentary exists as a style of performance in both film and theater. Anna Deveare Smith is perhaps one of the most notable practitioners of documentary theater, travelling across the country interviewing persons of interest and then recreating their responses on stage. Her work maintains the verisimilitude of her interviews, to the point of manifesting the interviewee’s physical ticks in her own performance. Similar in ideology, although not in product, is the popular National Public Radio storytelling show, “This American Life.” A purely journalistic endeavor, the show distributes its news stories through all the sonic theatrics of a play, even separating the story into acts. But the stories on “This American Life” are never fictive despite their drama—they are true. Quotes are taken from actual people; statistics given are cross-checked. Even the journalists sometimes live out the events they are reporting on.

This is why when “This American Life” aired an excerpt from theater performer Mike Daisey’s one-man show, The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs, an account of Daisey’s trip to China to interview workers from Foxconn, the leading manufacturer of Apple products, and then a few weeks later had to retract the story, it came as
quite a shock. “This American Life” learned that Daisey had taken extreme poetic licensing with his story. He, in fact, had lied about his trip to China. Daisey fabricated a number of the more intense scenes, including meeting workers poisoned by hexane, a chemical used to clean Apple product before packaging. He did not meet these people and admits that he exaggerated some details of his story in the episode titled, “Retraction.” “This American Life” host Ira Glass accuses Daisey of fabricating parts of his story, and Daisey apologizes for allowing the work to be excerpted on the show, knowing that the work itself was not up to journalistic standards. However, he defends that as a work of theater, he has nothing to apologize for. “I don’t know that I would say in a theatrical context it isn’t true. I believe that when I perform it in a theatrical context in the theater, that when people hear the story in those terms, that we have different languages for what truth means.”

Although I don’t agree with Daisey’s assumption that theater, whether cinema or live, has a different definition of truth, I think that audiences are readily willing to believe what is set forth on the stage or screen. Which makes one wonder why we do this: Why are we, as audience members, willing to take the stories of movies and theater as truth?

I think part of the conundrum is because of the unusual amount of trust we put into these mediums. While attending movies and plays, we pay before receiving the product, never truly knowing if it’s worth what’s being asked. We trust that we will be entertained, even though there is no guarantee. Dissatisfaction does not prevent us from returning to the event in the future. Therefore, an initial trust is instigated between audience members and the performing medium.

That relationship of trust is further extended between actors and audience at the live theater. There is no separation between the actors and the audience, no lens to filter the story through. You see real people experience the events of the story. The tangibility of the actors enhances the reality or “truth” of the situation. This tangibility does not exist in film. However, the technology of film and the historical perceptions surrounding the camera lend to the acceptance of truth in film. One of the original uses of cameras was to document the real world in full detail at a specific point in time. Only in the recent century has the potential to use cameras to create fiction rather than document the real, come to light. However, the understanding of the ability to film and capture truth via a camera further supports the willingness of audiences to accept truth from movies.

Ultimately, movies and plays show us stories and worlds different from our own, places and ideas unknown. The late Roger Ebert put it best, “[A great movie] lets you understand a little bit more about what it’s like to be a different gender, a different race, a different age, a different economic class. It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us.” Even in the era of the smartphone, when information is instantaneous, theaters remain a liminal space. What is performed is a re-creation, but we take its plausibility as truth. They exist between the real and the imagined. Stories have long been used as outlets of comfort and warning. Our belief anchors them into the real, into truth. When we come across the unknown, we open ourselves to new thoughts. Movies and plays are familiar mediums to process these unknowns. Thus, through the known, we accept the strange.

“[A great movie] lets you understand a little bit more about what it’s like to be a different gender, a different race, a different age, a different economic class. It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us.”
— Rober Ebert

Do you agree? Share your thoughts!
www.goodmantheatre.org/engage-learn
Enduring the Great Depression
BY TERESA RENDE

By The Way, Meet Vera Stark opens as starlet Gloria Mitchell runs lines with Vera Stark for an upcoming film. The stage notes and dialogue paint the first era in which the play takes place—1930s Hollywood (specifically 1933). As Gloria complains of issues memorizing her dialogue and the absurdity of having to do a screen test for such a typical female role, Vera retorts, “I don’t have to tell you every actress with halfway good teeth wants this role. And believe me, they’ll do whatever it takes to get it.”

