

**The Rep**  
MILWAUKEE

September 28 - November 13, 2011  
*Stiemke Studio*

# YELLOWMAN

By Dael Orlandersmith

Directed by May Adrales

*Play*  
**Guide**

# YELLOWMAN

Study Guide written  
and compiled by  
Leda Hoffmann  
*Education Coordinator*

With contributions from  
Neal Easterling  
*Education Assistant*

Play Guide edited by  
Jenny Kostreva  
*Education Director*

•  
Lisa Fulton  
*Marketing Director*

•  
Brent Hazelton  
*Associate Artistic Director*

•  
Samantha Martinson  
*Education Intern*

•  
Graphic Design by  
Megan Gadiant



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Mark Clements  
*Artistic Director*

Dawn Helsing Wolters  
*Managing Director*

**MILWAUKEE REPERTORY THEATER**  
108 E. Wells Street  
Milwaukee, WI • 53202



# YELLOWMAN STUDY GUIDE

Milwaukee Repertory Theater presents  
*Yellowman*

By Dael Orlandersmith  
Directed by May Adrales

September 28 – November 13, 2011

2002 Pulitzer Prize Finalist in Drama | 2003 Drama Desk Award Nomination

**“I chose *Yellowman* because it has an important message about prejudices and racism that still exist in our society today – but from a different angle that most of us aren’t as familiar with. It is beautifully written, a contemporary Romeo and Juliet type of story, and is one of the best plays I’ve read in a very long time. I’ve wanted to produce it for a while now, and this felt like the right time to bring it to The Rep.”**

-Mark Clements, Artistic Director



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# YELLOWMAN SYNOPSIS

Divided into five parts, each focusing on an important part of the two main characters' lives, *Yellowman* addresses internal racism within the Black community. The play takes place in the Gullah community in 1960s South Carolina. *Yellowman* follows two characters – Alma, a large dark-skinned Black woman, and Eugene, a fair-skinned, muscular Black man—as their relationship progresses through their youth.

## Part I

In the present, Alma describes her childhood in the Gullah community of 1960s South Carolina. She talks about how she takes after her female ancestors in physical appearance—large, dark-skinned women who “tugged the soil right beside the men” and felt that if they married a light-skinned man, their life would be better.

Eugene, who is light-skinned, talks about his father, Robert, a big man who has darker skin. They have a contentious relationship fueled by their different skin tones. Alma then describes how she and Eugene met in the schoolyard, when she was seven and he was nine. Alma and Eugene become inseparable, even though they are criticized for playing with each other because they are from different economic backgrounds and have different colored skin.

Alma and Eugene provide more family history. Eugene's father escaped a difficult environment by going to school and working at Georgia-Pacific. Alma's father, John, left her mother before she was born. He returns only to insult both Alma and Odelia and leaves again. Odelia gets drunk that night and makes a “love root” that supposedly will make Alma's skin lighter. Alma prays to become lighter-skinned and smaller so her father will return.

**“There is humanity within a bleak story. We find that humanity by exposing the darkness. I use language as a tool. Just the fact that the story itself is told – and hopefully well – is cause for hope.”**

-Dael Orlandersmith



## Part II

Alma, now 14, begins to notice the physical changes in her body while Eugene, 16, starts to take an interest in girls. Eugene is now best friends with Wyce, who is light-skinned as well. Alma and Eugene remain friends but begin to look at each other differently. Alma knows she has romantic feelings for him. While at a party, Eugene is kissing a girl and realizes he is imagining Alma instead. Drunk off wine and bourbon, Eugene has sex with the girl he was kissing at the party. Alma is filled with jealousy when she hears the girl he was with had fair skin and long hair. Eugene leaves to see Alma, and he kisses her.

## Part III

High school graduation is approaching, and Alma, now 17, appears more confident. She is able to graduate early and has a summer job at Woolworth's. Eugene, now 19, is unsure of his post-graduation plans and his father calls him pathetic. Eugene's mother tells him that his grandfather (who cut her off for marrying a darker skinned man), wants to meet him. When they meet, Eugene's

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grandfather tells him not to let dark-skinned people push him around and especially not to marry a dark-skinned girl.

