

INSIDE OUT

A STUDY GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

WORLD PREMIERE

IN THE UPPER ROOM

IN THE UPPER ROOM SYNOPSIS

Set in 1974, *In the Upper Room* tells the story of a multi-generational black family led by the family's controlling and secretive matriarch, Rose Berry. Rose, who lives in the upper room of her son John's home with her husband Eddie, has maintained control of her family by keeping them in fear using her sharp tongue and financial support. The family members gossip about Rose's mysterious past and contemplate if she's involved in evil practices to explain all the bad juju surrounding the family, including the prolonged absence of Rose's schizophrenic son, Terry.

When Rose gets word from Eddie that the Air Force may relocate them back to the South, she refuses to return and vows to take her granddaughter, Yvette, with them. Later, Rose overhears her granddaughters discussing a Ouija board and warns them never to use one. At Easter Sunday dinner, Rose tells the family about the move and her decision to take Yvette with her. The family is furious. John, Janet's husband and Rose's son confronts Rose about leaving Yvette with them and asks that she show respect to Janet, or he'll kick her and Eddie out. Rose tells him she's not going anywhere. Meanwhile, Yvette and Josephine borrow their classmate's Ouija board to try and contact Rose's mother. Rose interrupts them and is furious when she sees the Ouija board.

After Rose's death, John goes to the courthouse hoping to gather documents to contact Rose's mysterious family, while each family member fears that their actions are what killed Rose. With the whole family gathered for dinner, Eddie asks that they remember Rose as someone who loved her family and was close to God. Later, after stargazing together, John shares a "tall tale" about wrestling rattlesnakes with Terry.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Beaufield Berry is an Omaha-based playwright, novelist, and arts education professional who was inspired by her own family for this piece, *In the Upper Room*, which was a finalist in the O'Neill



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In the Upper Room

By **Beaufield Berry**

Directed by **Gregg T. Daniel**

Presented by **The Joan and Phill
Berger Charitable Fund**

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of an Edgerton New Play Award**

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Center's 2018 National Playwrights Conference and workshopped in the 2019 Colorado New Play Summit. Her work specifically takes on the drama, history and joy of the Black diaspora and often includes magical surrealism, musical, and mixed-media components. Beaufield's adventurous work has been performed across the country and in multiple conferences, including the Great Plains Theater Conference, Philadelphia Sparkfest, Manhattan Rep, and Colorado New Play Summit. She has served as a guest artist with Inge Fest in Independence, Kansas, on several panels and boards. Beaufield is currently the Resident Playwright at Creighton University in Omaha.

CHARACTERS

ROSE (50s)- The matriarch. Dark skinned. A Mahalia Jackson type. Raised old school in a modern world. Eddie's second wife.

EDDIE (50s)- A quiet, hard-working, mild-mannered family man. Rose's husband.

JANET (30s)- Light skinned. A strong voice, matter of fact, stoic. Wife of John.

JOHN (30s)- A boisterous storyteller with a charismatic way. Husband of Janet.

JOSEPHINE (15-16)- Dark-skinned. A book-smart girl under the shadow of her Grandmother Rose, who torments her because of her skin. John and Janet's daughter.

YVETTE (15-16)- Light-skinned. A fun-loving girl under the dotting wing of her grandmother, Rose. John and Janet's daughter.

JACKIE (50s)- Loves gossip, God, and games. Janet's sister.

DELORES (50s)- Loves gossip, God, and good food. Janet's sister.

TIME AND PLACE

As America moved past the 1960s and into the 1970s, marginalized groups such as women, minorities, and the LGBTQ community continued their fight for equality and rights while others protested the draft and the ongoing war in Vietnam. During this time, the civil rights movement continued to shine a light on the growing economic disparity between white and black Americans as the country was slowly making efforts to integrate neighborhoods, businesses, and schools, often with minimal success. These integration attempts resulted in what would be known as "white flight," a migration of white citizens fleeing their communities as they became more racially diverse. As neighborhoods began to change, so did the involvement of black citizens in politics, culture, and economics. On television, sitcoms like "Sanford and Son," "The Jeffersons," and "Good Times" brought black families right into the homes of black and white citizens while expanding and exploring notions regarding black families, black identity, and the black community. On the airwaves, black musicians such as Donna Summer, The Jackson Five, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, and Gladys Knight and The Pips, were connecting with audiences across the color line. As the "Black is Beautiful" empowerment movement took hold, the afro, perms, and the Jheri curl found their way into popular culture. In politics, The National Black Convention was held for the second time in 1974, hoping to create a common agenda for black advancement. In 1972, Shirley Chisholm became the first African American candidate and first female candidate for president of the United States.

