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### *Ethel*

By Terry Burrell

Directed by Kenneth L. Roberson

#### **Study Guide for grades 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>**

Created by Creekside High School 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Literature Class of Carmen Kinnebrew and

As part of the Alliance Arts for Learning Institute

Dramaturgy by Students Program

Under the guidance of Teaching Artist Ebony Tucker

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*Ethel* premiered February 21, 2012 at Walnut Street Theatre, in Philadelphia, PA



**On the Hertz stage**

**Tuesday- Sunday**

**March 25, 2016 to April 17, 2016**

**Student Matinee, April 14, 2016**

*"I sing because I'm happy. I sing because I'm free. His eye is on the sparrow.  
And I know He watches me!"*  
- *His eye is on the Sparrow*

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## **Language Arts Core Curriculum Standards**

**CCRA.R.3** Analyze how and why individuals, events and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

**CCRA.R.4** Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative and figurative meanings and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

**CCRA.L.3** Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

**CCRA.SL.2.** Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

**ELACC6-8RH2.** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions (grades 6-8)

## **National Core Arts Standards**

### **TH: Pr4.1.6.**

- a. Identify the essential events in a story or script that make up the dramatic structure in a drama/theatre work

### **TH: Re7.1.6.**

- a. Describe and record personal reactions to artistic choices in a drama/theatre work.

### **TH: Re8.1.8.**

- a. Recognize and share artistic choices when participating in or observing a drama/theatre work.

### **TH: Re9.1.8.**

- a. Respond to a drama/ theatre work using supporting evidence, personal aesthetics, and artistic criteria.

### **TH: Cn10.1.8.**

- a. Examine a community issue through multiple perspectives in a drama/theatre work.

### **TH: Cn11.2.6.**

- b. Investigate the time period and place of a drama/theatre work to better understand performance and design choices.

## The Soulful Sounds of the Playwright Terry Burrell



Terry Burrell is an African American playwright, singer, and stage actress born in Trinidad and raised in Queens, New York. She started to sing at a very young age. Terry's mother took her and her sister to the Ansonia Hotel in Manhattan for singing lessons when she was young. She later studied classical music and opera. She went to Pace University to study speech and drama but did not finish because she was offered an opportunity she couldn't refuse. She took her chance to go on the road and sing with a band.

Terry's career really took off when she was hired as an understudy for *Bubbling Brown Sugar* then three months later she took over the role of the ingenue (the leading lady). From there she starred in *Eubie*, *Modern Millie*, *Swinging On A Star*, *Into the Woods*, *Honky Tonk Nights*, *Ain't Misbehavin*, *Showboat*, and *Dreamgirls* on Broadway. Her sister was in the original cast of *Dreamgirls* and Terry took over for her sister when she left. She was nominated in regional theatre for Helen Hayes Best Actress. She began researching and writing *Ethel*, this one-woman show, while she was performing with the cast of *Into the Woods*. Now she is excited to return to the Alliance Theatre to play the role of *Ethel*.

The Soulful Sounds of...  
the Summary for *Ethel*



Comedic, melodic, and authentic, *Ethel* pays tribute to the late singer and actress, Ethel Waters. This one-woman show chronicles Ethel's life from her birth outside of Philadelphia in 1896 through her tumultuous career in the entertainment industry. In this two-act play, Ethel recounts her life through a series of flashbacks. With vivid storytelling, she guides the audience through her unexpected birth, troubled childhood, and romantic relationships; with heartfelt singing, Ethel takes the audience through the ups and downs of her career as a trailblazing African-American performer seeking fame, recognition, financial security, and validation. Ultimately, *Ethel* is entertaining and engaging with its soulful music sure to move the audience in their seat.

## The Soulful Sounds of... the Director



Georgia native, Kenneth L. Roberson is a director, choreographer, teacher, performer and writer.

His Broadway credits include: *Avenue Q* Tony Award For Best Musical.; *All Shook Up*, The Palace Theater; *Purlie (Encores!)*, City Center; *Freak*, Court Theater.;

Off Broadway: *A Boy and His Soul*, The Vineyard; *Jazz a La Carte* (as director and choreographer) and *Harlem Song* at the World Famous Apollo Theater.

