

STICK FLY

BY LYDIA R. DIAMOND
DIRECTED BY
SHIRLEY JO FINNEY
SEPTEMBER 7- OCTOBER 14, 2007

BUY TICKETS



Emily Mann on *Stick Fly*

Dear Patrons,



It is a rare gift to pick up a new script by an emerging writer and say: "This is a voice I've been waiting to hear!" Two years ago, when I first encountered Lydia Diamond's plays, I was struck by her brilliance and artistry. Her writing was crisp, witty and direct, yet also had a depth and impact that took my breath away. The first of her scripts that I read, *Voyeurs de Venus*, was such a moving and powerful play that I immediately knew Lydia was an important new voice in the American theater. We brought Lydia to McCarter to do a reading of her adaptation of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and once again, I heard a powerful voice that was as intellectually stunning as it was deeply heartfelt. When McCarter did a reading of her new play, *Stick Fly*, that June, I decided: our audiences had to see Lydia Diamond's work on our mainstage.

Set in the elite African-American community of Martha's Vineyard, *Stick Fly* explores complex and intertwining issues of family, trust, and class. Sadly, it is rare to find such a powerful piece of new literature that is set in upper-class African-American culture. American theater audiences have grown accustomed to seeing only one element of the African-American community represented on our stages and in our films. Contemporary, upper-class, well-educated, highly accomplished and economically privileged African-American families, like the one we see in *Stick Fly*, are too infrequently portrayed on stage. This play is an important reminder that even our finest African-American playwrights are showing only one side of the many facets of our nation's African-American community.

But *Stick Fly*, is not, at heart, a play about race. Rather, it is a play about secrets, a play about family, a play about trying to connect, and a play about the undeniable effects of class. It is a tremendously moving, exceptionally funny, and wonderfully true play that I know will entertain and entrance all of our audiences with its alluring language, complex characters, and keen exploration of modern society.

All best,

Emily

Character Profiles

CHERYL WASHINGTON

The daughter of the family maid, Cheryl has benefited educationally from her association with the LeVays. Just on the verge of college, Cheryl is bright, hardworking, relatively no-nonsense, and always well-intentioned. She has had a longstanding crush on Flip.

Cheryl

...Jesus, your dad's famous...That's a free pass to anywhere you wanna go. I'm bustin' my ass trying to raise enough money to supplement work study, and you cryin' in your milk because people at Harvard were mean to you.

Kimber

I've seen that kind of mean, it's crazy...

Cheryl

You think people at that stuck up school weren't mean to me? Of course they were, and it wasn't just the white girls. They were all mean. But I didn't lose sleep over it. Because I knew who I was before I went there. (II. iv.)

TAYLOR BRADLEY SCOTT

Kent's fiancée. She is the daughter from an earlier marriage of renowned public intellectual, James Bradley Scott. Taylor was raised by a single mother college professor. Though she carries her father's name, and so has had entrée to some social privileges, he was not a part of her life. She has also lacked financial resources.

Well, I got here, and this incredible house, and all these beautiful Black folks... I've never been on the inside of all of this, not like this. And it feels good...like, really good. Like right. But it's hard, it's scary, because, you know, I wanna make a good impression, and it's hard meeting the folks, the family... (II. i.)

KENT LEVAY

The youngest son of the LeVay Family. Kent has grown up with an artistic disposition in a family of doctors and lawyers. He is a writer, and his novel has just been picked up by a "small, reputable" publishing house. Although financially privileged, he has struggled to find his place in life and with his family, especially his father. He loves Taylor, and though she may not see it, his gentleness is a valuable ingredient in their relationship. Taylor refers to him as "Spoon."

See, I wanted the confrontation with Michael and his dad to be subtle...it can't be histrionic, or it's cheap...O.K... here it is... (Reading) It was in his brow. A measured crease that was always present, but deepened, not with concern as one would expect, but whenever the conversation shifted from him. Michael saw the shadow in that furrow grow darker, and he knew that soon his opening would have passed. It was not possible to express displeasure, even uncertainty in his father's presence, but a certain amount of honesty was required...a certain kind of communication, a language that played out in anecdotes and connotations, might... (I. iii.)

FLIP LEVAY

Oldest son and “golden boy” of the LeVay family. Flip has, with some compromises, fallen in line with his father’s expectations. He is a plastic surgeon, and an incorrigible ladies’ man.

Flip

I don’t bring just anyone up here.

Kimber

I find that hard to believe.

Flip

What, that you’re not just anyone...

Kimber

Please, this is all part of your mac daddy package... the old pictures of you on the fridge, the cute little brother... a charming father... all part of a deeper kind of seduction. (II. i.)

DR. JOSEPH LEVAY (DAD)

Joseph is a charming, opinionated, and frequently droll man, who rules his family with a firm, albeit occasionally uneven, hand. Like Flip, he has always had a way with women.

...Nobody can make you feel inferior. I’ve been the head of this house, coming to this island for the last forty years, put in hundreds of thousands of dollars of renovations.... But there’ll never be a sign out front that reads “LeVay.” This will always be the Whitcomb house, and I’ll always be the guy lucky enough to marry into the great Whitcomb dynasty.... (II. i.)

KIMBER DAVIES

Flip’s girlfriend. Kimber is an intelligent woman with a quick wit and sincere warmth. Unlike Taylor, her social status matches that of the LeVays—with, of course, the undeniable privilege of whiteness. She is aware of this, and on some level appalled by it.

