

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
JAMES
AND OTHER PLAYS

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INTRODUCTION

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JAMES is based on a double lynching that happened on August 8, 1930, in Marion, Indiana. The title character of the play, James Cameron, is based on the real-life James Cameron who, at the age of sixteen, narrowly escaped the lynching that took the lives of his two friends, Abram Smith and Tommy Shipp. James Cameron died in 2006 at the age of ninety-two after devoting his life to various causes focusing on civil rights and calling attention to the scourge of lynching in America. Although Mr. Cameron was the founder of multiple chapters of the NAACP as well as founder of America's Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he will primarily be remembered as the only man known to have survived a lynching in America.

Janet Allen, artistic director of the Indiana Repertory Theatre, commissioned *The Gospel According to James* in 2005 after we received a Joyce Award for the research and development of a play based on the 1930 Marion lynchings. After receiving the commission, I spent two years researching James Cameron, his story, and the events surrounding the lynchings before deciding what I wanted the play to be *about*.

From the beginning of my research, I realized that not everyone believed James Cameron's version of the events of August 8, 1930, and for good reason. Parts of his story had huge holes and other parts were simply implausible. As I continued to research James Cameron's story, its veracity, for me, became almost irrelevant. I realized that the facts were far less important than the truth, and the truth that buttressed James Cameron's version of the events that night is vital, relevant, and undeniable. While some parts of his story may not stand up to close inspection, I understood that he told his story the way he remembered it. He told it the way he needed to tell it, and that was his right because it was his story, his truth, his gospel, and that's what the play, *The Gospel According to James*, became. It is a play about individual memory and vision, a play about an individual interpretation of events. However, it isn't James Cameron's

memory, vision, or interpretation of events that drives the play. *The Gospel According to James* is my vision, my interpretation of James Cameron's interpretation, and while there is a character in the play named James Cameron, that character is not, and does not pretend to be, the man who once walked this earth. Theater must do more than simply try to realistically recreate or represent people and events on stage. Theater must be transformative in nature. It must at least attempt to articulate things that cannot be articulated in any other way.

Some scholars and critics have characterized four of the five plays in this collection as historical plays. Such genre-based definitions are often useful for a general understanding of the work. However, for a more comprehensive understanding, that characterization could prove counter-productive because it suggests that the engine, the soul, the *raison d'être* of these plays resides in the historical events on which the plays are based, when in reality, the historical events on which the plays in this collection are based are merely the devices, the vehicles in which we ride to arrive at a different, more contemporary destination.

JELLY BELLY is the only play in this collection that has not been characterized as a historical play. However, it is the only play in this collection with a plot that closely follows actual events. Three of the four other plays represented here, *Knock Me a Kiss*, *Free Man of Color*, and *The Gospel According to James*, were each based on a few salient facts that had captured my imagination. Beginning with those facts, I researched the time period of each story, and that research informed, but did not generate, my imagining of what could have happened. My imagining was based on a very subjective, personal, and individual point of view without even a perfunctory nod towards objectivity. All of the themes, 90 percent of the characters, and perhaps 70 percent of the plot of these plays was the result of that imagining. *Jelly Belly*, on the other hand, is the only play in this collection whose plot, characters, story, and theme were largely based on an actual event that I experienced firsthand. That makes the only play in this collection not considered to be historical in nature, *Jelly Belly*, even more historical than the others.

I met the man on whom I based the character Jelly Belly in August 1982. I had finished my first year of graduate school at the University of Iowa and had stopped to visit with my brother before heading back to school. That night, I sat on the porch of my brother's house, drank beer,

and listened while Jelly Belly expounded on his system of values used to assess human life in terms of cartons of cigarettes and time spent in jail. According to Jelly Belly, killing an uneducated black man would probably get you probation. If you killed an uneducated white man, you would probably get five to ten years. An educated white man would land you ten to twenty, and a white woman with a family would probably get you the death penalty.

What surprised me was not the fact that Jelly Belly had very calmly and openly admitted to murdering several people on different occasions, some of whom had been his friends, but that each time he had been convicted, he had spent no more than six months in jail.

I decided at first that Jelly Belly was an aberration, a freak of society who had slipped through the cracks of justice. But as the night wore on, I came to understand that Jelly Belly was no more of an aberration than I was, and that his system of values could not exist without a concrete foundation for those values. I understood that his system of values was not his own, that he had inherited it from a system much older than himself; that he was not the perpetrator of the unending cycle of violence, but a perpetrator.