Alma and Odelia visit Eugene's family for graduation supper. Eugene's father looks down on Odelia because she wasn't able to make a better life for herself. Everyone gets increasingly drunk, and Alma announces that she is moving to New York City in the fall to attend Hunter College. Upon returning home, Odelia yells at Alma, telling her that Eugene is going to leave her for a prettier, lighter-skinned girl. Odelia pours herself another glass of gin and tries to hit Alma, but Alma resists and tells her to never lay a hand on her again.

Eugene visits Alma the next day, struggling with the fact that she is moving away. He wants to settle down in South Carolina, while she wants to move away to make something of herself. Eugene's father gets him a job at Georgia-Pacific in the lumberyard, and he gets the same taunts about his light skin his grandfather talked about.

Eugene drives Alma to the train station, and they share a goodbye kiss. Alma goes to the cocktail car and orders white wine. In his car, Eugene drinks as well, but he drinks to get away from his problems while she drinks to celebrate.

Eugene returns home to find his parents drinking, too. His father tells him he's a failure and they argue. When his parents head to their room for the night, Eugene continues to drink.

#### **Part IV**

Six months after moving to New York, Alma has even more confidence. She has fallen in love with the different rhythms of the big city. Eugene visits Alma and is not sure how much he likes the city, but he notices how happy it makes her. Eugene tells Alma he loves her and Alma says the same to him. Back at the apartment, they consummate their sexual relationship.

#### **Part V**

For a year now, Eugene has been visiting New York once a month. He and Alma have decided to get married. While Eugene is in New York, his father calls to tell him that his grandfather died, and he needs to return home immediately. Both Alma and Eugene come back to St. Stephen, where Alma finds her mother living in filth and drinking too much. Back at Eugene's home, his father tells him that Eugene's grandfather left everything to him. Between drinks he tells his son that he worked hard all his life, and Eugene just gets everything handed to him because he has lighter skin.

After the funeral, Eugene's light-skinned relatives ignore his father and barely acknowledge Alma. Alma notes that people keep drinking and drinking, including Eugene. Eugene's father tells Alma he likes the way she looks after Eugene, and he squeezes her backside. Eugene sees this and is livid.

Eugene and his father argue. His father tells him that he doesn't love him and that he touched Alma because Eugene isn't man enough to do it. Eugene punches him and the fight becomes physical. Eugene ends up killing his father.

Telling the story, Alma reflects on her life and the prejudices and jealousy she had against light-skinned girls. She realizes that, no matter how hard she tries, she does take after her mother. Eugene is sentenced to twenty-five years to life in prison for the murder. Alma finds out she is pregnant with his child and she aborts the baby. She now lives in New York, but is no longer confident. In his cell, Eugene reminisces about the summer before Alma left for New York. All he can think about is how beautiful she looked and how good her lilac perfume smelled.

# THE CHARACTERS

Two actors portray all of the characters in the story.



## ALMA

A girl from Russellville who searches for a better life and dreams of New York City. A large-sized woman with a medium to dark brown complexion.

## John

Alma's father. He left the family before Alma was born. A light-skinned man.

## Odelia

Alma's mother. She drinks heavily and wants to believe that Alma's father is going to come back for them. Alma and Odelia live outside the city limits, in Russellville. A big, dark woman.



## EUGENE

A boy from St. Stephen who is trying to find his place in the world. A very fair-skinned black man.

## Robert Gaines

Eugene's father who worked hard to become a foreman at the Georgia Pacific lumber yard. A dark-skinned man.



## Thelma

Eugene's mother who was cut off from her family for marrying dark-skinned Robert. A light-skinned woman.

## Alton White

Alma and Eugene's friend in elementary school. A dark-skinned boy.

## Wyce

Eugene's friend in high school. A light-skinned boy.

## Granddaddy Eugene

Eugene's grandfather after whom he is named. He cut Thelma off for marrying Eugene's darker-skinned father.

Costume renderings by *Yellowman* Costume Designer and Rep Costume Director Holly Payne.

# GULLAH CULTURE

The Gullah/Geechie people have a strong cultural heritage full of traditional crafts, art, music and stories told in their own melodic language that is now contained mostly in the coastal islands of southern South Carolina and northern Georgia. Though they share much of the same language and culture, the people of South Carolina often refer to themselves as Gullah, where those of Georgia are often referred to as Geechie. Today, many people think of “Geechie” as a racial slur, and it is used as a derogatory term in *Yellowman*.



“The Old Plantation,” South Carolina, about 1790.