...So what we don’t talk about in my family? My Grandmother’s brother married an Irish immigrant. In my world that’s beyond unacceptable[...] ...someone fell in love with someone they weren’t supposed to... a whole branch of the family we don’t acknowledge. I watched Grandma, loving, sweet, philanthropic, Chanel and pearl wearing old lady, walk past nieces and nephews on the street without a word. Just cut ‘em out. No one questioned it. I didn’t even. And these are people who vote “family values.” Why am I telling you this? (II.i.)

Glossary of Useful Terms

Black Dog:

Tavern, bakery and tourist site on Martha's Vineyard. Producer of t-shirts and hats seen throughout the Northeast.

bell hooks:

Intellectual and activist. Her work focuses on race, class and gender and how they interact. Her book *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* explores how feminism neglects questions of race and class. She is a supporter of grassroots feminism, as opposed to academic feminism.

Cotillion: A fancy, formal dance for young people. Often associated with debutantes.

D.H. Lawrence: Controversial early 20th century writer. His novels explore relationships and were considered shocking for their frank depiction of sexuality. They include ***Sons and Lovers***, ***The Rainbow***, ***Women in Love*** and ***Lady Chatterley's Lover***.

Jack and Jill: Club for privileged African-American children. Membership requires sponsorship by a current member. Jack and Jill clubs plan national conferences as well as parties and cultural outings for their members to mingle.

Quadroon: a person with one black grandparent

Octoroon: a person with one black great-grandparent

Max Weber: German economist and sociologist, considered one of the fathers of sociology. His book *Economy and Society* is a foundation of modern public administration.

Utopian society: A perfect, idealized society. Also used pejoratively to refer to an unrealistic, unachievable society. From the Greek "*ou topos*" literally meaning "no place," or "place that does not exist". The term was coined by Sir Thomas More in his book *Utopia*.

African Americans on Martha's Vineyard

By Carrie Hughes

Martha's Vineyard. An island off the coast of Cape Cod—first, fishing village and whaling port, now, a summer resort playground. The Kennedys and the Clintons vacation here. So do Spike Lee, Vernon Jordan and Henry Louis Gates. Indeed, in the past century generations of the African-American elite have quietly made it their vacation haven.

African Americans arrived on Martha's Vineyard in the seventeenth century. While records from this period are vague and do not distinguish between indentured servants (slavery was outlawed in Massachusetts by 1780), artisans, and laborers, by the 1800s all three groups, along with at least one whaling captain, were represented on the island. As the century progressed, religious presence on the Vineyard served to draw African Americans to the island. In 1834, the first Methodist camp meeting was held there. These religious revivals (which also extended to other denominations) brought attention and visitors to the island. The gingerbread cottages built to house revival attendees lent the Oak Bluffs area its first name—"Cottage City." After the Civil War, the African-American population increased further as the Island's tourist economy grew. By 1879, "colored votes" swayed the vote for the secession of Oak Bluffs from the larger community of Edgartown. Oak Bluffs became the heart of the African-American community on the Vineyard though African Americans (including *Stick Fly's* LeVays) have and continue to live elsewhere on the island.



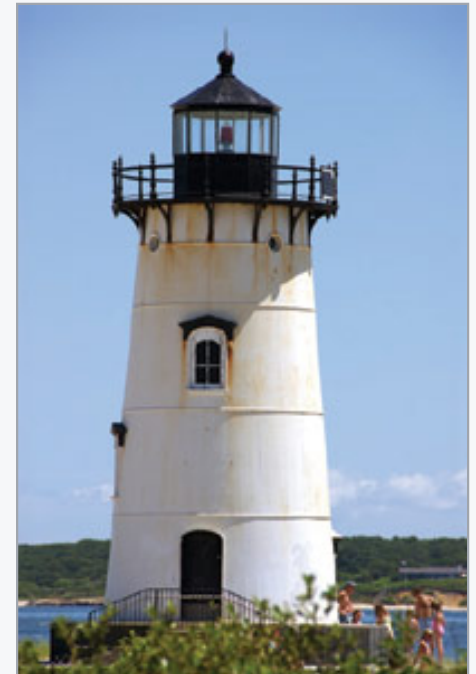
The dock at Menemsha, 1950.

Photo courtesy Shearer Family on Martha's Vineyard

embraced affectionately by many, but passionately rejected by members of the community who resent its implications. Social clubs, like the Polar Bears (who swim together in

The religious revivals brought visitors, but, as time progressed, not all came for religious fellowship—they came for fun, relaxation, and vacation, too. In 1880, a gazebo was constructed for musical entertainments. In 1917, the Shearer family opened Shearer Cottage, the first African-American owned guest house on the island. The Shearers hosted African-American vacationers, including luminaries like Adam Clayton Powell, Ethel Waters and Paul Robeson. These visitors fell in love with the place and increasingly bought homes. Powell's ex-wife, Belle Powell, who, until her death last May, was one of the Vineyard's oldest inhabitants, recounted how Powell drew other African Americans to the Vineyard: "He said [in his newspaper column], 'Come one, come all, my black brothers and sisters and I'll meet you in my bare feet,' and they've been coming ever since."

After World War II, the number of vacationers increased, as African-American doctors, lawyers, dentists, teachers, and business people, as well as politicians and artists, formed a unique summer community. The sandy Oak Bluffs beach became a gathering place, eventually earning the nickname "the Inkwell"—a term



the early mornings at the Inkwell) and the Cottagers (an exclusive service club limited to 100 members, for those who own historic cottages) formed and cocktail parties abounded. For many of these summer people, who often lived in neighborhoods where they were among very few African Americans, it was a rare opportunity to spend time with other African Americans from the middle and upper-middle class.