While their discussion hinges on a specific role under a specific director, Vera’s statement would be true of almost any role in 1933 Hollywood, when artists suffered the blows of the Great Depression as did most other professions. The loss of capital and decreasing value of the dollar didn’t make producers and studios keen on creating films with the same tenacity most of the 1920s had enjoyed. The solutions to weathering the Great Depression, however, were pragmatic and focused on a key element of struggling through any depression or recession: hope that the industry would bounce back and operations that assume the same. The film industry prepared for entertainment’s eventual bounce back while also managing the tough times of the depression. It did so by capitalizing on economies of scale reflected in other commercial markets; maintaining a high level of production and, at that, quality production; and negotiating per-project contracts to industry employees while simultaneously paying big stars and scouting new talent for a future entertainment boom.

As many know, entertainment has extraordinarily high overhead cost. Actors, writers, raw materials, sets, stage hands, front of house employees, building costs, musicians—the list goes on. As such, utilizing economies of scale allowed larger movie houses to stay in business while also discovering new items that could be mass produced for monetary gain. Douglass Gomery, in his article “Film and Business History: The Development of an American Mass Entertainment Industry,” explains, “During the 1920s, the American film industry developed into a vertically integrated ‘big business.’ Ownership of a 100 to 1,000 unit theatre chain guaranteed the major Hollywood companies outlets for their film.” With regard specifically to Chicago’s own Balaban and Katz, Gomery continues, “As B&K acquired more and more theatres, it was able to utilize the chain-store mode of operation to cover costs ... With a Chicago plus upper-Midwest circuit of its own, B&K could mount shows no single competing theatre could afford. Monopsony power helped in the construction of theatres and in bargaining with projectionists’ and musicians’ unions.”

Another idea that Balaban and Katz instituted, along with many other movie houses, was to garner revenue by selling cheaper products than the movies themselves: food. In the past, many patrons bought candy or popcorn from nearby confectionary stores or drawn wagons before attending a movie. In the 1920s, movie chains often avoided selling these goods, thinking the sale of such low-class foods might sully the appearance and image of the movie house itself. During the Great Depression, though, this was money to be made by a chain theater. Gomery continues:

“... most [movie houses] added sales of candy, and began to experiment with the marketing of other foods. Popcorn quickly emerged corn as the cornerstone of refreshment operations for it possessed a seemingly addictive aroma which filled lobbies as customers paused before the movies, and during intermissions. Popcorn was easy to manufacture and procure, and seemed to appeal to movie-goers of all ages. Moreover, popcorn functioned as what economists label an inferior good. Like other cheap starches, as incomes go down, people consume more, not less.”

Balaban and Katz didn’t just stop at food, though. They were part of the creation of an entire movie-going package that was attractive to many Chicagoans and indeed the nation. First, there was a technological element that few cities yet had: air conditioning. As Chicago was the hub of the meat packing industry, affordable air conditioning techniques were developed locally. This allowed companies outside meat packing, including B&K, to add another dimension to moviegoing: cooling off! This technology developed and found itself across more theaters over time. When the Great Depression caused movie attendance to drop sharply, movie theaters looked to differentiate their product and attract more customers; hence, the development of
the double (and sometimes even triple) feature. Some theaters, such as B&K, continued to feature stage performers between shows, making it both a cinema and live performance event. With a movie, live stage show, intermission time and cheap food to purchase in the lobby, all under the cool roof of air conditioning, moviegoing became an all-day event that made the ticket price even more attractive to financially strapped patrons.

Despite the big-business model and the addition of cheap goods for sale at intermission, the movie industry did still have to worry about the movies themselves, both in regard to the quantity and quality of movies made during the Great Depression. In his investigation of Radio-Keith-Orpheum, (one of the Big Five studios of Hollywood’s Golden Age), “Writing the Script for Survival and Resurgence, RKO Studio and the Impact of the Great Depression, 1932-1933,” author Edwin J. Perkins explains:

“With no signs of economic recovery, RKO executives in Hollywood and New York City reassessed their options. What was needed was a viable strategy that would ensure financial survival during hard times without losing too much market share on the screens of thousands of movie theatre at home and abroad. Equally important, RKO hoped to maintain its status as a full-fledged member of the Motion Picture Producers Association—a self-regulating organization or cartel created in 1922 by the large and medium-sized movie studios operating in the Hollywood area. Through the application and enforcement of informal rules and codes, association officers oversaw the operations and behavior of participants in an increasingly oligopistic industry. The association’s aim was to preserve and protect market stability, while promoting a reasonable level of mutual cooperation among members.”