Mrs. Queen Ellis of Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, making a sweetgrass basket, 1976.

The history of the Gullah people began on the rice plantations of South Carolina and Georgia in the late 1600s. By 1700, the colony’s economy was overwhelmingly based on rice production. Because of the forced migration of slaves to work these plantations, the population of the South Carolina was predominately of African descent by 1708. Since the marshy areas, where rice thrived, harbored diseases such as malaria and yellow fever, African slaves had little contact with the European landowners who were more susceptible to disease and lived in the cities. After the Civil War and Emancipation, most of the Gullah people stayed in the area working as hired labor for the landowners, remaining in fairly remote isolation until the 1920s

when the first bridges were built to the barrier islands.

Gullah culture formed in these isolated communities of descendants of many different African tribes. Gullah tradition seems to emphasize commonalities among the tribes: the people are known for their fishing tradition, weaving of sweetgrass baskets, ironwork on many of the gates of Charleston and traditional storytelling – made famous in the book *Uncle Remus: Legends of the Old Plantation*. As the isolation of the community broke down, many people moved elsewhere for college and better economic opportunities. Though Gullah culture remains centralized in the islands along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, its influence can be felt all over the region, from traditional “southern” dishes like she-crab soup, beans and rice, yams, okra and collard greens to musical instruments like the banjo.



Mrs. Ida Wilson selling sweetgrass baskets, 1965.

In *Yellowman*, the characters live in an area about 40 miles from the Atlantic coast on the shore of Lake Moultrie, a large flooded cypress swamp. St. Stephen and the more rural Russellville, where Eugene and Alma grew up, are populated by descendents of Gullah people who left the islands to seek economic opportunities further inland.

# The Gullah Language

Gullah is what linguists call an English-based Creole language. Creole languages usually form when people of different cultures and linguistic backgrounds live in the same place and must find a way of communicating. The new hybrid language typically melds linguistic influences from the different constituent languages. In the case of Gullah, the grammar, sentence structure and pronunciation of the English words are influenced by the African languages.

An excerpt from  
*I Have a Dream*  
by Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Translated to Gullah by Alphonso Brown

“Ie say tuh unnuh today, mye frien’, eeb’n dough we duh face dees haad time yuh ob today ‘n temorrh, Ie still hab uh dreem. ‘E uh dreem wuh staat way down een America dreem. Ie hab disshuh dreem dat one day dis America gwi’ come up ‘n be tru’ mout’ ob de law wah call de Creed: “We hol’ dees trut’ fuh be sef-ebbuhdent, dat all man duh mek equal.”

“I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”



The characters in *Yellowman* are from the town of St. Stephen, South Carolina and the nearby community of Russellville.

# THEMES

**“*Yellowman* is about internal racism within the Black community. It takes place in the sixties in South Carolina within the Gullah community up to the present.**

**Although the play takes place within the Black community, the themes of alcoholism, parental abuse, and self-abuse are universal themes and that is the author’s intent – to show universality.”**

-Dael Orlandersmith, Playwright’s Statement on *Yellowman*

## ALCOHOLISM

The central characters in *Yellowman* struggle with alcoholism. All the parents in the play drink heavily – Alma’s mother and father drink gin and Eugene’s parents drink bourbon. When Eugene and his friend Wyce start drinking as they get older, Eugene begins to use alcohol to “steady his nerves” just like his parents do.

**“all day he’d been at it/  
the bourbon but you’d  
never know it/that he  
had bourbon in him  
unless you knew him  
well and could smell it.”**

-Eugene, referring to his father



### Questions

At what moments in the play do characters drink more heavily than usual?

What are the signs that Eugene may be becoming an alcoholic?

Eugene calls bourbon “truth serum.” To what extent does alcohol bring about the real truth in the play?

How does alcoholism lead to the final events of the play?

## Universality

- About 13% of adults in the United States will suffer from alcoholism at some point in their lives.
- In the United States, 17.6 million people – about 1 in every 12 adults – abuse alcohol or are alcohol dependent.
- Alcoholism can run in families through learned behavior and/or genetic predisposition.
- Wisconsin has the highest rate of binge drinking (percentage of adults drinking more than five drinks in an evening at least once a week) in the country.