Writing about her childhood summers in Oak Bluffs in the 1950s and 60s in her book *Finding Martha's Vineyard*, writer Jill Nelson noted: "There was no need to be the exemplary Negro here, or to show white people that we were as good as or better than they were to conduct ourselves as ambassadors for integration and racial harmony. For the months of summer the weight of being race representative—and all the political, emotional, and psychic burdens that come with demanding that an individual represent a nonexistent monolith—was lifted. Absent the constraints, the Vineyard was an ideal place to figure out who we really were underneath all the other stuff. Here it was enough that you simply be yourself."

While this spirit of Oak Bluffs continue to inspire its summer inhabitants, the increasingly valuable real estate and the opening up of the rest of the island is bringing change to Martha's Vineyard. Wealthy African Americans are now increasingly willing and able to build large homes outside of Oak Bluffs, while some old families, now living too far from the island and with modern schedules that preclude spending a whole season away, are selling their houses.

"Certainly the Vineyard is not a racial utopia, but it was and is better than most places. Or at least for the most part it seems that way, maybe because there has always been a finite acceptable number of black families here. The obvious bond of race is augmented and in recent years perhaps trumped by the bonds of class," writes Nelson. Martha's Vineyard remains an important place for real families similar to the fictional LeVays and Whitcombs—complicated, privileged, and black.



Who's Who in the Production

CAST (in order of appearance)



Julia Pace Mitchell
Cheryl Washington



Michole Briana White
Taylor Bradley Scott



Kevin T. Carroll
Kent LeVay (Spoon)



Javon Johnson
Flip LeVay



John Wesley
Joseph LeVay



Monette Magrath
Kimber Davies

Artistic Staff

<i>Written by</i>	Lydia R. Diamond
<i>Directed by</i>	Shirley Jo Finney
<i>Artistic Director/Resident</i>	Emily Mann
<i>Playwright</i>	Jeffrey Woodward
<i>Managing Director</i>	Felix E. Cochren
<i>Set Design</i>	Karen Perry
<i>Costume Design</i>	Victor En Yu Tan
<i>Lighting Design</i>	David York
<i>Director of Production</i>	Cheryl Mintz
<i>Production Stage Manager</i>	Alison Cote
<i>Stage Manager</i>	Laura Stanczyk, CSA
<i>Casting Director</i>	

An Interview with Lydia Diamond



Playwright Lydia Diamond's work has been performed across the United States and in the U.K. Recently commissioned by McCarter Theatre Center and by Steppenwolf Theatre, Lydia has won numerous awards for her work, including *Stick Fly* and *Voyeurs de Venus*. Producing Associate Adam Immerwahr sat down with Lydia to discuss the process of writing *Stick Fly* and the play's upcoming production at McCarter.

What were the inspirations that led you to develop *Stick Fly*?

I was working on an intense, difficult play, called *Voyeurs de Venus*, which was about a slave. I was spending a lot of time in the library, crying over horrendously racist accounts of what black people looked like to the Europeans in the early 1800s, and just sobbing. And I needed to do something fun when I wasn't losing my mind over that. *Stick Fly* was going to be my fun play. The themes I wanted to explore had to do with my relationship to white women. I have all of these very good white friends who are like sisters whom I love, but outside of my circle I still feel a tension. That's interesting, because I'm also a feminist, and if I'm going to have visceral negative reactions socially to a person it should be white men, and I found that I bumped heads most often with white women. I wanted to explore that, because it's a contradiction and a really interesting one. Also, in my personal life there is always this search for father and what that means, and it

was very much a part of what the play is exploring—relationships with fathers.

The setting and the story comes out of the characters, so I made the characters first. Then they tell me where they live and what's happening with them. That's how Martha's Vineyard happened. I didn't say: "I'm going to write a Martha's Vineyard play." This is where they live and these are the things that they were dealing with. Martha's Vineyard is the perfect place for exploring the intersection of race and class dynamics outside of the black community and within the black community.

How do the personal and the political intersect in the world of *Stick Fly*?

That's a question that I'm asked a lot. I would say that in the world of *Stick Fly*, the personal and the political intersect the way that they do in my life. There is a way in *Stick Fly* that the family can't really sit down without at some point, very organically, having a discussion about how they navigate and exist in a world that is tricky to navigate and exist in as a person of color. That's the experience I have in any group of African Americans anywhere in America. The way we don't know how to acknowledge the uncomfortableness and inequalities that are personal and institutional makes the very nature of racism so tricky. The only way that you can deal with it is to have other people to process through it with, and so that becomes very much a part of the world of the family.

The horrible, weird trick about the way racism manifests itself in America is that it's difficult to acknowledge. Acknowledging it makes everyone feel uncomfortable, acknowledging it makes white people feel implicated, makes black people feel vulnerable, and so we don't acknowledge it. But then how do we teach our kids to conquer it and to function in it? So there is something soothing about having someone say: "Oh yeah, I went into that store and they were on me like white on rice." That's important. I've had people respond to my plays in a way that makes it clear to me that there's a cultural disconnect around the organic nature of how class and race affect you when you are a person of color. I don't sit down to write a play about race, but as a person of color who navigates this tricky landscape, it is very much just who I am. And so when it comes out in my work, it is coming out of a very organic place. I'm just writing what I know.

What do you want the audience to walk away with?