Regional Theatre credits include, as Director: *Frog Kiss* (world premier Virginia Stage.) *Ethel* (also a world premier) Walnut Street Theatre and Alabama Shakespeare Festival; *Crowns*, *Lady Day* at the Emerson Bar and Grill and *Ain't Misbehavin'*, all at the Arena Stage in Washington D.C.; *Once on This Island*, Baltimore Center Stage.

Regional Theatre credits as Choreographer: *Ray*, Pasadena Playhouse; *The Color Purple* (world premier,) Alliance Theater, Atlanta, *Guys and Dolls* both at Thunder Knocking on the Door, Arena Stage.

Film: HBO's *Lackawanna Blues*, *Preaching to the Choir*, *Brother to Brother* and John Lequizamo's *House of Buggin'*, Fox T.V. which he received an Emmy Nomination. Other awards include: two NAACP Awards, two Lucille Lortel Award nominations, Drama Desk Award nomination and ADELCO Award, BET Spirit Award and NPT Spirit Award.

Kenneth is currently Professor of Practice, Theatre, Drama and Contemporary Dance at Indiana University. As a teacher, he has taught workshops specializing in the Black Vernacular of Theatre dance in cities including; New York City, N.Y., Bahia, Brazil; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Stuttgart, Germany and Osaka, Japan. Also a performance artist and writer, Kenneth's one man show *Middle Aged Passage Crisis* has garnered a NYC cult following and played Joe's Pup in New York City and Baltimore Center Stage, in Maryland. Lastly, he is the recent winner of NPT's New York Writers Festival for his new Gospel musical in progress, *WE AIN'T PERFECT*. Kenneth is a graduate of the University of Georgia's Henry Grady School of Journalism.

**The Soulful Sounds of the Actors**

Ethel.....Terry Burrell



*Ethel* is a one-woman show. One actor will use her body, voice and imagination in different ways to tell the story. In addition to Ethel Waters, several other characters will be portrayed.



## **The Soulful Sounds of...** **the Characters**

### **Ethel Waters**

She is a sassy woman who shows resilience by overcoming the obstacles she had doing her career. Ethel wants to be a famous singer.

### **Louise Waters**

Louise Waters is the mother of Ethel Waters. Despite the hatred Louise once felt towards Ethel, Ethel sent her mother money every month.

### **Nurse Rose**

Nurse Rose is a very caring woman that helped Ethel when she was in distress. She's a thoughtful person who likes to take care of people. She would go out of her way to find the best treatment for a patient.

### **Lou Henley**

Lou Henley is a pianist that gave Ethel the idea to perform for white crowds. Lou Henley was her friend. He was hired by Murray Goldstein to play for his club.

### **Earl Dancer**

Actor, director and producer Earl Dancer is Ethel's close and personal friend. He is the person that further influenced Ethel to perform for white audiences. He was the motivation she needed to step out her comfort zone.

### **Buddy**

Buddy was Ethel's disrespectful ex-husband. He is physically and verbally abusive to Ethel. Buddy was 23 years old, almost twice Ethel's age.

### **Murray Goldstein**

Murray Goldstein is the club manager of the Kenzie Theatre where Ethel performed. He is genuinely concerned about Ethel's well being.

### **John Waters**

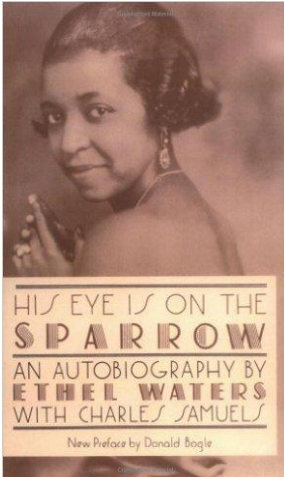
John Waters became Ethel's father through unfortunate circumstances. He was in and out of Ethel's life when she was growing up.