## PARENTAL ABUSE

Both Alma and Eugene’s parents abuse their children verbally and physically. Much of the abuse is fueled by alcohol, and both Alma’s mother and Eugene’s father live in fear that their children will surpass them in education, wealth and status. Odelia cannot see herself as beautiful and sees Alma as an ugly reflection of herself. Eugene’s father sees all the people who put him down in the face of his lighter-skinned son. Alma and Eugene work to escape their families’ fates but, in the end, must acknowledge that they are the product of their families. In one of her last lines, Alma says, “I am my mother’s daughter after all.”

**“Ole big fat funny-  
lookin’ thing can’t run  
– ole fat funny-lookin’  
thing can’t do nuttin’.”**

-Odelia to Alma

# THEMES continued

## PARENTAL ABUSE continued

### Questions



- Why are the parents in *Yellowman* afraid that their children will surpass them?
- What are tactics Alma's mother uses to keep Alma where she wants her? What tactics does Eugene's father use with Eugene?
- What role does alcohol play in parental abuse in the play?
- Both Alma and Eugene try to be different from their parents and not repeat their parents' mistakes. Can we ever really separate ourselves from our families?

### Universality

- A report of child abuse in the United States is made every ten seconds.
- Child abuse occurs at every socioeconomic level, across ethnic and cultural lines, within all religions and at all levels of education.
- In 2007, nearly 56,000 children were reported abused and neglected in Wisconsin. These children could fill every seat at Miller Park or populate a city the size of New Berlin or Brookfield.
- In 2009, approximately 772,000 children in America were found to have been victims of abuse or neglect.

## SELF-ABUSE

*Yellowman* is a love story as much about finding a way to love oneself as it is about love between two people. In a community where dark-skinned people are told that they are ugly and light-skinned people are resented by the dark-skinned and disrespected by whites, worthlessness fills the characters of *Yellowman*. Negative self-image is reinforced since birth. Eugene's father tells his son, "I was too black and ugly . . . and you wanna know the first person that told me that? My father. He said that to me for as long as I can remember." Alma and Eugene both struggle to love themselves over the course of the play. Alma fights her negative self-image by buying new clothes and make-up. However, the first time Alma and Eugene make love, Alma can't help but think of herself as ugly: "How do I look against these sheets - how fat, black and ugly do I look against these sheets?"

**“What I want to say is, can you take care of me Gene? Can you make me feel pretty? Do you think I take up too much space?”**

-Alma

### Questions:



- How do Alma and Eugene help each other gain self-respect?
- Dael Orlandersmith calls negative self-image and self-hate "self-abuse." What does she mean by this?
- What are the moments in the play where Alma displays a lot of self-confidence?
- Self-hate in *Yellowman* is focused on appearance. Why is appearance the number one factor in these characters' self-worth?

### Universality

- Seven in ten girls believe they are not good enough or do not measure up in some way, including their looks, performance in school and relationships with friends and family members.
- Only 4% of women globally feel comfortable using the word "beautiful" to describe themselves.

# THE MUSIC OF *YELLOWMAN*



## Questions:

Many examples of these artists' music can be found on YouTube. Search for them and listen to their music. How are their sounds different? Alma grows up in a community still listening to 1920s artists like Ma Rainey and Big Mama Thorton. How is the music she hears different when she gets to New York and hears 1960s artists like James Brown and Otis Redding?

Photos (left to right): Row 1: Willie Mae Thornton, Ma Rainey, Bessie Mae, Bob Dylan; Row 2: The Monkees, Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell, Robert Johnson, Jimi Hendrix; Row 3: Otis Redding, Tito Puente, Hector Lavoe, James Brown; Row 4: The Apollo Theater, Billie Holiday.

# DAEL ORLANDERSMITH

Playwright Dael Orlandersmith was born and raised in public housing in New York's East Harlem. Beginning at an early age, she loved to write journals and read voraciously, learning to express her thoughts about the African-American community in which she lived. That background provides her with many ideas for her plays, in which she explores "humanity by exposing the darkness."



Dael Orlandersmith and Howard Overshown in *Yellowman* at the McCarter Theater.

She started acting as a young woman and wrote her own scripts for performance assignments when she attended Hunter College in New York. As a playwright, she attended the Sundance Theatre Lab in Salt Lake City, Utah, and began writing stories about growing up in Harlem. Between 1995 and 1998, her plays *Beauty's Daughter* and *The Gimmick* won her many awards and recognitions. In a *New York Times* article, she wrote, "There is a theme throughout the work that I write, about childhood and the sins of the father and the sins of the mother and how people take on the very thing they don't like about their parents and they become them."