I just hope the audience will be entertained. I hope they will feel that their time was well spent, whatever that means. Whether it challenges them, whether it just amuses them, whether it brings up their own things and makes them sad and contemplative. I like to think that people will have discussions after the play. I feel impassioned about encouraging your white audiences to know that this is a story for them, that this is a story about a family dealing with the things that all families deal with. And if anything, I would like for people to think of it as a play about the themes that we all deal with, and that we can all see ourselves in.

An Interview with Shirley Jo Finney



Amidst the bustle of preparations for the first rehearsal of *Stick Fly*, Literary Intern Elizabeth Edwards was able to interview director Shirley Jo Finney. Sitting in cozy chairs on what would soon serve as the porch for the rehearsal room version of the set, they discussed Shirley Jo's connections, reflections, and approaches to the piece.

So, the first question I would like to ask you is where or how do you connect with this play? Do you feel like there's a place where this play touches you in a personal way?

Oh, definitely. I think it touches me because it reminds me of *my* family. My father was a judge; my mother was an academician/counselor/educator. I was in Jack and Jill, I was an AKA debutante. Being in [the world of elite African Americans], and understanding what that world is—I come from that.

All my life I have had to navigate going between both worlds; I have had the experience of being “the only one.” When I was little, my family integrated the neighborhood. And then I was the first African American in the Theatre Arts department at Sacramento State University, and at UCLA I was the first African American to be in the MFA program. Even as a professional director, at some of the regional theaters I've gone to, I've been the first woman of color some people have had to deal with. So, that touches me.

And then, I come from a divorced home, and so there's the father issue—absentee father, present but still absent, and wanting the father that's present to be the father. Having to figure out, ok, where do I fit, and where's my father, I have one over here and one over here. Having emotionally to navigate and find placement on that.

There are so many deep and powerful issues that this play addresses—class, race, family dynamics... What do you see as being at the heart of this piece, what ties these issues together?

What this piece has is—home. It's in so many layers. There are different things that run throughout this piece, and regardless of the issues of race or class or status, this is a *family*, and home is the universal element that transcends everything else in this piece. So, what is home to a person? I think part of the thing that we do on our journey here is trying to find home for ourselves. People usually articulate it as "I have to find myself!" And I think the finding of the self is really "where is home?" When everything goes down, where are your values and your beliefs? And that's a lifelong journey—but it is about placement and home, and I think that's part of the theme that transcends everything in the piece.

So what do you think this play specifically has to say about home, and about finding yourself?

It's trust. It's trusting. And I think everyone, all these characters... What I love—here it is—what I love about the piece is that at the very beginning, the opening scene, Cheryl, the character, comes in and she has to *unveil*. She's taking the sheets off the furniture. Which is the unveiling. And [this play] is about unveiling the masks, what is hidden—lifting what is hidden. And every character in this piece has something that they're hiding, a secret, or a dilemma that they're dealing with that has to stay hidden. And in these three days coming here, the three days that it takes, that unveiling happens, the secret happens, everything starts unraveling from the moment she takes the sheets off the furniture, for everyone.

Wow. Wow, I'm getting chills.

(laughs)

I think more than anything, we don't ever want to show our flaws. We don't ever want to be wrong. And by keeping secrets, we think that we're protecting. When, in our lives, in our families (because, *every* family has a secret) the secret is the one that really *harms*. And, what is the risk of telling the truth? You know?

You may get upset for a minute. You may not appreciate it. But if you stand back from it—at least there was an honesty, and an authenticity. And I think *that's* more empowering than having a preconceived notion, and then you find out that what you thought was a truth isn't a truth. Ultimately, it's better to be using your authentic voice than to hide and wear a mask. And that's what that whole thing is about.

I know it's hard, it's a hard journey, it's a lifelong journey. But the question with this particular dysfunctional family, as with other dysfunctional families, is—where does it come from? Where is the anger of not being seen, of not being accepted, of not being wanted, or being lied to? It's because that person is in *fear*. And it's all about fear. Because what is a secret? A secret is something that you're fearing. So, if we can confront the fear, and face our own fears, that's better for you, and it's better for me.

That's wonderful. So, after talking about that metaphor—the metaphor of the unveiling—can you now talk a bit about another prominent metaphor in the piece: the Stick Fly. What do you think the title refers to, what does it mean?

Now, see, now the writer may tell you something different...

Right.

There's something that Taylor's character says about how you cannot study the movements of a fly, because it moves so fast. In order to study the movement of a fly, you have to stick it down somehow. Taylor's character does this at one point, she captures the fly and then she puts it on honey so it gets stuck, so she can actually study it. And what they do in the laboratories is that they'll take a fly and put a pin in it, to stop it, so they can study it. And then after they finish studying and analyzing it, they discard it.

I think that's one of the things that Taylor, and we, do. Everyone is trying to protect themselves, and overanalyzing... And once I think that I have you pegged, I have no more use for you. I think that's what we do as human beings, instead of really dropping down in the heart space and exploring what your truth is, and accepting that person unconditionally, we place all these conditions on a relationship. And once we analyze it, and if it doesn't serve our expectations, we discard it. And we see that happening in this house.

So do you think there's a specific character in this play, one character who is "the fly," or "the analyst"?

No, I think for me, this piece is an ensemble. It really is. If you, as the audience member, came in and decided just to watch one character, with each one of these characters you could say "Oh, that's *his* story. That's *Daddy's* story." "Oh no, the story's really *Taylor's* story." "No, no, no, the story's really *Cheryl's* story." "No, no, no..."