The thought of writing a play based on that night did not occur to me until months later when the literary manager of a theater phoned me regarding another one of my plays. He said they liked the play but couldn't produce it and wanted to know if I had a one-act they could consider. Unfortunately, I did not have a one-act, so I did what any young, hungry playwright would do. I lied. I told him I had a play and would put it in the mail to him on Monday. This was on a Friday, so I hung up the phone and went to work believing that my entire embryonic career as a writer depended upon my writing a play over the weekend and getting it to the theater by Monday. I finished the play Sunday night, FedExed it Monday morning, and received my rejection notice a couple of weeks later in the guise of a poorly duplicated form letter.

The play was produced a year later by Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota, and, of course, has been produced since. And while my impetus for writing the play came from a phone call and a chance encounter on my brother's porch one night in August, I couldn't tell you whether the character Jelly Belly bears any resemblance to the man I met that night. If I had to hazard a guess, I would guess not. However, what does exist is a clear and unmistakable resemblance between the character in

the play and my impression of who he was. This makes the play less a retelling of the events of that night and more my impression of, or my comment on, those events. As with James Cameron in *The Gospel According to James*, my goal was not to try to reproduce the man but to use my impression of the man, combined with my view of the world, to arrive at a more contemporary, more personal destination.

Jelly Belly is one of the first plays I wrote that helped me understand who I was as a writer. As head of the Professional Playwriting Program at Ohio University, I've spent considerable time and energy over the years developing a program that I wish had been available when I was in graduate school. As head of that program, and in solidarity with the writers in the program, I also thought it was important to include a play in this collection that I wrote when I was in graduate school.

PUDD'NHEAD WILSON is a stage adaptation of the Mark Twain novel of the same name. The play was commissioned and produced in 2002 by The Acting Company in New York as part of a five-year project named The American Century. The purpose of the project was to develop new works for the stage based on works of American literature. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* was the second commission in that series.

When Richard Corley, the associate producing director of The Acting Company, approached me about the project, I was unfamiliar with Mark Twain, had not read *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, and had attempted only one other stage adaptation—that of Jean Toomer's *Cain*, which was commissioned and produced by Victory Gardens Theater a few years earlier with dubious results. One of my mentors, the late Darwin Turner, was a Toomer scholar, and my desire to tackle the stage adaptation of Toomer's *Cane* was propelled by my need to prove my worthiness to him as a playwright and as an artist. With the adaptation of Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, I had nothing to prove. With nothing to prove and nothing at stake, I read *Pudd'nhead Wilson* with no preset agenda.

Reading Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, I was immediately struck by the wry humor, its timelessness, and its sophistication. Set in the charming but fictional Missouri town of Dawson's Landing in the first half of the nineteenth century, the story is about two babies, one slave, one free, who are switched at birth. The child born a slave grows up believing he is white and free. The white child born free grows up living life as a slave.

On first glance, the novel is a powerful commentary on slavery

and perceptions of race. Dawson's Landing is an idyllic place, and the characters who live there could have stepped straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting if it were not for their free and easy use of the word "nigger" when referring to a member of the slave population. This is a disconcerting juxtaposition, to be sure, so unsettling that even today some politicians and educators regularly embark on crusades to ban Twain because of his use of the word "nigger." Others try to sanitize Twain, to expunge the offending word in order to make his work more appropriate for young audiences. But to remove the word "nigger" from the work of Mark Twain is to attempt to rewrite and sanitize a loathsome part of American history. The word "nigger" is offensive, as well it should be. But the word is not nearly as offensive as the social, cultural, and political climate that gave rise to the word and everything it represented. We should not be offended by the word "nigger." We should be offended by our actions or, in most cases, our inaction to stop the development of a social climate that bred the physical, emotional, cultural, and economic genocide and violence that accompanied the word. Any attempt to excise the word "nigger" from the English language is an attempt to excise the history that comes with it, and that history should not be changed, smoothed over, sanitized, whitewashed, or revised in any way whatsoever. It is a difficult subject to address. And it should be. But it is a part of who we are as a nation. It is part of our past and, whether we want to acknowledge it or not, part of who we are today. And Twain knew what he was doing when he liberally sprinkled the word "nigger" around the idyllic town of Dawson's Landing. It's called irony.