*Yellowman* was commissioned by the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey. Orlandersmith played Alma in the 2002 McCarter production and on Broadway at the Manhattan Theatre Club. The work has established Orlandersmith as a recognized leader of a new generation of African-American women writing for the stage.

In an interview in *A Voice to be Reckoned With*, Orlandersmith said this about *Yellowman*:

"My mother was from South Carolina, and this is very, very, loosely based on a family down there. When I was a kid my mother would send me down in the summer. And there was this family that used to interbreed to keep the light skin going. Yellow, "high yellow" was a nasty term for lighter-skinned black people.

When the '60s rolled around, the Black Power movement started in this particular region in the South and in other places as well. I remember people who were extremely dark and extremely light getting together simply because it was a taboo, and you could not do it before.

*Yellowman* is loosely based on this community, on this family, when the '60s rolled around. There was a bust-out of stuff. It became a catalyst for me to look at internal racism – the rift between light-skinned people and dark-skinned people, which has its roots in slavery. So in this particular case I don't want to let anyone off the hook. The people that have enslaved, and the people who have taken on being enslaved and taken the very bias that's been done unto us. You know, because it still happens."

**"So in this particular case I don't want to let anyone off the hook. The people that have enslaved, and the people who have taken on being enslaved and taken the very bias that's been done unto us. You know, because it still happens."**

-Dael Orlandersmith on *Yellowman*

# MAY ADRALES



May Adrales

Director May Adrales recently directed the world premieres of *Edith Can Shoot Things and Hit Them* at Actors Theatre of Louisville and *Mary* at The Goodman Theatre. She has directed work at The Public Theater, Second Stage Theatre, New York Theatre Workshop, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Partial Comfort Productions and Long Wharf Theatre. She served as Director of On Site Programming at the Lark Play Development Center (2008-10), Artistic Associate at The Public Theater (2006-08), and has an MFA from the Yale School of Drama.

**REP:** You worked on the original production of this play with Dael Orlandersmith and Howard Overshown. What excites you about exploring this play now?

**MA:** It's been ten years since I worked on the world premiere of *Yellowman* and the play is just as potent, poetic and powerful then as it is now. *Yellowman* encompasses the bare essentials of the theater – a provocative story, rich and complex characters and gorgeous writing. It effortlessly combines lyrical, rhythmic language and lush imagery with an important message about race.

I am also so excited about working on a play that deals with types of people not commonly seen on stage. How many love stories center on a light skinned black man and a large dark skinned woman? It's a rare and amazing opportunity for these two actors. And I believe it's important to show a diverse range of human experiences on the stage.

**REP:** As well as the central issue of internal racism, this play deals with complex issues such as alcoholism, parental abuse and self-abuse. Why is it important to tell this story?

**MA:** This is a play that exposes the cyclical violence and abuse within families and societies. We tell this story in hopes that it might bring to light the danger of such cycles and inspire others to take responsibility to change detrimental learned behavior, such as racism, alcoholism and abuse.

There is no better medium than the theater to teach these lessons. In watching *Yellowman*, we witness two fragile, vulnerable human beings share some of their deepest, darkest most painful memories. In experiencing the play, I believe people will leave with a deep sense of empathy and a greater awareness of racism and oppression.

**REP:** In this play, two actors tell a story that spans many years and includes a wide variety of different characters. What opportunities and challenges arise with this storytelling approach?

**MA:** Each character must be truthfully and honestly portrayed. The very talented actors, Erica Bradshaw and Ryan Quinn, must know not only the central figures of Alma and Eugene, but also must know inside and out all the people in the world. This means a deep investigation of how the dozens of characters in the play talk, walk and their point of view on the world. During some of the play, the actor playing Eugene has to play four different characters within a two minute speech.

The play is sparse in its design elements and it relies solely on the storytelling skills of the two actors. One of my favorite aspects of the theater is working closely with actors on complex material. Working with the two actors on this show is really a marriage of sorts – as a director, I have to figure out what makes them tick and how their brain works and how to create a supportive artistic environment that will allow them to fully embody the characters.

