



Renaissance

THEATERWORKS

Theater By Women For Everyone

NEAT

By Charlayne Woodard

FEATURING Marti Gobel
reprising her 2012 tour-de-force role

DIRECTED BY Suzan Fete

MARCH 19 – APRIL 11, 2021

AUDIENCE GUIDE

ABOUT “NEAT”

Back by popular demand, Renaissance Theaterworks presents its 2012 hit, with Marti Gobel reprising her tour-de-force role.

NEAT is a magical, often humorous, coming-of-age story. Based in the oral traditions of the African Diaspora, award-winning playwright, Charlayne Woodard is a modern-day griot. NEAT is based on the playwright’s lived experience. As an infant, Woodard’s beloved Aunt Beneatha (Neat), is denied treatment at the local “white” hospital, leaving her with permanent brain damage. But Neat possesses an enormous heart. With love and simplicity, Neat teaches young Charlayne to embrace black pride and cherish life through the turbulent 1960s and 1970s.

HOW “NEAT” CAME INTO BEING

Charlayne Woodard



Before she was an award-winning playwright, Charlayne Woodard was a successful actress living in New York City, where she received a Tony for her performance in *AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'*, among many theatrical accomplishments. But when she moved to Los Angeles, Woodard found herself less than satisfied with acting opportunities. She took inspiration from a quote by Maya Angelou, however: “If you don’t like something, change it. If you can’t change it, then change the way you think about it.” The Angelou quote inspired her to “stop complaining”. Instead, Woodard says, she started “telling stories” to her friends. “The result was my first play, *PRETTY FIRE*, and it changed my life.” A one-woman play performed by Woodard, *PRETTY FIRE* was produced in Los Angeles and received the LA Drama Critics and NAACP awards for best play and best playwright. It went on to be produced at prestigious theaters across the country.

One day as she was performing *PRETTY FIRE*, the actress/playwright remembers thinking, “This is absolute madness... Never again.!” Talking with her director, she shared the story of her Aunt Neat who had moved north from Savannah to live with her family. His reaction: “That’s the play I want you to write... We’ll workshop it next spring.” Woodard began exploring her memories and after a few months, called her director, saying, “I’ve got the story. It’s called NEAT and I know the four actors I’ll need for the workshop: Angela Bassett, Mary Alice –”. He cut her off with “Charlayne, not four actors, only you. You’re the only one who does what you do.”

That’s how Woodard’s second play, NEAT came into being. Developed at Seattle Repertory Theatre, it was produced there, as well as the Manhattan Theatre Club and Mark Taper Forum. Along the way it garnered the Irving and Blanche Laurie Theatre Vision Award and an Outer Critics Circle Award nomination.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES



Bringing back NEAT, a 2012 audience favorite followed by a successful South African tour, had always been my dream. Most importantly, because the story captivated me immediately. Woodard's writing is lyrical and her characters are so full of life! I'm sure Marti would agree – there is an awful lot of action in the script's thirty-nine pages! Back in 2012, NEAT was the second offering in our Diversity Series, which ran for three seasons. For each of them, fifty percent of our productions were written by playwrights of color. I believe we were the first professional theater company in town to make that kind of tangible commitment to diversity.

For our 2020-21 season we had other plans. Like most performing arts organizations, we were forced to reimagine our season more than once. Being a one-actor play, NEAT would be much safer to perform than a larger cast production, so this was the perfect time to bring it back. And I couldn't be more excited to work with Marti again! Her beautiful versatility as she plays twenty-four different characters is just priceless and something to be admired more than once. Like a fine work of art.

So, last October, I called Marti. I said, "Hey, I wanna do NEAT again. Are you..." Before I could finish, Marti said, "YES! Wait, when is it? Never mind, I'll cancel everything else!" I adore working with her! She is everything I love in an actor – immensely talented, brave, and a lot of fun. Marti and I have worked together in different productions for the last ten years, if not more. Even though I am so proud of our 2012 production of NEAT, this time around it's subtler, more nuanced, more complex.

When we started rehearsing, it all just felt right, like coming back home to old friends and family...