While slashing production quantity would have been one method of cutting costs, it would have left all those big movie houses short of product to sell (i.e.: tickets to different movies), making the industry suffer more on the whole. It also would have broken up the current teams of actors, directors, technicians, etc., making it difficult for the studios and film industry to bounce back when, and if, the rest of the economy did. RKO, for example, chose instead to convert a number of employee long-term contracts to per-production contracts. Perkins elaborates:

“Since the output of films was largely maintained, most employees suffered only modest reductions in their annual real wages given the general decline in consumer prices and the cost of living. In short, RKO management decided to preserve the core of its institutional and organizational capacities. As a result, the enterprise was in a favorable position to make a resounding rebound when the film industry finally turned the corner in late 1932.”

RKO’s strategies didn’t go unheard by other movie studios. Indeed, the previously mentioned Motion Picture Producers Association served as an industrywide space for discussion of strategies to manage the continuing financial distress. Studios and movie houses frequently shared one another’s techniques. As Perkins explains, “Studio professionals openly discussed their problems and invited suggestions for possible solutions, and especially any proposed industry-wide solutions. If Kahane [RKO’s 1932 CEO] was perplexed over certain issues at RKO, he did not hesitate to phone one of his peers at Paramount or MGM and ask for advice.” This is not dissimilar from the current regional theater industry, in which theaters openly share best practices and common difficulties. The industry, as a result, prospers with one another’s successes instead of competing against them. One element of the Depression-era movie industry that remained quite competitive, though, was the use of stars in A-level movies. While some costs could be cut from production, many studios held onto their star contracts as stars were more likely to sell tickets. At RKO, for example, the two highest paid employees on the payroll in 1932 were two movie stars, Constance Bennett and Ann Harding, each making more than double what the chief executive officer made!

Studios also experimented with the release of cheaper productions, which came to be known as B-level movies. These had lower production costs; cheaper, sometimes more hastily or sloppily written scripts; and lesser known
talent. While some studios, such as Columbia, saved costs by converting to doing only B-level movies, other studios believed doing only B-movies, or A-movies with B-level actors, would hurt their reputation (both in the films themselves and with the movie houses). When it came time to renegotiate annual contracts, RKO, Paramount and MGM instead opted to keep their stars and A-level movies with slightly decreased contracts costs, while also creating a litany of B-level movies to test out up-and-coming stars. For RKO, especially, the dual strategy of maintaining A-level actors while testing up-and-comers in B-level films yielded such greats at Katherine Hepburn and Fred Astaire.

By the mid-1930s, the movie industry started to turn around. Again studios could invest big money in quality star actors, directors and screenwriters. It was only in 1933 that “King Kong” was released and captured the world’s imagination by storm, fueling the struggling, but still very apparent, public interest in cinema. The key to surviving the Great Depression, though, had been in investment and economic strategy. Movie houses utilized economies of scale and product differentiation by operating as chain-store businesses while adding new elements to the movie-going experience, including concessions, air conditioning and double feature bills. Movie studios continued to produce large-scale, quality films at a loss, while also testing new stars in B-films, to weather the Depression-era years and prepare for an eventual entertainment resurgence. Many studios and theaters continue to use key strategies developed during the Depression era as they proved a viable guideline for the future of the movie industry.

