

Back to Alabama with Cleage and Baldwin

2 Southern playwrights get personal with the history of the Civil Rights Movement

AN INTERVIEW
BY WENDELL BROCK



GREG MOONEY AT LANTANA PHOTOGRAPHERS.COM

Playwrights Margaret Baldwin, left, and Pearl Cleage.

AMERICA'S COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF THE CIVIL Rights Movement is catalogued from a public database of headlines and photographs, marches and boycotts, martyrs and villains. We sometimes forget that in the inner sanctums of cities such as Selma, Atlanta and Jackson, ordinary people engaged in private dramas the same way that humans always have: falling in love, having children, trying to put food on the table, worrying about sickness and death.

In two plays debuting this fall, Atlanta playwrights Pearl Cleage and Margaret Baldwin dig into the rich, messy, complicated lives of two Alabama families as they watch history unfold from behind lace-curtained windows, circa the mid-'60s. Cleage's *The Nacirema Society Requests the Honor of Your Presence at a Celebration of Their First One Hundred Years*, about an upper-crust Montgomery family preparing for a society cotillion, runs at Alabama Shakespeare Festival, where it was commissioned, through Oct. 3, then plays Atlanta's Alliance Theatre Oct. 20–Nov. 14. Baldwin's *Night Blooms*, about the relationship between a white Selma family and its black maid on the cusp of the third Selma-to-Montgomery march of 1965, runs through Oct. 24 at Atlanta's Horizon Theatre as part of the company's New South Play Festival.

In an uncanny feat of timing, Cleage, 61—a well-established playwright (*Blues for an Alabama Sky*, *Flyin' West*) and best-selling novelist with an Oprah Book Club title (*What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*)—and Baldwin, 42, an up-and-comer who teaches theatre at Atlanta's Kennesaw State University and has written original plays for Horizon

(*Her Little House*) and Georgia Shakespeare (*Tom Thumb the Great*)—have created milieus that are just a few miles and months apart. In *Night Blooms*, Selma matriarch Lucille Stafford decides to have a cocktail party to witness the rare flowering of her late mother's treasured night-blooming cereus plant, so she calls in her maid, Geneva Willis, to fry the chicken and make the potato salad. Never mind that the whole world is watching Selma. In *Nacirema Society*, Montgomery maven Grace Dubose Dunbar is preparing for her granddaughter's debutante ball and trying to keep a lid on family secrets. In the real world outside, Martin Luther King Jr. is picking up his Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, and organizers are preparing for what will turn into "Bloody Sunday" in Selma.

On a blazing June day, as Baldwin poured iced tea and served crackers, fruit and pimento cheese in the sunny upstairs Atlanta condo she uses as a writing space, the two playwrights met for the first time and engaged in lively conversation about the convergence of history and art.

WENDELL BROCK: Both your plays are set in Alabama during the tumultuous '60s. Tell me about your roots in the South.

PEARL CLEAGE: I grew up in Detroit, but my maternal grandparents came from Alabama and my paternal grandparents came from Tennessee and Kentucky. So all my grandparents are Southern. When people in my family talk about where they came from, they always talk about Alabama. I came to Atlanta in 1969 and I've been here ever since.

MARGARET BALDWIN: I grew up in Atlanta and lived here until I was about 16, when my family moved to Virginia. My Alabama connection is from my mother's side. She grew up in Selma, and we spent all of our holidays there. I spent every Christmas there for the first 17 years of my life. I thought that Santa Claus came just to Selma. My grandmother's home is such a big, big image in my life, and I think in some ways that's my creative home. That's where I used to play dress-up for hours on end. I used to make up stories, and I was also very moved by the relationships that I saw there, particularly the relationship between my grandmother and the woman who worked for her her whole life, basically, and ended up nursing her through her death.

How did the plays come about?


CLEAGE: I wanted to write a play set in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement. I grew up in a family that was very much involved in the movement. My father was a radical minister, so we grew up around demonstrations and mass meetings and all of that. The people who made the biggest impression on me were the people who came from SNCC [Student

Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] to raise money in Detroit, and they weren't that much older than I was, and I was in awe that they were so brave to be doing what they were doing, because people were still being killed in the South at that time. It wasn't like you were going down on a lark and were sure to come back. They always came to my dad's church to raise money, so I had a chance to hear a lot of those stories and to be a person who was involved in that movement.