1974

1974 saw the resignation of United States President Richard Nixon following the Watergate scandal. Gerald R. Ford, born in Omaha, Nebraska, is sworn in as the 38th President and pardons Nixon for his crimes. "The Rumble in the Jungle" boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman takes place in Zaire, where Ali knocked out Foreman to regain his heavyweight title. The NAACP and the Urban League try

to tackle the barriers to black liberation by turning their efforts toward the political and economic factors. A global recession deepens as gasoline shortages, and price increases begin debates about the use of nuclear energy. The second-largest tornado outbreak in 24 hours on record occurs, impacting 13 U.S. states.

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OMAHA, NEBRASKA

Omaha is the largest city in Nebraska and the 43rd largest city in the United States. As industrial jobs began to emerge, such as railroads and meatpacking, Omaha became a major state for African American's fleeing the South during the Great Migration of the early 20th century. This influx would help it eventually become home to The Union Pacific Railroad Company, one of the largest railroad centers in the United States. During this time, black men who arrived in Omaha were hired as cooks, waiters, porters, and strikebreakers until the railroad and other industrial industries were restructured in the 1960s, causing massive job losses. As poverty began to rise, racial tensions and housing crises in the city led to outbreaks of violence. During this time, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy visited Omaha to discuss the civil rights movement. By the 21st century, jobs had shifted from the industrial to service sector jobs such as housekeeping, nursing, teaching, and retail. Today, Omaha has the fifth-largest African American poverty rate among the nation's 100 largest cities, as more than one in three black residents live below the poverty line.

Omaha was the birthplace of many black figures such as civil rights activist and advocate for black empowerment, Malcolm X, Tuskegee Airman Alfonza W. Davis, Ernie Chambers, the longest-serving Nebraska state senator in history, Republican Presidential candidate Herman Cane, actress Gabrielle Union, Founder and president of Radio One, Cathy Hughes, and numerous others. Omaha is also home to the Great Plains Black Museum, one of the country's most prominent African American culture and history centers. In addition, the Omaha Community Playhouse has been recognized as one of the top community theatres in the United States.

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THE UPPER ROOM

Referenced in Mahalia Jackson's song, "The Upper Room," refers to Heaven, a place where one meets to speak with Jesus/the Lord. In the play, The Upper Room is the room in John's home where Rose resides.

POP CULTURE REFERENCES

- Mahalia Jackson - An African American gospel singer.
- Huey P. Newton - Co-founder of the Black Panther Party.
- *JET Magazine* - A magazine focusing on news, culture, and entertainment related to the African American community.
- Marilyn Monroe - A Caucasian American actress, model, and singer, who was a sex symbol in the 1950s and 1960s.
- Soul Train Line - A variant of the 1950s fad then known as The Stroll, in which all the dancers on the show "Soul Train" form two lines with a space in the middle for

dancers to strut down and dance in consecutive order. Soul Train was an African American-focused music-dance television program that aired for 35 years, starting in 1971.

- “General Hospital” - An American daytime television soap opera. It is listed in Guinness World Records as the longest-running American soap opera.
- “Howdy Doody” - An American children’s television program with Songs, sketches, games, and more with Buffalo Bob and his puppet pal, Howdy Doody.
- Lena Horne - An African American dancer, actress, singer, and civil rights activist.
- Nubian Queen - A member of a group of dark-skinned peoples that formed a powerful empire between Egypt and Ethiopia from the 6th to the 14th centuries. In pop culture, this usually refers to an intelligent black woman with dark skin who overcomes any obstacle.
- Beverly Johnson - An American model, actress, singer, and businesswoman who was the first African American model to appear on the cover of *American Vogue* in August 1974.
- Grace Jones - A Jamaican American model, singer, songwriter, and actress.
- The Drinking Gourd - The Drinking Gourd is another name for the Big Dipper. It was used by escaping slaves so they would not get lost.
- Rosa Parks - An African American activist in the civil rights movement best known for refusing to give up her seat during the Montgomery bus boycott.
- “Black is Beautiful” - Is a cultural movement that began in the mid-1960s. It was a slogan created by African Americans in response to claims that black citizens were less attractive than whites and used to empower black people.
- The Supremes - The Supremes were an American female singing group and a premier act of Motown Records during the 1960s. Motown’s first and most commercially successful girl group.
- James Brown - Known as the “Godfather of Soul,” Brown was an American singer, songwriter, dancer, musician, record producer, and bandleader.
- Ouija Board - Also known as a spirit board or talking board, often used during a séance to communicate with the dead.
- Skin Whitening Cream - A cream used in an attempt to lighten the skin. Lighter-skinned African Americans were perceived to be more intelligent and skilled than dark-skinned African Americans during slavery.