ABOVE: One of Balaban and Katz’s most iconic movie houses, The Chicago Theatre, built in 1921. The Chicago Theatre is on the National Register of Historic Places and is known as an unofficial Chicago icon. Photo by Nevels; reprinted under a Creative Commons license with permission from the photographer via Wikimedia Commons.
“Black” Has Three Syllables?
BY KIMBERLY FURGANSON

“Why are you so black?” A light-skinned, African American female junior high classmate of mine actually asked me this. Frankly, I didn’t know how to answer her, or why it was an issue in the first place. Then, there was the little, psychopathic, green-eyed black boy who told me I was ugly nearly every day of junior high. I was not in secondary school at a time when “dark skin was in.” In fact, when I was in school in the 1980s, the joke was that “light skin was in” because of all the popular black singers who were on the scene at the time, like El DeBarge (can’t deny I wanted him to be my future husband), Prince and Al B. Sure. It’s hard to think of myself as not being in because of skin color, but it was always noticeable to me when me and my group of friends would go to the high school dances, and, being the darkest of the group, I often would often get passed over for a dance the entire night while my lighter-skinned friends wouldn’t. What was wrong with me? I wore denim miniskirts with leg warmers and Madonna black rubber bracelets were draping my arm too. If a guy did ask me to dance, I would automatically turn to either side and look at my lighter-skinned friends to make sure that he was talking to me. I rarely, if ever, heard the words “pretty and dark skinned” in the same sentence. Black guys (interracial dating was not as acceptable as it is now) were flipping out over Prince’s talented and not-so-talented fair-skinned protégés Sheila E. (the talented one), Apollonia and Vanity. These fair-skinned women were the examples of beauty at the time.

I also can recall a time in my biology class when I was one of three black students in a room of predominately white people, including the teacher, who told the class, “I’m a biology teacher and I didn’t realize black people can tan.” Suddenly, we black girls were in a metaphorical Petri dish being examined by the rest of our classmates as they stared at us in wonder. I didn’t care to get singled out like some Barnum and Bailey oddity. Black people come in a multitude of skin colors, and even a darker-skinned person like myself gets a bikini line when out in the sun, in case you didn’t know.

My earliest recollection of the color thing was at about 4 years old when I was coming home with my mom from a glorious shopping trip from downtown Cleveland, Ohio—my hometown. We were walking toward our townhouse apartment when a neighbor, a white boy about 7 years old, came outside of the unit he and his family lived in, and as we passed him, he came up to me and said, “Hi, stupid black girl.” For the record, I was more offended about being called stupid; however, the cutting tone of his very Midwestern-heavy, vowel-tinged-voice with the emphasis on that short “a” in the word black had a sting to it. “What? I’m black and it is bad? ‘Black’ has three syllables?” This was the beginning of lost innocence of afternoons of my Sesame Street existence. Before I could say or do anything, my mother’s long-finger-nailed-hand sliced across his face in front of his mother, who actually kind of cursed him out in embarrassment as well. To clarify, I’m not suggesting violence, I’m just sayin’... I couldn’t understand why he would say something like this, but at that age I was still too joyous about being a kid and the fun I was having in my life to dwell on it.

In spite of these incidents and others, I was very fortunate to have two great parents, both of whom would be considered darker skinned: Dad was a dark chocolate and Mom is a dark cinnamon, who taught me by example to be the very best I could be and not to let my skin color get in the way of anything. I don’t recall having a skin-color conversation with them, but I was very aware that my father beat all odds and made it out of a crime-infested Cleveland neighborhood at a time when blacks were not welcome at mostly white colleges and got
accepted into the notoriously-white-at-the time Louisiana State University during the early 1960s. He also would be one of the few blacks to work in a corporate job as an accountant in the early 1970s. He is no longer with me in the physical sense, but I definitely look to his example and try not to think about my skin color as a crutch to anything. And anyone who has a problem with it, it is exactly that—their problem and not mine. Mom takes a more spiritual approach since her slap-happy days and tries to instill the lesson in me that we are spiritual beings and not our bodies—someone PLEASE tell these guys that!

Even though on occasion I still deal with insensitive remarks from others regarding skin color in all kinds of settings, and still sometimes struggle to feel attractive, at this stage of my life (you do the math), I like my dark skin. Fortunately, I have met men of various ethnic backgrounds who do too. I feel very fortunate to be living in a time when we have First Lady Michelle Obama on the cover of Vogue magazine and we have singers like India.Arie singing the praises of brown skin. How wonderful it is to have Queen Latifah as a spokesperson for Cover Girl, and for them and other companies to have affordable makeup lines for women of color. With the exception of Fashion Fair, there really were slim pickings for a darker-skinned woman when it came to foundation hues. On a personal note, I love when people guess my age as younger than I am due to the gift of melanin. It’s a beautiful thing.
From Someone Else’s Perspective

BY LAUREN BLAIR

From someone else’s perspective, it might look easy to be a white-looking African-American, but trust me when I say it’s not that simple.