Safely creating work, however, is a challenge, but it has presented opportunities that we all have welcomed. Learning what's possible, working with cameras, finding new ways to bring the story to life, have been exciting challenges and have proven how creative and resilient we all are. I'm so fortunate to be working with such a brilliant production team! Lighting designer Noele Stollmack, set designer Lisa Schlenker, the experts at Studio Gear, and the editing skills of Kathy Wittman, made NEAT come to virtual life.

We are also fortunate to have Jayne Pink as choreographer and movement director. Trained at the Royal Ballet School, Jayne is considered one of the finest dramatic dancers of her generation. Having her wealth of talent and experience is beyond what I ever imagined. And she's so much fun! Her movement suggestions bring each character to life in ways that bring us closer to the stage...even from the distance.

I assure you – NEAT will stay in your heart for a long time.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Suzan Fete". The script is fluid and cursive.

Suzan Fete

SET BACKDROP

The beautiful NEAT backdrop was created by Set Designer Lisa Schlenker. Lisa was inspired by the work of artist Minnie Evans.



MINNIE EVANS

Excerpt from <https://www.petulloartcollection.org/>
Minnie Evans was born on December 12, 1892 in a cabin in Long Creek, North Carolina. Her young, poor mother was fourteen years old, working as a domestic servant. At the age of only two months, Minnie was taken to live with her grandmother in Wilmington. She was essentially raised by her grandmother, and considered her biological mother to be more of a sister-figure. Her father, George Moore, was also very young when she was born and abandoned the small family. When she was a teenager, Minnie found out about his death, but not until a year after the fact.

Minnie's family history is full of strong women. Passed down verbally from one generation to the next, their story recounts the experiences of their ancestor, Moni, an African woman



"My, my. I don't know how I did it. But I did it." ~MINNIE EVANS

Untitled artwork by Minnie Evans



who was a slave in Trinidad. She eventually ended up in Wilmington, North Carolina, where relatives still live today.

Minnie began school at the age of five and attended until she was in the sixth grade, leaving school to help earn money for her family. She had loved studying history, mythology, and biblical stories which were part of her deep Baptist faith.

As a child, she often heard voices and had waking dreams and visions. She could not recall a night she slept without having dreams, and during the daytime, recurring hallucinatory experiences led to a confused sense of reality. This continued throughout her life, though the intensity of her visions varied. These waking dreams were often images of prophets and religious figures, real and mythical animals, flowers, plants and faces. She was quite conscious of this unusual aspect of her

personality, and cautious about letting other people become aware of this phenomenon.

After leaving school, she worked going door-to-door selling shellfish from the waters off of the North Carolina coast. She met Julius Ceasar Evans, and married her nineteen-year-old groom four days after her own sixteenth birthday. During their long marriage, they bore three sons.

Her husband worked as the valet for Pembroke Jones, a wealthy landowner, and Minnie went into domestic service on the estate as well. After the death of Jones, his widow remarried and moved with her new husband to the estate called Airlie where the Evans' continued working for the family. The 150 acres were developed into an expanse of gardens and opened to the public in 1949. [READ MORE.](#)

SEGREGATION IN HEALTHCARE



Garden City Maternity Hospital
Located on Ford Rd. in Garden City
1947

In the 1950s, when Neat was an infant, she was denied treatment at this “white” hospital, which resulted in her permanent brain damage.

The following articles illustrate the widespread segregation in the healthcare system at the time the story of NEAT took place.

Professional and Hospital discrimination and the US Court of Appeals Fourth Circuit 1956-1967. “As late as the mid-1960s, hospital discrimination was widespread throughout the United States and, in many jurisdictions, legally sanctioned. Discrimination was expressed through denial of staff privileges to minority physicians and dentists, refusal to admit minority applicants to nursing and residency training programs, and failure to provide medical, surgical, pediatric, and obstetric services to minority patients. A national campaign to eliminate hospital discrimination involved collaboration among professional associations; public health,

hospital, and civil rights organizations; and the federal government, along with a direct attack against hospital policies through litigation that culminated in 2 landmark judicial decisions. These legal decisions, one involving a hospital in North Carolina and the other a hospital in Virginia, both emerged from the US Court of Appeals Fourth Circuit.” [READ MORE in this article from the National Institute of Health's National Library of Medicine.](#)

[Segregation in United States Healthcare: From Reconstruction to Deluxe Jim Crow](#) Honors Theses and Capstones Student Scholarship - University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. Author: Kerri L. Hunkele.