VOCABULARY

- Voodoo - A religion practiced in parts of the Caribbean (especially Haiti) and the southern U.S., combining elements of Roman Catholic ritual with traditional African magical and religious rites and characterized by sorcery and spirit possession.
- High Ball - A drink of whiskey mixed with club soda or ginger ale and served with ice in a tall glass.
- Tall Tales - An exaggerated, unreliable story.
- Folk Tales or Folktale - Any belief or story passed on traditionally, especially one considered false or based on superstition.
- Hippies - Members of a cultural protest movement that began in the United States in the 1960s and affected Europe before fading in the 1970s. Hippies were bound together by the rejection of many standard American customs and social and political views. The hippies often cultivated an unkempt image in their dress and grooming and were known for practices such as communal living, free love, and the use of marijuana and other drugs. Although hippies were usually opposed to

the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War, their movement was fundamentally a cultural rather than a political protest.

- Heffa - It can be spelt “heffer” or “heffa.” This word is used most often in African American Vernacular and is used to insult someone. In general, it means “bitch” but can apply particularly to someone who is fat.
- Juju - An emanating aura or supernatural force.
- Melanin - Pigments that account for the dark color of skin.
- Calisthenics - Exercises designed to develop physical health and vigor, usually performed with little or no special apparatus.
- Schizophrenia - A severe mental disorder characterized by some, but not necessarily all, of the following features: emotional blunting, intellectual deterioration, social isolation, disorganized speech and behavior, delusions, and hallucinations.
- Sunday School - A school, now usually in connection with a church, for religious instruction on Sunday.
- Jive - Language associated with swing music and early jazz and also known as deceptive slang that is exaggerated or meaningless.
- Baby blues - Feelings of sadness that you may have in the first few days after having a baby.
- Mulatto - Usually offensive, this term relates to the first-generation child from one black and one white parent.
- American Dream - An American social ideal that stresses egalitarianism (a belief in human equality, especially with respect to social, political, and economic affairs) and especially material prosperity.
- Namesake - One that has the same name as another. Especially one who is named after another or for whom another is called.
- Gibberish - Unintelligible or meaningless language.
- Con man - A person who tricks other people to get their money.
- Tar baby - Although the term “tar baby” is documented as coming from a folktale of African origin, its modern meaning in America is different. Many consider tar baby to be a derogatory term for African Americans.
- Whoopie - To have sex.

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THEMES

Multi-Generational Households

According to advocacy group Generations United, 51.4 million Americans currently live in multi-generational households, equating to 26% of the population. Of the various types of multi-generational households, the most common arrangement consists of three generations. Benefits of living together typically include but are not limited to enhanced bonds/improved relationships among family members, more accessible means to provide care for one another, improved finances for at least one family member, and positive impacts on mental and/or physical health.

Under one roof, the Berry family struggled to remain united as Rose fought to maintain power of the younger generations. Financial circumstances allowed Rose under John’s

roof, as it is with her and Eddie's money that John could get the house. Janet's baby blues after the birth of Yvette allowed Rose to step in and raise her while creating future tension between mother and daughter of multiple generations. Circumstances such as these, along with Janet taking on the new role of being a homemaker with a job outside the house, created tension between the two matriarchs, who questioned the other's ability to run a family successfully. Despite these tensions, the Berry's found ways to stay united via games, dinners, and faith. As numerous family secrets came to light, the bonds that had been built between the siblings and couples only grew stronger when those holding the secrets finally set them free, which allowed them to see Rose as Eddie had asked.

Source: <https://www.gu.org/explore-our-topics/multigenerational-households/>

Gossip & Secrets

Gossip is defined as informal talk or stories about other people's private lives that may be unkind or not true. In the case of Rose, her desire to keep her family secrets private led numerous family members to speculate and gossip about her mysterious past. While the gossip did bring Jackie and Delores together, it also highlighted how petty one could become when faced with questions with no answer. For the aunts, gossiping revealed what little they didn't know and their true character. The desire to know the unknown also pushed Yvette and Josephine to defy Rose's request regarding staying away from the Ouija board, as the secrets and gossip only made their curiosity grow. Gossip and secrets became obstacles for the Berry family to overcome in order for them to fully see each other as well as what their family had become once Rose died.