# STRONG LANGUAGE

Orlandersmith uses strong language to show how people turn hateful language on themselves and others. The characters in *Yellowman* use specific words to put down people based on race, gender and status. The play deals with difficult family issues and includes complex content to tell a truthful story of the many kinds of relationships between men, women and families.

When choosing language and when hearing the strong language in this play, it is important to understand the origins and meanings of the words. By understanding where these words come from and the way in which they are used, we can hope to choose our own words thoughtfully.

## Strong language in this play includes:

**Nigger** – *Origin: French “nègre” and Spanish “negro” meaning “black.”* The word is demeaning and is used to cause deliberate offence. It has been used as a derogatory term for black people since at least the Revolutionary War.

**Faggot** – *Origin: French “fagot” from the Latin “fascis,” meaning “a bundle of sticks.”* The term was originally used to refer to heretics who were burned at the stake. It is now most commonly used as a derogatory term for homosexual men.

**High Yellow** – *Origin: “high” refers to a class system where people with lighter skin are privileged over those with lighter skin; “yellow” refers to the light shade of skin.* The distinction between blacks with lighter skin and with darker skin goes back to the beginnings of the slave trade where lighter skinned slaves would work in the house and darker skinned slaves would work in the fields. People find this word very offensive since it is based on the idea that light skin is superior.

**Boy** – *Origin: used since the beginning of the slave trade as a derogatory term for African-American men.* When applied to an African-American man, “boy” refers to the idea that blacks are inferior to whites.

**Bitch** – *Origin: a term for a female dog.* When referring to women, this term dehumanizes women by referring to them a dogs.



## Questions:

How can language be hurtful? How do characters in the play use language to hurt each other? What are words you find offensive?

## COLORISM

Colorism: discrimination or prejudice based on skin tone within an ethnic group.

A light-skinned African-American male is more likely to earn a higher salary and more likely to receive higher education than a man with darker skin. Dark-skinned African-American males are more likely to be incarcerated, to face the death penalty and to be sentenced to longer terms than those with lighter skin. These statistics apply not only to African-Americans. Similar discrimination exists in the Hispanic/Latino community, the Asian community and the South Indian community.

**“The world can be hard on people like us. The white man hates us/ dark-skinned niggers hate us.”** -Eugene’s Grandfather

# VISITING THE REP

Milwaukee Repertory Theater's Patty and Jay Baker Theater Complex is housed in the Milwaukee Center downtown at the corner of Wells and Water Streets. The building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company.

The Ticket Office is visible on the left upon entering the Wells Street doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: The Rep, Associated Bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater and the Intercontinental Hotel. The entrance to the Stiemke Studio is located behind the staircase on the left. Inside the lobby are restrooms, concessions and water fountains. There will be a sign in the lobby with the full running time of the play.



Milwaukee Repertory Theater. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

## THEATER ETIQUETTE

Attending the theater can be a fun experience for everyone if you follow a few simple rules:

- Turn off and put away all electronic devices prior to entering the theater. This includes cell phones, iPods and video games.
- Taking photographs and video recording in the theater is strictly prohibited.
- Do not place your feet on the seat in front of you.
- The actors onstage can see and hear the audience just as well as you can see and hear them. Please refrain from talking or moving around during the performance as it can be distracting to the actors as well as to other audience members.
- Feel free to respond to the action of the play through appropriate laughter and applause. The actors enjoy this type of communication from the audience!
- Have fun! Attending the theater should be an enjoyable experience. Following basic courtesies allows everyone to enjoy the show.

## CONTACT US

### WRITE US:

Milwaukee Repertory Theater  
Education Department  
108 E. Wells St. • Milwaukee, WI 53202

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[twitter.com/MilwRep](https://twitter.com/MilwRep)  
[www.MilwaukeeRep.com](http://www.MilwaukeeRep.com)

### FOR QUESTIONS OR TO SCHEDULE A CLASSROOM WORKSHOP, PLEASE CONTACT:

Jenny Kostreva  
*Education Director*  
414-290-5370  
[jkostreva@milwaukeeep.com](mailto:jkostreva@milwaukeeep.com)

Leda Hoffmann  
*Education Coordinator*  
414-290-5393  
[lhoffmann@milwaukeeep.com](mailto:lhoffmann@milwaukeeep.com)

Neal Easterling  
*Education Assistant*  
414-290-5398  
[neasterling@milwaukeeep.com](mailto:neasterling@milwaukeeep.com)

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