Some aspects of the stage adaptation of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* afforded me the opportunity to explore some very contemporary ideas of the perceptions of race in this country, as well as take the story even further in the direction in which I think Twain was moving. For example, while the audiences who read *Pudd'nhead Wilson* in its original serial form in 1893 appeared to have had no problem digesting the word "nigger," they might have had a problem digesting the idea that a respected, upstanding, white member of Dawson's Landing, Judge Driscoll, could be the father of a slave.

Twain establishes that the two babies who were switched at birth were the exact same age. One was born to Mrs. Percy Driscoll, the wife of Judge Driscoll, and the other was born to the slave Roxy. Both babies looked exactly alike, so much so that only Roxy, the mother of the slave baby, could tell them apart. However, Twain then goes on to tell us

that the father of Roxy's baby, who later became Tom, was a mysterious Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex who is mentioned only once in the story.

Making Judge Driscoll the father of both children in the adaptation, for me, was as natural as taking a breath. It seemed to be the clear implication of the story. While Twain assigned a different father to Tom in chapter 1, thereby avoiding the explicit idea that the respected Judge Driscoll raped a slave girl and thereby fathered a slave, the rest of the novel unabashedly supports the idea. This implication, combined with today's widespread acknowledgment that sexual congress between master and slave was commonplace, made the change easy and one on which I think Twain would have smiled. However, other aspects of the adaptation were a bit more problematic.

In the novel, the two children, Tom and Valet de Chambre or Chambers, appear to be physically identical in every respect. However, one was white and the other was a very light-skinned slave. While this was not an issue in the world of the novel, it presented an interesting dilemma when it came to the stage. It suggested that I was going to have to cast two actors who physically resembled each other. Adding this restriction would make the play almost impossible to produce, and even if we could find two actors who physically resembled each other, I knew that I could not cast a white actor in the role of Tom. While some plays could be cast colorblind without changing or distorting the meaning of the play, colorblind casting in plays where race is a central theme would be foolish and irresponsible. In this particular case, casting a white actor in the role of Tom would radically change the meaning of the story, turning it into a tragedy of a white man whose life was destroyed when he discovered that he was black. This is not what Twain intended and certainly not the story I wanted to tell in my adaptation.

The solution was to embrace the perceived differences between the two characters and cast two actors who appeared to have been drawn from opposite ends of the physical and racial spectrum. As a result, the script calls for a white actor in the role of Chambers, who is born to privilege but, after being switched at birth, spends most of his life as a black slave. The script calls for a dark-skinned African American actor in the role of Tom, who is born a slave but, after being switched at birth, grows up in a white household, spending his life in privilege as a white slave owner. In the world of the play, Tom grows up believing he is white. He thinks he is white; all the other characters in the play believe he is white; therefore, when the other

characters look at him, all they can see is someone white, even though we the audience see something different. Likewise, even though a white actor is playing someone who, in the play, is thought to be an African American slave, he believes himself to be a slave; he acts like a slave; therefore, when the other characters look at him, all they can see is a slave.

This theatricality is supported by the casting of the visiting Italian Twins as well. Even though none of the characters in the play can distinguish one twin from the other, the script requires that a black actor play one twin, and a white actor play the other. This reinforces one of the main themes of the play: that what we consider to be race is not the result of some set of definable predetermined biological markers but the result of a manufactured social construct. This idea was most recently demonstrated on a national level when during the 2008 presidential campaign, the nation viewed Barack Obama as a biracial example of a postracial world. After the election, he was no longer considered to be biracial. He simply became black. Of course, his ancestry did not change. What changed was the nation's perception of him.

KNOCK ME A KISS is about Yolande Du Bois, the daughter of W. E. B. Du Bois. The impetus for this play came when I was doing research for an earlier play, *Black Star Line*, which was about the messianic Jamaican leader and entrepreneur Marcus Garvey and his back-to-Africa movement. Research into *Black Star Line* included a journey into the life of W. E. B. Du Bois, whose political feud with Garvey during the early 1900s was well publicized. While researching the life of Du Bois and reading his work, I found his attitude toward his daughter to be curious. At times he seemed to be hypercritical of her, and at other times he seemed to be dismissive. When I was in rehearsals for *Black Star Line*, I mentioned this to the director, Tazewell Thompson, who was surprised that I was not familiar with what he considered to be a well-known story.