FROM THE SCRIPT...

CHARLAYNE. *My grandmother picked up her baby and ran out of the house. She ran through that cane field. She ran over a mile clutching her baby. Running, running, all the way to Garden City. When she reached the hospital on Main Street, she burst through the front door of that small, white building.*

GRANDMAMA. *My baby won't wake up! My baby won't wake up! Oh, Lord, somebody help my child.*

CHARLAYNE. *The nurses and doctors came running. They saw to the baby in Grandmama's arms. And just then, Neat began to have convulsions.*

GRANDMAMA. *Oh, Lord, look at her! What's wrong my baby? Somebody please ... help my child!*

CHARLAYNE. *She tried to hand Neat to the doctors. To the nurses ...*

GRANDMAMA. *Do something, hurry!*

CHARLAYNE. *But they wouldn't take her. They all just backed away, recoiling, as if she was offering them poison.*

GRANDMAMA. *(Screaming.) Somebody help my baby!*

CHARLAYNE. *Then, the head nurse grabbed my grandmother in an attempt to calm her down.*

NURSE. *(With a sweet smile.) Ma'am ... I'm sorry, ma'am, but that is a colored baby. We can't treat a colored baby here. You're going to have to take that baby over to the colored people's hospital in Savannah ... I'm sorry ma'am.*

GRANDMAMA. *Oh, no, no, no! Not my child! My child be dead by the time I —*

CHARLAYNE. *But the nurse just held the door open for her.*

NURSE. *Good luck, ma'am.*

CHARLAYNE. *With that, my grandmother descended the steps of the hospital and ran across the street to the bus stop. And there she waited in the midday heat, without her parasol, the baby having convulsions in her arms. She just stood there in that hot sun, praying and searching Main Street for the bus that would come and take her to the colored people's hospital, clear across on the other side of Savannah.*

Established in 1832, the Georgia Infirmary was the first hospital for African Americans built in the United States, “the colored people’s hospital” where Neat was finally treated. It was built ten miles south of Savannah, Georgia to treat slaves that were in prematurely bad health, many who were cast out by their owners when they were no longer able to work. [READ MORE.](#)



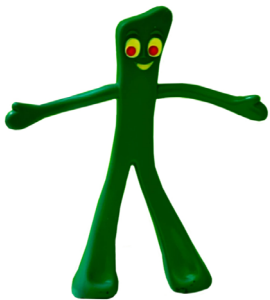
GLOSSARY



Dixie Peach Hair Pomade is a greasy or waxy substance. It was a popular pomade in the USA from World War II through the 1960s and it is still made today. Pomade is used to style hair and make it look slick and shiny. Unlike hair spray and hair gel, pomade does not dry and often takes several washes to remove. It can be removed using a special shampoo or other de-greasers such as olive oil, dishwashing liquid, or lemon juice.



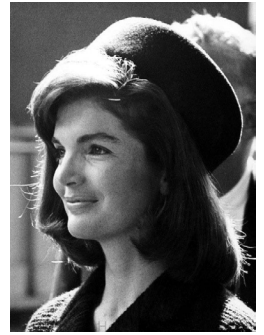
The Flip was hip in the 1970s and initially favored by younger women, although eventually it became widely popular with all ages. Shoulder-length hair was back-combed slightly at the top and then curled out at the ends to “flip” up. Famous flips included those of pop singer Lesley Gore, Mary Tyler Moore on “The Dick Van Dyke Show,” Marlo Thomas on “That Girl,” and 1971 Miss America Phyllis George.



Gumby is a blue-green cartoon figure who had a TV show in the 1950s and was the subject of a TV series which spanned over a thirty-five-year period. He was animated using stop motion clay animation. Gumby was created by Art Clokey while a student at the University of Southern California.

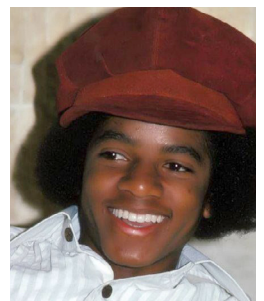
Pillbox hat. The Pillbox hat is a small woman’s hat with a flat crown and straight,

upright sides. Historically, the pillbox was also a military headgear, often including a chin strap, and can still be seen on ceremonial occasions in some countries. In military terms, the pillbox is a round defense structure for ground troops, popularized in World War I by the British. Jacqueline Kennedy was well-known for her signature pillbox hats in the 1960s, designed by Oleg Cassini.