I owe my fair, sun-burnable skin and wash ‘n’ go straight hair to my Irish-American father, but my mother is a beautiful, brown-skinned African-American. For all of my life, as far back as I can remember, people have asked “what are you?” or confessed that they “couldn’t tell” whether I was Jewish or Puerto Rican or “mixed” with black. I grew up knowing the antiquated term “mulatto” and feeling like an outcast to both races. I wasn’t “black” enough for some black folks and always felt different, and significantly less privileged, than white folks.

It wasn’t easy for me to find my place in a world that I believe defines people, and the opportunities available to people, primarily by race. As a child, I didn’t think about it much, but in my exclusive, private college prep boarding school, I assimilated with the majority because I could. In college, after immersing myself in what Cornell University called at the time ‘Africana Studies,’ my racial paradigm shifted significantly and I militantly proclaimed my blackness. As I look back on my formative years, I’m sad to say that I clearly felt I had to choose a side.

So where does that leave me today? I proudly define myself as an African-American woman and I’m happy to say I’ve felt comfortable in my skin for a long time. I identify as African-American for many reasons, but one of the most compelling is that I believe I can do far more to confront racism as a black woman who looks white. I leverage whatever white privilege I have by dint of my physical appearance to speak up against racial prejudice and inequality. My whiteness gives me credibility to call out racism that exists today in subtle, but still very real, forms. It also gives me the opportunity to approach and potentially educate non-African-Americans on race issues and maybe their own unperceived prejudices. Ultimately, my white privilege gives me a platform to fight against racism, but it is unquestionably my sense of black power that compels me to do so.

LAUREN BLAIR has been on the Scenemakers Board since summer 2004, when the Goodman’s young professional board was reconceived. She currently serves on the Leadership Team as Secretary and worked closely with President Aaron Davidson in implementing the new strategic vision for the Scenemakers over the past few years.

Lauren is a partner in the Litigation and Alternate Dispute Resolution Practice Group at the downtown Chicago-based law firm of Pedersen & Houpt, where she has practiced since 2000. She has been practicing law since 1994, and is licensed in Illinois and California (and formerly New Jersey). She lives in West Town and is married to David Wheeler, a frequent participant in Goodman events, and they have two children, Andrew and Erin, ages 8 and 6.
What should I wear?

Definitely dress nicely but comfortably; try business casual. No tank tops, ripped jeans, etc. Baseball caps or hats must be moved once you enter the theatre. The Goodman is air-conditioned so be sure to bring an extra sweater or dress warmly.

What should I bring?

Only what you really need. Electronic devices such as PSP, Nintendo DS, smart phones, and laser pointers are not permitted during the show. If it makes noise or is distracting, please refrain from having it out in the theatre. A purse, bag, or backpack is fine. School supplies are not necessary. Remember that you are here to sit back, watch and enjoy, so don’t bring anything you don’t need.

(Please remember):

No smoking, and no eating or drinking while inside the theatre.

What if I need to leave the theatre during the show?

Only if it is an emergency. Otherwise, it’s very disrespectful. Make sure to use restrooms before the show, or wait until intermission.

Have respect for other audience members. This means no talking during the performance, no feet on seats, and no kicking. (For your safety and others’!)
How should I respond to what’s going on on the stage?

Honestly but appropriately. If you find something funny, then laugh—but don’t laugh for five minutes straight or laugh so hard that you need to leave the theatre. Theatre is very different from watching a movie at home. Always remember that you are in a room full of people who are there to watch the performance. They can hear your responses just as well as you can hear theirs. Most important, the actors can hear and see you. They will appreciate any appropriate feed back but might be extremely offended if it is inappropriate. Whether you enjoy the play or not, you owe respect to the actors for having given it a try.

What to do during Intermission:

Most plays have a 15 minute intermission. This gives you time to stretch your legs, walk, use the restroom, get water and discuss the play with your friends.