And so, in an ensemble, the *family* is the one character. Okay? In the world that I look at, metaphysically—and that's usually how I break down scripts, is metaphysically, because every story that is told is a story about *us*—so metaphysically, houses represent consciousness. So if you ask whose story it is, it's the *house's* story. The house is a character, the house is a place of consciousness, and the house has a secret that's being unveiled. And we find out, and I'm not saying here what that secret is, but, everything impacts the other.

Right... Okay, so, as a self-proclaimed "actor's director," and you've been an actress yourself, as well, is that right?

In one stage of my life I was, yes.

Right. And so, with this very character-driven play, how are you going to be approaching the relationships between the characters in your rehearsals?

When I work with a play, I look at mind, body, spirit. Spirit being emotional life. And all three of those make up a human being—the mental, the physical, and the emotional. There are times in our life where one of those is prevalent. You may be in more of your head thing, or you may be emotional one day... Okay, for instance, there are six characters in this play that are present, physically. Well, the number six, metaphysically, says, "working out of a condition." So every one of these characters is working out a condition, something personal in their lives.

But there is also a character in this play who is not seen—the mother. This all takes place in the *mother's* house. So her consciousness is prevalent within that home. The invisible character, seven, represents "spiritual realization." Out of the working out, and out of the secret, comes a revelation that is going to *heal* this family.

And the other character, Cheryl's mother, who also does not appear, is the number eight, which is infinity, which is "the end is declared from the beginning," which takes its place in what? The secret.

So, when we're at the table, that's how I talk to my actors. So, they go: "okay that's the higher level of that." Then I will say to them, "Where do you think you are in this play? Who represents that spiritual, emotional element?" Well, I would go, "Cheryl." And then who's operating in their head a lot?

Have you read the play?

Mm-hm.

Who do you think is operating in their head?

Taylor?

There you go! See, see, there you go! And then, who's the other one who's operating spiritually and emotionally. Spoon. Right?

And then you have the other one—who's operating in the physical here?

Oh, uh, what's his name...? Flip.

Flip. See, see how it goes? See? So you can just see where that mind, body, spirit thing happens. And it's in every play. So you see that operating, it's interesting. And then we'll talk about energy—it's interesting that this woman who's in the mental is drawn with this guy who's emotional, and they're trying to feed off of one another, you know?

If you look at your own life five years ago or three years ago, who were your friends then, and who are your friends now? You draw to your life what you need, and they come to you as human beings, as people. And you'll see your strengths and your weaknesses in someone, either you say "Oh, that's something I see in myself," or you say, "I wish I had that." And you'll keep that person there. And when you've learned all you needed to know, you're like the stick fly—you'll discard. You see how it all...? Yeah.

So, that's how I approach the work, that kind of investigation happens at the table. That's tomorrow's discussion. And then Saturday we'll continue in that discussion, in terms of where people are. And by the time we have those kinds of discussions, and cry, and all that, then Sunday we'll be able to start.

So is there anything that you are hoping that the audience comes away from this production with?

When I go to the theater, a movie, anything, I want to have an experience. I want to have an emotional experience. And so, I always set that as an intention. They're going to bring certain aspects of their lives in those seats, and I want them to be able to connect—mentally, physically, and spiritually—to someone, or something, in this play. So that they can begin to have a conversation, not only with themselves, but maybe with someone else, to then perpetuate a healing within themselves, to understand what lies and secrets do, and then maybe they can look in their own mirror.

Core Curriculum Standards

According to the NJ Department of Education, "experience with and knowledge of the arts is a vital part of a complete education." Our production of *Stick Fly* and the activities outlined in this guide are designed to enrich your students' education by addressing the following specific Core Curriculum Standards for Visual and Performing Arts:

1.1

All students will acquire knowledge and skills that increase aesthetic awareness in dance, music, theater and visual arts.

- 1.2 All students will refine perceptual, intellectual, physical and technical skills through creating dance, music, theater and/or visual arts.
- 1.4 All students will demonstrate knowledge of the process of critique.
- 1.5 All students will identify the various historical, social and cultural influences and traditions which have generated artistic accomplishments throughout the ages and which continue to shape contemporary arts.
- 1.6 All students will develop design skills for planning the form and function of space, structures, objects, sounds and events.

Viewing *Stick Fly* and then participating in the pre- and post-show discussions suggested in this resource guide will also address the following Core Curriculum Standards in Language Arts Literacy:

- 3.3 All students will speak in clear, concise, organized language that varies in content and form for different audiences and purposes.
- 3.4 All students will listen actively to information from a variety of sources in a variety of situations.
- 3.5 All students will access, view, evaluate and respond to print, nonprint and electronic texts and resources.

In addition, the production of *Stick Fly* as well as the resource guide activities will help to fulfill the following Social Studies Core Curriculum Standards:

- 6.1 All students will utilize historical thinking, problem solving and research skills to maximize their understanding of civics, history, geography and economics.
- 6.4 All students will demonstrate knowledge of United States and New Jersey history in order to understand life and events in the past and how they relate to the present and future.
- 6.5 All students will acquire an understanding of key economic principles.

Pre-Show Preparation, Questions for Discussion, and Activities

Note to Educators: Use the following assignments, questions, and activities to introduce your students to Stick Fly and its intellectual origin, context, and themes, as well as to engage their imaginations and creativity before they see the production.