Dashiki. The dashiki is a colorful garment, widely worn in West Africa, that covers the top half of the body. It has formal and informal versions and varies from simple draped clothing to fully tailored suits. A common form is a loose-fitting pullover garment, with an ornate V-shaped collar, and tailored and embroidered neck and sleeve lines.

Applejack is a cap with a baggy, floppy crown and a short, wide visor. Popular among hippies in the 1970s, they were sometimes made patchwork-style, with different fabrics for each panel of the crown.



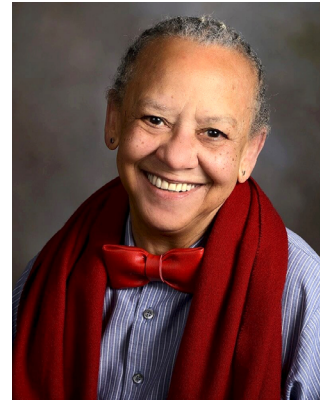
Griot. Since the thirteenth century, when Griots originated from the West African Mande empire of Mali, they remain today as storytellers, musicians, praise singers and oral historians of their communities. In addition, griots were responsible for keeping all the births, deaths and marriages throughout the

generations of the family or village. This role was very important for the preservation of a people's history, especially centuries ago when communities weren't learned in writing or reading, and their whole lineage and history could have been forgotten otherwise. Traditionally, griots were of a social caste. The art and important position of storytelling was passed down from generations of griot families, and as such, not just anyone could become a griot.

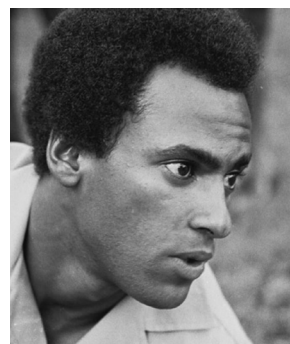


South African Gumboot Dancing originated in the Gold mines in South Africa during the apartheid. Black laborers worked in total darkness for three months at a time in appalling conditions. They were chained to their work stations and were forbidden to talk to each other. They stood up to their knees in infected water causing skin diseases and ulcers resulting in lost time from work. The bosses discovered that it was cheaper to provide them with gumboots (Wellington Boots) than to drain the mines. The miners used the Gumboots as a method of communication by slapping their boots and stamping their feet and rattling their ankle chains. During their free time, the miners would sing and dance and drink together and remember their families a thousand miles away, giving birth to the tradition of Gumboot dancing. Gumboot dancers are commonly sighted on the streets and plazas of tourist areas in South Africa.

“Nikki” Giovanni (born Yolande Cornelia in 1943) is an African American poet, writer, commentator, activist, and educator. Her primary focus is on the individual and the power one has to make a difference in



oneself and in the lives of others. Giovanni's poetry expresses strong racial pride, respect for family, and her own experiences as a daughter, Civil Rights activist, and mother. She first caught the public's attention as part of the Black Arts movement of the late 1960s. After graduating with honors from Fisk University in 1967, she moved to Cincinnati and established the city's first Black Arts Festival. Giovanni also began writing the poems that are included in her first self-published volume, “Black Feeling, Black Talk” (1968). By the mid-1970s, she had established herself as a leading poetic voice. She won a number of awards including Woman of the Year from Ladies' Home Journal in 1973. Since 1987, she has been on the faculty at Virginia Tech, where she is a University Distinguished Professor.



