

An excerpt from

THE RENT PARTY

By Valerie Curtis-Newton

Valerie Curtis-Newton  
5951 44<sup>th</sup> Avenue South  
Seattle WA 98118  
Valcn0902@gmail.com  
206.719.4677  
© 2021

### Synopsis:

The spirit of Bessie Palmer has come back from the dead to get her earthly house in order. She can't connect with her husband Ray on the other side until her children get themselves sorted out. As her family gathers bail money to free her activist son-in-law, old patterns and grudges get in the way. Bessie meddles and pushes the entire family to come together to support the cause - uniting a house divided.

### Time

Evening. August 10, 1968

### Setting

A house in a mid-western city and a world of ghosts and memories.

NB: The front porch should be pretty fully realized while the inside of the house can be represented more simply. Projections, and a few carefully curated pieces of period furniture, for example. The right chair, table, prop makes the world. The design needs to provide the flexibility to move from the "real world" into memory or ghost world and back again. The worlds can also all exist simultaneously.

Characters continue actions in their rooms until it is time for them to go to another space. The whole house is active to some extent for the entire performance. Magical and unexpected things can happen any/everywhere.

### Notations

[] Indicates interactive options - Indicates an interruption

...Indicates a pregnant pause

/ Indicates overlapping

## Timeline

- 1968 - The Party
- 1967 - Hamp is arrested
- 1966 - John Lee is killed in Vietnam
- 1965 - Bessie dies (66)
- 1963 - Medgar Evers murder radicalizes Hamp
- 1953 - Julia & Hamp move in to care for Bessie
- 1951 - Bessie diagnosed with MS
- 1949 - Ray dies of a heart attack
- 1947 - Pearl Harbor/WWII
- 1947 - Ekundayo (nee Theresa - 21)
- 1943 - Julia and Hamp marry
- 1936 - Sunda born (32)
- 1935 - Ray buys the house
- 1920 - Julia Born (45)
- 1919 - Dora born (46)
- 1917 - WWI begins/Ray enlists
- 1917 - Ray & Bessie marry
- 1899 - Bessie born
- 1897 - Ray born

Characters - in order of appearance (All characters are African American.)

\*Ray Palmer - The patriarch (The memory of a ghost) in his late teens and early 30's.

Bessie Palmer - The matriarch (A ghost) in her 60's.

Uncle Moe (Morris Gilbert) - Bessie Palmer's brother, a father protector of the Palmer Girls.

Mr. Rose - Uncle Moe's friend. A WWII vet, he owns the neighborhood barbershop.

Julia Palmer Harris - Early 40s. A wife, mother and activist.

Sunda Palmer Bates - Early 30s. Widowed by the Vietnam War.

Dora Palmer Mason - Early 40s. Childless and somber.

\*Wardell Wilkerson - a ex-con, hustler with a reputation as a very bad man.

Hampton Harris - Julia's husband; leader; a voice on the phone.

Ekundayo (Theresa) Harris - Hamp feminist. Militant and effective.

Lisa Ritter - Ekundayo's lover. A

\*Bobby Harris - Hamp's Brother. A

Rev. Ritter - Lisa's father and a Palmer Family. an activist and community and Julia's daughter. A pastor's daughter. Vietnam Vet. one-time friend of the

\*Ray, Wardell and Bobby can all be played by the same actor.

**ACT 1: THE RENT PARTY - PROLOGUE**

Darkness. The distant sounds of banging pipes, sawing wood and hammering nails rise in a gentle symphony of construction. Lights rise slowly on the foggy darkness revealing the silhouette of Young Ray Palmer - in WWI uniform - carrying a chicken-greased stained paper bag.

**RAY (VO)**

"This war is going to change things for colored men."

60year-old Bessie rushes on with her walker and her carpetbag. Not seeing Ray, she is in the middle of a story...

**BESSIE**

Next thing I know, we standing on the train platform waiting for the train to take him away.

Noticing him in the distance, Bessie stops. As the construction music gives way to the sounds of violins playing softly, relieved, she moves closer looking at him like a exhibit in a museum...

**BESSIE (CONT'D) (reminiscing)**

I stood there wanting it to be just like in the movies: a fog-filled night with violins playin' and a perfectly timed tear rolling down my cheek. He'd wipe it away, call me his best girl and ask me to smile one time just for him. Then he would step onto that train and disappear into the mist.

She smiles as the violins rise. She is about to touch his face when a train whistle suddenly cuts the violins short. Lights shift - harsher somehow. Ray and Bessie

are jolted into a new reality.  
They both face the audience. The  
sound of a bustling train station  
engulfs them.

**INTERCOM**

No eating in the dining car. No use of the restrooms and no  
leaving the colored car except to exit the train.

**BESSIE**

Somewhere, a ticket clerk is yelling at a couple of colored  
soldiers whose uniforms have gone to their head and blocked out  
Jim Crow.

**TICKET CLERK (VO)**

Just cause you all in uniform doesn't make any difference in  
the rules. Isn't that right, boy?

**BESSIE**

He looks right at Ray.

**TICKET CLERK (VO)**

Isn't that right, boy?

Ray stands more defiantly.

**BESSIE**

...Ray looked at all the colored people standing around  
trying to be invisible. And something in him let go. All the  
pride and honor that fueled my Ray ran dry. He bowed his head,  
let go of my hand and...

She looks to Ray who slowly nods  
at in the direction of the clerk.  
She stands awkwardly next to him.

**BESSIE (CONT'D)**

After that, we stood in silence for a long time like strangers. We were just too ashamed to face each other, I guess. He didn't want me to see him weak and I didn't want him to see me scared. So, we just stood there.

A train whistles in the distance.

**BESSIE (CONT'D)**

Then the sound of the train coming in set me to crying. And there was Ray wiping away my tears... looking hard into my face searching for something. It was like for a moment we forgot who we were. Then, I guess, he remembered because he kissed me real gentle on the forehead...

Violins rising.

**RAY**

Stop now. My best girl can't go around crying like that.

**RAY & BESSIE**

Come on, smile one time just for me.

**BESSIE**

...I gave him my best "come back to me" smile and we kissed one of those long hungry kisses. Then, my Ray got in that colored train car, and waved at me until he disappeared into the horizon.

The swell of violins is transformed back into the construction song as Ray disappears. Lights shift and Bessie Palmer alone with her walker standing in the darkness, listening intently to the construction music. She reaches into her bag to make sure she has everything for her journey. She is carrying a large keyring with a single key and a carpet bag

overflowing with doilies. The sound gets louder and louder until it overtakes her. She is disoriented; spun around. Then, just as suddenly as they arose, the sounds zoom off into the distance. Bessie collects herself and follows them off.

**BLACKOUT .**