Source: https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/gossip_1

Colorism

Colorism is defined as a practice of discrimination by which those with lighter skin are treated more favorably than those with darker skin. This practice is a product of racism in the United States but is also a global problem. Colorism upholds the white standards of beauty and benefits white people in the institutions of oppression such as the media, medical world, and judicial system. During slavery, those with lighter skin, often a result of being a child born of rape committed by the slave master on to one of his slaves, were assigned domestic tasks while those with darker skin were forced to work in the fields.

Throughout the play, Rose uses a skin bleaching cream and gives it to Josephine to use. Unlike Rose, who takes pleasure in applying the cream and staring at herself in her vanity mirror, Josephine takes no joy in applying it to her skin. Rose also disciplines Josephine much harder than her light-skinned sister and is more critical of Josephine's interactions both with the family and while in public. Rose also makes it a point to call out Janet's light skin in their first interaction in the play's opening. Rose's refusal to return to the South and the likely discrimination she experienced because of her skin tone turned her into an occasional self-hating black woman who passed down the hate done to her on to her own family. Josephine can finally deal with this obstacle after Rose dies but knows that even with her main tormentor gone, she cannot escape those outside the home.

Sources: <https://racism.org/index.php/articles/law-and-justice/citizenship-rights/116-slavery-to-reparations/racial-reentranchment/1707-colorism001?showall=&start=3>
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Faith & Spirituality

In the Upper Room is a reference to Heaven, to the place we go after our time on Earth is done. For Rose, who lives in the upper room, her spirituality and faith are thrown into question multiple times. There is gossip Rose practices voodoo and casts spells to explain how she ended up with Eddie and what happened with Terry. Though the audience never sees Rose cast a spell, there are suggestions that more may be afoot as she spends time getting ready in front of her vanity. After her death, the audience is left to wonder if Rose has truly left the upper room or if she's only now arrived when

Terry returns and one of her candles lights itself. Spirituality also manifests in various ways for the Berry's who are presented as a Christian family. There is prayer in the home, but its power is later questioned after Rose's death. The arrival of the Ouija board puts fear into Yvette, Josephine, and Rose when they try to reach out to their great-grandmother. Again, there is faith through Eddie, who continues to believe his family will survive together under one roof because, like the faith they all have in the lord, it's clear that they all have faith in each other.

Folk Tales, Tall Tales, and the stories we tell ourselves

It is through stories that humankind has been able to form bonds, transfer knowledge, and entertain. The storyteller's story and how they present it provide the audience with a clear view of how they see the world and themselves in it. Through tall tales, John becomes a complex and fully formed character in the Berry family, who's strong, fearless, and hilarious. Eddie uses his stories to teach lessons to his children, and Rose uses her stories to create mystery and fear. The stories each of the characters tell themselves are also shaping their realities, which is especially clear after Rose's death when each character believes that they are responsible for her sudden demise. The Berry's use these stories as an opportunity to come together and get to know one another, and in the end, Eddie asks them to all share the same one, that Rose loved her family.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Pre-Performance questions

1. What are the benefits and drawbacks of living in a multi-generational household? List a few of the positive and negative aspects that would affect your living condition?
2. How are tall tales and exaggerations beneficial to the creation of personal and familial stories? Why do people exaggerate these stories when they tell them?
3. Why do family secrets always have a way of revealing themselves? What are the consequences when family secrets are revealed?

Post-Performance Questions

1. How do the technical elements of scenic, costume, sound, and lighting design enhance the story?
2. Who is the central character of this play and why do you think the play focuses on their story?
3. How would you describe the relationship between Rose and her husband, son, daughter-in-law and granddaughters?
4. Compare the marriages of the two couples, Eddie and Rose and Janet and John.
5. How would you describe Dolores and Jackie? How do they move the story forward?
6. How does Rose treat Yvette and Josephine differently? What do the sisters think is the reason for the favoritism that Rose shows one over the other? Why does Rose tell Yvette and Josephine that they are descendants of royalty?
7. What are the reasons that Rose gives for taking Yvette from Janet and John? How does that affect the family and what are the consequence of this action?
8. How is ritual and religion portrayed in the play? What is the significance of voodoo and the Quija board?
9. How would you describe the character, Eddie? How does your feeling for Eddie change over the course of the play?
10. Why do families change family stories to fit their own personal narrative? How do the different Berry family members recall and tell their stories?