1. **Sticks, Flies, Families, Friction and Secrets.** At the dramatic heart of Lydia Diamond's *Stick Fly*—and at the dramatic heart of all great domestic or family dramas, from Aeschylus' *Orestian Trilogy* to Ibsen's *Ghosts* to O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* to Wilson's *Fences*—are the tensions and secrets that test, confound and fracture families and the individuals within them. Families on stage, like those off stage, struggle with dysfunction in the form of personality and priority clashes, harbored resentments, and skeletons in the closets.
 - o Ask your students if they can recall any fictional families, either on the stage (or in television or films) or on the page (fiction or non-fiction) who have been tested, confounded, or fractured because of conflicts and emerging skeletons from their ancestral closets. What are the pervasive or common interpersonal problems that overwhelm these fictional families?
 - o Ask your students if in the histories of their own families there have been instances of tension or conflict, or if secrets have threatened to tear the family fabric. Was the family able to openly address and calm these difficulties? If so, how? What were the outcomes of these challenging situations?
 - o Have your students consider a situation in their own family history (or in someone else's familial experience) in which personality or priority clashes, harbored resentments or an unexpectedly exposed secret has suddenly created interpersonal discord. Give them an opportunity to dramatize the conflict either as a dialogue between multiple characters or in a monologue in which one individual character gives their personal perspective of the controversy. If appropriate, students may volunteer their scripts to be read aloud to the class (or scenes could be prepared for a staged reading performance) and discussed.

2. **Contextualizing the World of *Stick Fly*.** In *Stick Fly*, Diamond introduces us to the world of the LeVay family, a contemporary, upper-class, well-educated, highly accomplished, and economically privileged African-American family. The play is set in the LeVay's ample Martha's Vineyard "cottage." Your students may not be aware of the fact that Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts is a traditional summer resort as well as a year-round haven for upper-class and upper-middle-class African Americans.

Research

To prepare your students for *Stick Fly* and to deepen their level of understanding and appreciation of the complexity of contemporary African-American experience, have your students research, either in groups or individually, the history of Martha's Vineyard and its inhabitants. You might consider the following subjects for research: Captain William Martin (b. 1829); Rebecca Amos & Nancy Michael; Randall Burton & Edgar Jones; John Saunders & Rt. Rev. (Bishop) John Burgess; Dorothy West; Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. & Isabel Washington Powell; Shearer Cottage; Oak Bluffs; Chappaquiddick; and the African-American Heritage Trail History Project. Avenues for research may include:

- Jill Nelson's *Finding Martha's Vineyard: African Americans at Home on an Island* (New York: Doubleday, 2005).
- Lawrence Otis Graham's *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).
- Stanley Nelson's film *A Place of Our Own* (Oakland, California: Firelight Media Inc., 2004) and its companion web site (www.pbs.org/independentlens/placeofourown/index.html)
- Perry Garfinkel's article on Oak Bluffs, "ZipUSA: 02557," appearing in *National Geographic* (June 2003) (magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0306/feature8/)
- The African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard's web site (www.mvheritagetrail.org),

Presentation and Discussion.

Have each student or group present her/his/their research to the class. Following the presentations, ask your students to reflect upon their research process and discoveries.

- Was this a history of which they were already aware?

- Were any of the names of people, places or organizations already familiar to them? Ask them to explain why they think they were or were not familiar.
 - Was information on their research subjects readily available?
 - What was the nature of the resources they found? Were they plentiful? Scarce? Detailed? Vague?
 - Did their research yield any particularly surprising information?
 - Can they identify any interesting, compelling, challenging or confusing themes in the totality of their research?
-

3. **Staging African-American Experiences.** McCarter Theatre, in its mission to develop and produce new works for the stage, to support the next generation of playwrights, and to engage, educate and cultivate a broad range of audiences, has committed itself to presenting the broad and complex African-American experience on stage. In the past six years alone, the following remarkable plays by both established and up-and-coming American playwrights have entertained, enthralled, provoked and challenged McCarter audiences:

- *Radio Golf* by August Wilson(2006-2007 season)
- *The Brothers Size* by Tarell McCraney (2006-2007)
- *Gem of the Ocean* by August Wilson (2005-2006)
- *PolkCounty* by Zora Neal Hurston and Dorothy Waring, adapted by Kyle Donnelly and Cathy Madison (2004-2005)
- *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women and Their Church Hats* by Regina Taylor (2002-2003)
- *Lackawanna Blues* by Ruben Santiago Hudson (2001-2002)
- *Yellowman* by Dael Orlandersmith (2001-2002)

Stick Fly by Lydia Diamond joins these works that further define, explore, expose, and investigate the depth and breadth of the history and of contemporary lives of Black Americans of African ancestry.

To better appreciate Lydia Diamond's unique perspective and contribution, and for purposes of comparison and discussion, have your students read one or more of the above plays before their attendance at *Stick Fly*.

Ask of the play(s) the following questions:

- What makes the play and its world unique?
 - What are the issues and themes highlighted in the play?
 - What issues and themes in the play do you think are unique to the African-American experience?
 - How does the play speak of or deal with issues of class and race?
 - What aspects of the play do you specifically see as affirming and empowering for an African-American viewer/reader?
 - Are there aspects of the play that might challenge a non-African-American viewer?
 - What themes or issues in the play, if any, do you think are universal or common to any race or class of peoples?What is the importance or significance of presenting many perspectives on the African-American experience?
-

4. **Observing *Stick Fly* as a Playwright.** The *Stick Fly* student matinee is also the kick-off for McCarter Education's Youth Ink! High School Playwriting Residency Program. To prepare YI! student playwrights (and our entire student matinee audience) for analysis and discussion of the dramatic elements of Lydia Diamond's play, provide a brief overview of the following essential principles of playwriting:

Action: *What a character wants*; also often referred to as a character's objective. Characters have both immediate actions (in any given scene) and overarching actions (in the entire course of a play).