The facts on which I based *Knock Me a Kiss* are that on April 9, 1928, Countee Cullen was married to Yolande Du Bois, the daughter of W. E. B. Du Bois. Two months later, Countee Cullen sailed to Paris with the best man from the wedding, Harold Jackman, leaving Yolande, his bride, behind. Yolande was granted a divorce from Countee on December 9, 1929.

In his essay, "So the Girl Marries," the elder Du Bois wrote, "It was not the mere marriage of a maiden. It was not simply the wedding of a fine young poet. It was the symbolic march of young and black America.

. . . But it was not simply conventional America—it had a dark and shimmering beauty all its own; a calm and high restraint and sense of new power; it was a new race; a new thought; a new thing rejoicing in a ceremony as old as the world.”

Of course, the “new race” and “new thought” to which Du Bois referred was one of Du Bois’s signature theories, the theory of the “Talented Tenth.” Du Bois’s solution to the “negro problem” in America was for the African American community to focus its resources on the classical education of the talented 10 percent of the African American population who would then spearhead social change and serve as leaders for the race. One doesn’t have to read very deeply to understand that Du Bois thought that the marriage of his daughter to one of the leading poets of the Harlem Renaissance marked the beginning of that development. However, many Harlemites suspected, some say knew, that Countee Cullen was gay. Nevertheless, Du Bois clearly held his daughter responsible for the failure of the marriage.

I thought, if this was true—if Countee Cullen was gay and if it was Countee Cullen’s sexual orientation that caused the failure of the marriage—that would make Yolande Du Bois an unselfish tragic heroine who easily could have redeemed herself by outing Countee Cullen. However, that also would have meant outing one of the most important poets of the Harlem Renaissance and by doing so, outing the fallacy of her father’s notions. Instead, Yolande apparently chose to keep Countee’s secret, thus protecting her father’s public persona and upholding his theories on race, family, and marriage, even while her father simultaneously chastised her for being capricious and irresponsible. I thought, if true, this was a magnificently delicious story.

W. E. B. Du Bois was a man who was aware that he had achieved greatness in his own time. I doubt if he ever destroyed a single letter, receipt, or slip of paper that crossed his desk. As a result, his collected microfilmed papers are voluminous. My search through hundreds, if not thousands, of microfilmed documents in the W. E. B. Du Bois papers led me to the Countee Cullen papers, and there I found the single letter that allowed me to write the play that I had imagined on first hearing the story. That letter, dated May 23, 1929, was written to W. E. B. Du Bois by Yolande after she had joined Countee in Paris. The letter reads in part, “Countee told me something about himself that just finished things.” She goes on to say, “I knew something was wrong—physically, but being

very ignorant + inexperienced I couldn't be sure what. When he confessed that he'd always known that he was abnormal sexually as far as *other men were concerned* then many things became clear."

Not long after finding this letter, Dennis Začek, who was artistic director of Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago, asked me if I had a play for the 1999–2000 season. I told him the story and what I was thinking about writing, and he immediately put it into the season.

FREE MAN OF COLOR was the result of a commission by Robert Glidden, who was then president of Ohio University. The guidelines for the commission were simple and straightforward: the play could be on any subject of my choosing but had to be appropriate for the 2004 bicentennial celebration commemorating the founding of Ohio University. I had always imagined writing a play about John Newton Templeton after discovering that the performing arts auditorium at Ohio University was named after him. I thought the idea that an ex-slave had graduated from a university almost four decades before Abraham Lincoln signed the emancipation proclamation to be amazing. Even more amazing was the fact that I had never heard of John Newton Templeton and had never heard his story before encountering the auditorium that stood in his name.

The facts on which I based the play are that John Newton Templeton was an ex-slave who graduated from Ohio University in 1828. While at Ohio University, Templeton did not live in the college edifice with the other students. He worked as a "student servant" and lived with the then president of Ohio University, Robert Wilson, and his wife, Jane Wilson. To mark his graduation, John Newton Templeton delivered a commencement speech titled "The Claims of Liberia." In that speech, he advocated support of the American Colonization Society (ACS) and its goal of establishing Liberia as a homeland for freed American ex-slaves.