But I wanted to set the play in Montgomery right around the time of the Pettus Bridge [incident], so my play takes place after the summer of '64, when the three civil rights workers were killed in Mississippi, when the violence was undeniable. What I wanted to do was take a family who was not excited about the Civil Rights Movement. People talk about the movement as if the black community was a monolithic group, in which everybody was so in favor of the movement, everybody was in love with Dr. King, everybody was a radical marching in the street—and I know that was not true. I wanted to look at a family that really did not appreciate all these wild-eyed radicals messing up their planning for a

cotillion. I know people like that and I wanted to see if I could put them at a very explosive moment and let them react to history in the midst of their family drama.

BALDWIN: I had done *Her Little House* with Horizon Theatre, and a couple of years later Lisa [Adler, co-artistic director] said, "What do you want to write next?" And I said, "I think it's time to write this play that I have been wanting to write my whole life." What I meant was going back to that relationship between my grandmother and Matilda Martin, the black woman who worked for her for 40 years. Here's how I heard the story: When the march came to Selma, Matilda came to work and Granny Ruth said, "Matilda, do you know what's going on downtown?" And Matilda said, "Yes, ma'am." And my grandmother said, "Well, do you want to go watch it?" And Matilda said, "Yes, ma'am." And the two of them drove down in the Lincoln Continental with the suicide doors—my grandmother in the front seat and Matilda in the back seat, because they couldn't sit in the same seat, and they parked on Lauderdale Street and watched the march go by together. ▶



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This was a story that made me want to be a writer, because I thought if I could capture this relationship, in all its complexities and contradictions and ambiguities, then that's worth doing. It took me a while to get the gumption to try it. So I started this project with Horizon—I wrote about 30 pages and decided I would set it on the day of March 21, 1965, the day the March left Selma, and I went and I talked to Mrs. Martin, and I said, "I want to hear your perspective. I've heard the story all my life and it's been a really important story to me. This is the way I've heard it." I told her the story and, she said, "Well, it never happened." [Cleage gasps.]

I could feel the walls start to crumble around me. I thought, "Oh, no!" Driving back to Atlanta, my husband said, "Maybe *that's* the story." Even though the story I ended up with is very different, it's still about how two people who share so much and obviously care about one another have such different perspectives about what happened.

CLEAGE: These plays deal with a lot of the same themes. The family in my play has a maid who has been there forever. She doesn't



In Baldwin's *Night Blooms* at Horizon Theatre Company, foreground: Marguerite Hannah, left, and Harrison Long; in background from left, Lala Cochran, Tom Thon, Jill Jane Clements.

get to speak a word because she's the maid, and these people are so class-conscious. They are not mean to her. It's as if she weren't even there. Only at the very end is she acknowledged by the young woman that's marrying into that family as someone who is a human being who should be included in the celebration they are having. I think enough time

has passed now from that actual historical moment that we are starting to deal with it, we American writers, in all its specificity. It's not that this is a movement play, in which all the good guys are going to be black, all the bad guys are going to be white, and then we'll go on with the story. In fact, these stories are a lot more complicated than that.

BALDWIN: When I was watching your reading at Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Pearl, I kept getting chills. "This is too weird. How did we do this?" One thing that struck me in your play was the complex layers in the generations—how something is so rigid on the part of the grandmother's generation; then the granddaughter wants to open everything up—"Let's talk about this." And there are the ones who are sort of caught in between. It's fascinating how families deal with change.

CLEAGE: I loved that after the reading in Montgomery, people came up to me—white women—and said, "That is exactly the relationship between me and my grandmother." Once you wipe away race, you realize all the generational questions are the same, all the class questions are the same, all the family fidelity questions are the same. It's just what humans do. We are all messy in the same ways. Once you get past race, it's as though there's unlimited access to all these stories. It's only race that makes us think that you can only write about this and I can only write about that. What's actually most interesting is: "What did you feel about it when that happened?" ❏

Atlanta-based Wendell Brock writes regularly about the theatre.

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