Huey P. Newton (1942–1989) was a political and urban activist who helped establish the controversial African American political organization the Black Panther Party and became a leading

figure in the black power movement of the 1960s. As a teenager growing up in Oakland, California, he got in trouble with the law—as he would numerous times throughout his life. Despite his legal run-ins, in the mid-1960s Newton decided to pursue his education

at Merritt College, where he met Bobby Seale. The two were briefly involved with political groups at the school before they set out to create one of their own. Founded in 1966, they called their group the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Unlike many of the other social and political organizers of the time, they took a militant stance, advocating the ownership of guns by African Americans, and were often seen brandishing weapons. Newton was arrested in 1967 for allegedly killing an Oakland police officer during a traffic stop. He was later convicted of voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to two to fifteen years in prison, but public pressure helped his cause. The case was eventually dismissed after two retrials ended with hung juries. In the 1970s, as the Black Panthers began to fall apart, Newton returned to school, earning a Ph.D. from University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1980. The once popular revolutionary was shot on the street in 1989.



Stokely Carmichael (1941-1998), West Indian-born civil-rights activist, leader of black nationalism in the United States in the 1960s, and originator of its rallying slogan, “black power.” Carmichael immigrated to New

York City in 1952, attended high school in the Bronx, and enrolled at Howard University in 1960, where he joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Nonviolent Action Group. In 1961 Carmichael was one of several Freedom Riders who

traveled through the South challenging segregation laws in interstate transportation. For his participation he was arrested and jailed for about 50 days in Jackson, Mississippi. He continued his involvement with the Civil Rights Movement and SNCC after his graduation. During this period Carmichael and others associated with SNCC supported the nonviolence approach to desegregation espoused by Martin Luther King, Jr., but Carmichael was becoming increasingly frustrated, having witnessed beatings and murders of several civil-rights activists. In 1966 he became the chairman of SNCC, and during a march in Mississippi he rallied demonstrators in founding the “black power” movement, which espoused self-defense tactics, self-determination, political and economic power, and racial pride. This controversial split from King’s ideology of nonviolence and racial integration was seen by moderate blacks as detrimental to the Civil Rights cause and was viewed with apprehension by many whites. Before leaving SNCC in 1968, Carmichael traveled abroad speaking out against political and economic repression and denouncing U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Upon his return, Carmichael’s passport was confiscated and held for ten months. He left the United States in 1969 and moved to Guinea, West Africa, changing his name to Kwame Toure. He helped to establish the All-African People’s Revolutionary Party, an international political party dedicated to Pan-Africanism and the plight of Africans worldwide. In 1971 he wrote “Stokely Speaks: Black Power Back to Pan-Africanism”. His memoir “Ready for Revolution” was posthumously published in 2003.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1 When Woodard started writing NEAT, she envisioned many different actors playing all the characters until she was persuaded to write a one-actor play. How do you think the storytelling would've been different?
- 2 In the writing of NEAT, Woodard was inspired by West African storytellers, or Griots. From the description in the Glossary, how do you see Charlayne acting as a Griot?
- 3 How did you feel when Neat was denied treatment at the local hospital? Do you see similarities in how African Americans are being treated in healthcare today? How?
- 4 Since she was an infant, Neat faced many obstacles due to permanent brain damage. How do you think she was able to thrive?
- 5 How do you think things were different for Charlayne and Neat in the city versus the country?
- 6 Neat's questions about "her people" inspired Charlayne to learn more about the history of African Americans in this country. She went to great lengths to find the information she was looking for. What do you think about the barriers she had to overcome to find this information?
- 7 And then, Charlayne went from a flip to a 'fro. Why was this significant?
- 8 That's when Charlayne started having huge fights with her father, who loved the flip. He also wanted the Angela Davis poster down off Charlayne's wall, whom he considered an outlaw. "I'm not living with Angela. I'm not living with Stokely. I'm not living with Malcolm X. We're in the King camp in this house. Martin Luther King! Go get his poster!" Why do you think Charlayne's father felt this way?
- 9 When Charlayne asked to have more books about the history of African Americans at her school library, the principal ended up calling the police. How did the way the police treat the students make you feel? Do you see similarities with current times?
- 10 "I tell you, life doesn't get any better than this!" This is a recurring line in the play. What are the moments in your life that make you feel that way?
- 11 Most of the relationships in the play are between women. What effect do you think this had on Charlayne's life? Are you used to seeing this kind of stories onstage or in movies?

Would you like to bring NEAT to your group? This play is ideal for educators, bookclubs, friends' groups, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion work, etc. For group tickets, please contact Marketing Director Lucía Lozano. llozano@r-t-w.com or 414-273-0800.

Renaissance

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