I initially thought that "The Claims of Liberia" was the work of a firebrand radical. Templeton's advocacy of an African homeland came almost one hundred years before Marcus Garvey's multinational back-to-Africa movement that divided the African American community but united other people of African descent from all over the world. I thought that this made John Newton Templeton an iconoclast who was ahead of his time. Instead of conceding to convention by delivering a more traditional commencement speech, as did his nine graduating classmates,

John Newton Templeton delivered a speech on a provocative topic about which he felt passionate. And that was the play I had planned to write.

During my research, I discovered that President Wilson of Ohio University was an ordained Presbyterian minister. I also discovered that Reverend Robert Finley, also an ordained Presbyterian minister, founded the ACS. In addition to this, the Presbyterian Church, like the Quakers, ardently supported the ACS. They were joined in their support by many American slave owners who viewed the ACS's goal of transporting free men of color to Liberia as a convenient way of quelling discontent and maintaining superiority and control over the enslaved population.

This means that my original assumption that John Newton Templeton was somehow an iconoclast was uninformed and misguided. He was admitted to Ohio University not through a progressive humanitarian act of altruism, but in a carefully calculated act of opportunism. And although it's sad to say, when reading "The Claims of Liberia" in the light of this new information, it appears as if John Newton Templeton capitulated. It appears as if he did exactly what was expected of him. These were not the ingredients of any play that I was interested in writing.

Whenever I've been engaged in research and make a discovery that is contrary to a direction in which I've been moving, my wife teases me by saying, "So what? You've never let the facts stop you before." And she's right, to a degree. I've always been more interested in a fundamental truth of the story than I am in the facts.

For example, in the play *Knock Me a Kiss*, Yolande Du Bois confronts Countee Cullen and makes the decision to end their marriage before Countee sails to Paris. Historically, this confrontation happened after Countee had sailed to Paris and after Yolande had joined him there, but I considered that distinction to be irrelevant to the story I wanted to tell, and to what I wanted to communicate by telling that story. However, the information I discovered during my research for *Free Man of Color* was not irrelevant. That information was more than factual. It spoke directly to the fundamental truth of the story, and I had no choice but to try to incorporate it into the texture of the play. The only question was how to incorporate it while continuing to tell the story that I was interested in telling.

I believe that John Newton Templeton was admitted to Ohio University under false pretenses. When I tried to imagine what that must have been like, I started to think about my own experiences in the Chicago public school system and immediately saw what I imagined to be an

undeniable parallel. John Newton Templeton was admitted under false pretenses, and I believe that I, like many of my classmates in elementary school in Chicago, was also admitted to those classrooms under false pretenses. We were there, ostensibly, to be educated, but instead we received training or indoctrination. Instead of being given the freedom to develop our own ideas, we were given the ideas of others, then called on to mindlessly repeat someone else's principles, doctrines, and conclusions. Instead of being given tools and the means by which we could conduct our own intellectual inquiry, we were given the answers and then asked to repeat those answers and believe them without thought or question. Education, or at least, I believe, true education, is teaching a student how to think. Indoctrination is teaching a student what to think.

I imagined that John Newton Templeton's time as an ex-slave in the early 1800s at Ohio University was similar to my early "education" in the Chicago public school system. This imagining is what helped me take information that initially appeared to be problematic and turn it into the core, the engine, the central theme of the play.

Occasionally the subject of my time in the Chicago school system comes up in conversation and I tell people of my Kafkaesque journey through the bureaucracy and my struggle to avoid the brutal and sometimes sadistic, but well-meaning, civil servants who called themselves teachers. The people who hear my story always listen with their mouths agape, and inevitably they always ask the same question: "Why don't you write a play about that?" And I always mumble some lame excuse about not having enough time when deep down inside, I know that I have written a play about it. I have written a play about that and many other traumatic, puzzling, and often amusing events in my life. I wrote about it in *Free Man of Color* and *Knock Me a Kiss*, in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, and in *The Gospel According to James*, as well as in *Jelly Belly*, *Freefall*, *Les Trois Dumas*, *The Sutherland*, and all my other plays.

It does not matter if the play is set in Chicago in 1982, in Harlem in 1930, or in France in 1825. The settings are merely the devices, the vehicles we use to travel to destinations that are always contemporary and personal.

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