Conflict: *That which stands in the way of what a character wants*; also referred to as an obstacle. Conflicts come in two varieties:

External: A conflict which comes from outside the character, either in the form of an inanimate object or another character.

Internal: A conflict which comes from within the character, in that she or he wants more than one thing and therefore is blocked from both.

Ask your students to keep track of the actions and conflicts occurring in *Stick Fly*. Have them consider as they experience the play:

- What is each character's action/want when the play begins?
- What conflicts arise? What keeps characters from getting what they want?
- Do any of the characters suffer from an internal conflict?
- Who gets what they want?
- Whose action/want changes? Why?
- How and why does each character change, if at all, during the course of the play?

Following your *Stick Fly* attendance, utilize the above questions for a discussion of the dramatic content of the play

5. **A Theater Reviewer Prepares.** A theater critic or reviewer is essentially a “professional audience member,” whose job is to report the news, in detail, of a play's production and performance through active and descriptive language for a target audience of readers (e.g., their peers, their community, or those interested in the Arts). To prepare your students to write an accurate, insightful and compelling theater review following their attendance at the East Coast premiere of Lydia Diamond's *Stick Fly*, prime them for the task by discussing the three basic elements of a theatrical review: reportage, analysis and judgment

- Reportage is concerned with the basic information of the production, or the journalist's “four w's” (i.e., who, what, where, when), as well as the elements of production, which include the text, setting, costumes, lighting, sound, acting and directing (**Theater Reviewer's Checklist**). When reporting upon these observable phenomena of production, the reviewer's approach should be factual, descriptive and objective; any reference to quality or effectiveness should be reserved for the analysis section of the review.
- With analysis the theater reviewer segues into the realm of the subjective and attempts to interpret the artistic choices made by the director and designers and the effectiveness of these choices; specific moments, ideas and images from the production are considered in the analysis.
- Judgment involves the reviewer's opinion as to whether the director's and designers' intentions were realized, and if their collaborative, artistic endeavor was ultimately a worthwhile one. Theater reviewers always back up their opinions with reasons, evidence and details.

Remind your students that the goal of a theater reviewer is “to **see** accurately, **describe** fully, **think** clearly, and then (and only then) to **judge** fairly the merits of the work” (Thaiss and Davis, *Writing for the Theatre*, 1999). Proper analytical preparation before the show and active listening and viewing during will result in the effective writing and crafting of their reviews.

Post-Show Questions for Discussion and Activities

Note to Educators: Use the following assignments, questions, and activities to have students evaluate their experience of the performance of Stick Fly, as well as to encourage their own imaginative and artistic projects through further exploration of the play in production. Consider also that some of the pre-show activities might enhance your students' experience following the performance.

1. **Stick Fly: A Discussion.** Following their attendance at the performance of *Stick Fly*, ask your students to reflect on the questions below. You might choose to

have them answer each individually or you may divide students into groups for round-table discussions. Have them consider each question, record their answers and then share their responses with the rest of the class.

Questions to Ask Your Students About the Play in Production

- a. What was your overall reaction to *Stick Fly*? Did you find the production compelling? Stimulating? Intriguing? Challenging? Memorable? Confusing? Evocative? Unique? Delightful? Meaningful? Explain your reactions.
- b. Did experiencing the play heighten your awareness or understanding of the play's themes? [e.g., coping with the challenges that test, confound and fracture families, such as personality and priority clashes, generational tensions, sibling rivalries, unmet or unbalanced child/parental expectations and the revelation of damaging secrets; the struggle to find identity at the complex juncture of race and class.] What themes were made even more apparent in performance? Explain your responses.
- c. Do you think that the pace and tempo of the production were effective and appropriate? Explain your opinion.

Questions to Ask Your Students About the Characters

- a. Did you personally identify with any of the characters in *Stick Fly*? Who? Why?
- b. What qualities were revealed by the action and speech of the characters? Explain your ideas.
- c. Did any characters develop or undergo a transformation during the course of the play? Who? How? Why?
- d. In what ways did the characters reveal the themes of the play? Explain your responses.

Questions to Ask Your Students About the Style and Design of the Production

- a. Was there a moment in *Stick Fly* that was so compelling or intriguing that it remains with you in your mind's eye? Can you write a vivid description of that moment? As you write your description, pretend that you are writing about the moment for someone who was unable to experience the performance.
- b. Did the style and design elements of the production enhance the performance? Did anything specifically stand out to you? Explain your reaction.
- c. How did the production style and design reflect the themes of the play?
- d. What mood or atmosphere did the lighting design establish or achieve? Explain your experience.
- e. How did the sound design enhance your overall experience?
- f. Did the design of the costumes and makeup serve to illuminate the characters, themes, and style of the play? How?

-
2. **Exploring the Story and the Politics of *Stick Fly*.** Lydia Diamond's work has been celebrated for its contribution to the political discourse and perspective on race, class, and privilege in America, yet according to the playwright, "...[For] the most part, I tell the story, and the politics come out because that's who I am. I think we have stories that are important to tell, and the honesty in those stories appeals to people." Engage your students to tell the story of *Stick Fly* in their own words. Then ask them:

- o What are the "politics that come out" in the telling of the story?
- o What do the story and/or the politics of *Stick Fly* mean to you?
- o What do you find compelling about the story and its politics? Confusing? Evocative? Challenging?
- o Where do you find meaning (political or otherwise) in the play?
- o Where does your personal experience converge with the politics of both play and playwright? Where does it diverge?