IN THE UPPER ROOM

ACTIVITIES

Tall Tale Writing

Materials: Newspapers, pen and paper

Goal: The purpose of this exercise is taking an actual event or a moment in time and exaggerate the event to make it even more exciting.

Embellishing the facts

1. Select a newspaper article. The article can be from any section including the sports page. Read the article and make some notes about the event that has happened and the characters that were involved. Condense the story into three parts; a beginning, middle, and end and write them in three paragraphs.
 - a. Keep the opening paragraph of the article written by the journalist.
 - b. Change the middle of the article by adding exaggerations about the event or the characters involved. Pay attention to details.
 - c. Add the original ending of the article as written by the journalist.
2. Read the new article with your embellished moments.
3. Add some more exaggerated moments and continue to make the story even more outlandish and exciting, and yet try to keep the integrity of the original article.
4. Discussion Questions: Discuss how the story may or may not have changed. Did the characters and the situation stay believable even with your additions? Is there a certain point where the story becomes too unbelievable?

Colorado Model Content Standards

Writing PG: Effectively use content-specific language, style, tone and text structure to compose or adapt writing for different audiences and purposes

Writing PG: Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.

IN THE UPPER ROOM

ACTIVITIES

Perspective Writing – A Family Story

1. Start with students, working individually, to craft a personal definition of the word, “family story.” What are the indicators of a family story, and do we know why it is told?
2. Students write about a person (or an event) in their life that they are willing to share.
3. Students then interview a parent/caregiver or other adult for an example of a family story. Students identify and define the similarities and differences between their interviewee’s definitions and their own personal definition within Step 1.
4. Students then ask the subject of the interview to describe a family story that they are willing to share. Why is this story important? What obstacles were in their way? Are there any additional details they would like to add? Students look for the similarities and differences between the adult experience and their experience within Step 2.
5. After the interview, identify key themes and character choices that they will adapt into a monologue or scene of dialogue for the stage.
6. After writing the first draft, have students read the draft aloud.
7. Discuss the differences between theatrical adaptations. What did the playwrights do to convey the characters and the family story? Were their embellishments that may have been included?
8. Ask the playwright, in what ways did they have to invent, delete, or change anything within the source material for the monologue or dialogue?
9. Raising the bar: Following the first theatrical adaptation, instruct the playwrights to change a point of view. What changes would have to be made to clearly show that the events found in the first draft are now being described from a different character’s perspective?

Writing PG: Effectively use content-specific language, style, tone and text structure to compose or adapt writing for different audiences and purposes.

Writing PG: Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Denver Public Library recommends:

Read!

The House of Broken Angels by Luis Alberto Urrea

This house comes to life across borders, generations, genders, and ages. The matriarch of the sprawling de la Cruz family is dead just as her eldest son, Miguel Angel - known as "Big Angel" - is about to celebrate a farewell birthday blowout before he succumbs to terminal cancer. Over the funeral/party double-header weekend, the extended clan gather in San Diego to eulogize and revel in the decades spent as family and strangers, as loved ones and pariahs.

Watch!

Eat Drink Man Woman, dir. Ang Lee (2021)

Director Ang Lee weaves a funny, poignant and always entertaining story of one family and their traditions. Centered on a father and his three unmarried daughters living in Taiwan, each Sunday the family, as is their tradition, gathers around the table to share a meal, stories and digest the wisdom of their all-knowing father. Stream it on Kanopy, free to all Denver residents with your library card.

Listen!

Dock of the Bay Sessions by Otis Redding

This CD collects Otis Redding's recordings from the months before he died in 1967. The songs are a mix of Redding's intelligent songwriting, passion, and Southern soul. Let this be the soundtrack to the play, pushing you through a range of emotions from "(Sittin' on) The Dock of the Bay" to the final song, "Amen," that displays Redding's belief in the beauty of simplicity.

Download!

Fences by August Wilson

A black garbage collector named Troy Maxson in 1950s Pittsburgh is bitter that baseball's color barrier was broken only after his own heyday in the Negro Leagues. Maxson is prone to taking out his frustrations on his loved ones. Also adapted into a great film in 2016 starring and directed by Denzel Washington, as Troy Maxson, and Viola Davis as Rose Maxson.



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