We do ask that if you are sitting on the main floor that you remain downstairs and if you are sitting in the mezzanine that you remain upstairs. There are restrooms on both floors. When intermission is over, the lights in the lobby will flash several times; that is your cue to get back to your seat because the performance is about to begin!

What to do after the show:

There will be a post-show discussion immediately following the performance. Members of the cast will come out on stage and answer your questions. Feel free to ask anything that’s on your mind about the show, but please remember to be respectful.

What to do before the show:

When your class arrives, your teacher will let the Education staff know how many people are in your group. It is a good idea to arrive at least 15-20 minutes before the performance.

If you are late, often you will not be allowed to enter the show until after intermission. Once your group is called, an usher will lead you to your seats and hand you a program.

Please promptly sit where you have been assigned. Remember that the show needs to begin on time and everyone needs to be seated.

And remember the Golden Rule of Theatre-going:

Theatre artists are paid professionals. When you enter a theatre, you are entering their work space. Respect their work as you would have them respect yours.

Enjoy the Show!
As a patron of the theatre, it is important to know how to read your ticket and find your seat. Generally, seats for all performances in the Goodman’s Albert Theatre are assigned seating, so be sure to know how to be able to find your seat. When you come with your school, you will be ushered to a section where you and your fellow students can sit and enjoy the play together.

Below is a seating chart— a map of all the seats in the Albert Theater – and an explanation of how to read your ticket. If you have any problems, ask an usher for help. They’re here for you!

Goodman’s Albert Theatre

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Reading Your Ticket
BY GOODMAN EDUCATION
After you have seen the show and discussed your responses in the classroom, it’s time to let us know what you thought! Your response letter plays an important role at Goodman Theatre. All of the letters we receive are forwarded to our artists, and you may get a response!

Pick one of the artists involved with By the Way, Meet Vera Stark whose work was particularly memorable to you—an actor, designer, the playwright or the director—and write that artist a letter describing your experience at the show and your feedback about his or her work. Be honest and ask any questions that are on your mind.

Send us your letter within one month of seeing the show, and we’ll forward it on to that artist!

Important information to include:

- Your name, age and school
- Your mailing address (where a response may be sent)
- Any questions or special observations you want to share with the artists!

Send your letters to:
Education and Community Engagement
Goodman Theatre
170 North Dearborn Street
Chicago, IL 60601

Or email us at:
education@goodmantheatre.org

Here is a great student letter we received in response to Animal Crackers:

Dear Cast and Crew,

I would have to say that every single one of you have done a superb job in this play. All the effort you have put forth into this play has resulted in a memorable experience for all of us. I thought it was clever that the actors, actresses and the orchestra interacted with the audience. From viewing the original film of Animal Crackers, I think the cast played in the play and the original cast of Animal Crackers very similar! This play might have been the first encounter of the Marx brothers for many teenagers and children and I believe that the cast of Animal Crackers proved that early comedy can also be entertaining and memorable!

The director’s vision of the play was a rather conscious one. Exposing the Marx brothers to the vast majority of people who never knew about them and bringing back nostalgic memories to the older audience was a great idea. This play was actually my first play and a first trip to Goodman Theatre. I myself, as a young adult, finally realized that plays are enjoyable and gratifying. The play had all the elements of emotion and slapstick comedy which made it a great one. The technical aspects as well as the props were amazingly set to follow each scene. My favorite scene had to be the scene where Harpo and Rivelli tried to clear up the misunderstanding of “The Flash.” I thought the script was very flowing and comfortable. Was there any improv involved? I did not find any negative aspects of this play. I have found the play and the ambiance of Goodman Theatre very positive. I give Animal Crackers two thumbs up.

Sincerely,
A CPS student

Goodman Theatre Education & Community Engagement is also online!

Check us out on Facebook:
http://www.facebook.com/goodmaned

Or Twitter:
http://twitter.com/GoodmanEd

We love hearing your thoughts, so don’t be afraid to drop us a line, comment, tag us in a note, @reply, or retweet us. Also check out our online educational resources for more information regarding the play you’ve seen, or anything else you’d like to know about how our programs (and theatre) work!

Keep checking in for updates online!