-
3. **Change in the World of *Stick Fly* (in the Mode of Fuchs).** In her highly regarded essay entitled "Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," Yale School of Drama professor and performance scholar Elinor Fuchs offers a "template for the critical imagination" that asks a play viewer/reader to approach a play as if it were a new world with its own geography and rules. She suggests:

To see this entire world, do this literally: Mold the play into a medium-sized ball, set it before you in the middle distance, and squint your eyes. Make the ball small enough that you can see the entire planet, not so small that you lose detail, and not so large that detail overwhelms the whole.

In addition to contemplating the play planet in terms of space, time, climate, mood and music, and in terms of its inhabitants and their social interactions, Fuchs asks the viewer/reader to look at the play *dynamically* and poses the question “What changes in this world?”:

Look at the first image. Now look at the last. Then locate some striking image near the center of the play...To give an account of destiny on this planet range over these three markers. Why was it essential to pass through the gate of the central image to get from the first to the last?

Have your students contemplate the changes that occur in *Stick Fly* using Fuchs’ prompts above; contemplations can be made individually on paper first and then be brought into small group or full class discussion.

Use the following questions from Fuchs as further consideration of what changes in the world of *Stick Fly*:

- What changes in language? In tone, mood, dress?
- What changes in the action? Have we moved from confusion to wedding (the basic plot of romantic comedy)? From threat to peaceful celebration (the basic plot of [traditional] tragicomedy)? From threat to disaster (the basic plot of tragedy)? From suffering to rebirth (the plot of the Passion play)? From threat to dual outcome, suffering for evil persons and vindication for good (the basic plot of melodrama)?
- What doesn’t change?
- Is the world of the play at the end of the play a transformed world? Or is it the same world returned to “normal,” with minor adjustments?

Have your students explain/defend their responses. [For the full text of Elinor Fuchs’ essay see “EF’s Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play,” *Theatre* 34:2 (Summer 2004); 4-9.]

-
4. **Stick Fly: Character Collage.** Ask your students to choose a character from *Stick Fly* whom they found particularly compelling (either because the student closely identified with her or him or because the student desires to understand the character better). Ask them to utilize the artistic medium of collage to create a visual representation of the character.
- They will need an 8½” x 11” sheet of paper (either colored paper or paper that can be painted), magazines with visual images/photographs, scissors, additional color paper for cutouts, colored pencils or paint for a background, and glue.
 - They should think about how they might use color, images, and text to symbolize who their character is, what he or she wants, and what happens to her or him in the course of the play.
 - Educators might also opt for their students to create electronic collages by utilizing PowerPoint technology and images gleaned from the internet.
 - Students should be given time to show their finished collages to the class and to explain why they chose their particular character and how the objects and images in their collages express and symbolize their character.

-
5. **Playwrights’ Post-Show: Action & Conflict in *Stick Fly*.** Have your students analyze and discuss the details of the dramatic in Lydia Diamond’s play by asking them the following questions [See “Pre-Show Questions and Activities,” Question 4 for a thorough explanation of the dramatic principles of action and conflict.]:

- What is each character's action/want when the play begins?
- What conflicts arise? What keeps characters from getting what they want?
- Do any of the characters suffer from an internal conflict?
- Who gets what they want?
- Whose action/want changes? Why?
- How and why does each character change, if at all, during the course of the play?

Additional Resources

BOOKS AND ARTICLES:

- Asante, Molefi K. and Mark T. Mattson. *The African-American Atlas*. New York: Macmillan, USA, 1998
- Ciment, James. *Atlas of African-American History*. New York: Media Projects Inc., 2001.
- Cowen, Tom and Jack Maguire. *Timelines of African-American History*. New York: Roundtable Press, 1994.
- Garfinkel, Perry. "ZipUSA: 02557," *National Geographic*: (June 2003) www.magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0306/feature8/
- Graham, Lawrence Otis *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999.
- *A History of the African American People*. Ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997.
- Nelson, Jill. *Finding Martha's Vineyard: African Americans at Home on an Island*. New York: Doubleday, 2005. <http://www.jillnelson.com/>

DVD:

- Stanley Nelson's film *A Place of Our Own*. Oakland, California: Firelight Media Inc., 2004. (www.pbs.org/independentlens/placeofourown/index.html)

WEBSITES:

- The African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard: www.mvheritagetrail.org
- Shearer Cottage: <http://www.shearercottage.com/index.php>
- Martha's Vineyard Historical Society: <http://www.mvmuseum.org/faq.php>
- Great Photos of Martha's Vineyard: <http://www.capecodphotoalbum.com/martha.html>

- African-American History in the 21st Century: <http://hhsu.learning.hhs.gov/slaverytofreedom/twentyfirst.html>



A **McCarter Theatre** production | Venue: Berlind Theatre

RESOURCE GUIDE STAFF : Editor for Literary Content: Carrie Hughes | Editor for Education Content: Paula Alekson | Editorial Administrator: Francine Schiffman |
Web Design: Dimple Parmar | Contributors: Elizabeth Edwards, Carrie Hughes, Adam Immerwahr, Mara Isaacs, Emily Mann, Christopher Parks.