## The Soulful Sounds of... Ethel Waters

Ethel Waters was born October 31, 1895 in Chester, Pennsylvania. She was a singer, performer, and actress whose career took off in the 1920's. She began to perform on Broadway stages and in concerts. Before making it to any stage, she had to make it through a very difficult childhood. In her youth, she began to clean houses professionally and ended up dropping out of school. She was forced by her mother to get married at the age of 13 to a 22 year-old man. Interesting enough, her mother was forced to grow up quickly at the age of 12.

Despite the events happening outside of Ethel's world, on the inside of her was a



*Ethel Water's  
Autobiography*

magnificent voice and she used it to make her listeners feel what she was singing. She also became well known as a film and stage actress. Around 1923, Ethel was convinced by her friend Earl Dancer to audition for a white Chicago theater, where she began to become more famous and make more money than she ever made before. She was a woman of many firsts

- She was the first black woman to appear on

radio (on April 21, 1922)

- The first black woman to star on her own at the Palace Theater in New York (in 1925)
- The first black woman to star in a commercial network radio show (in 1933)

- The first singer to introduce 50 songs that became hits (in 1933)
- The first black singer to appear on television (in 1939); and the first black woman to star on Broadway in a dramatic play (also in 1939).

Waters won the Negro Actors Guild Award in 1949 for the film “Pinky”. She had many successes but Waters didn’t always have financial security. She had diabetes for over ten years and the only money she received during that time was from a Social Security check. Her health declined and the multi-talented actress/singer died of cancer on September 1, 1977 in Chatsworth, California.

## The Soulful Sounds of Vocabulary, People and Phrases

**Accustomed (a):** customary or usual

**Bambina (a):** slang for a good-looking woman.

**Bessie Smith (n):** a popular American Blues singer of the 1920s and 30s nicknamed The Empress of the Blues.

**Chippie** 1. (n): a fish and chip shop

2. Ethel Waters nickname

**Cloisters (n):** a covered walk in a convent, monastery, college, or cathedral, typically with a wall on one side and a colonnade opens to a quadrangle on the other

**Coon shouter:** one who sings in the manner of a blackface minstrel.

**Declassée (a):** having fallen in social status

**Donkey Ears:** The phrase “donkey’s ears,” meaning a long time, originated in the early 20th century, apparently as a pun on the long ears of a donkey.

**Ebullient (a):** cheerful and full of energy

**Ecstatic (a):** feeling or expressing overwhelming happiness or joyful excitement.

**Euphoric (a):** characterized by or feeling intense excitement and happiness

**Evangelist (n):** a person who seeks to convert others to the Christian faith, especially by public preaching.

**Fanny Brice (n):** A popular influential American illustrated song model

**Gauche (a):** Lacking ease or grace unsophisticated and socially awkward

**Gumption (n):** Shrewd or spirited initiative and resourcefulness

**Gyp (n):** cheat or swindled

**Heifer (n):** A young female cow that has not borne a calf. Also, a derogatory term referring to a large woman.

**Hophead (n):** A drug addict

**Jack Johnson (n):** An American singer songwriter, musician, actor, record, producer, and a former professional surfer

**Jeanette MacDonald (n):** An American singer and actress

**Josephine Baker (n):** An American born French dancer, singer, and actress

**Libation (n):** A drink poured out as an offering to a god or spirit in honor of one who’s died

**Mulatto (n):** A person of mixed white and black

**Ofay (n):** an offensive term for a white person used by a black person

**Punum (a):** Hebrew for “face” usually express with affection

**Rosary (n):** A form of prayer used especially in the Catholic Church named for the string of prayer beads used to count the component prayer

**Tinderbox (n):** A thing that is readily ignited

**Trifling (a):** Unimportant or trivial

**Vigorously (adv.):** forcefully

**Vittles (n):** A term used for food

**W.C. Handy (n):** an American blues composer

**“What’s on the rail for the lizard”** how much are you going to pay me?

## The Soulful Sounds of Places and Locations in *Ethel*

**Saks Fifth Avenue** is the successor of a company founded by Andrew Saks in 1867. Horace Saks and Bernard Gimbel opened Saks Fifth Avenue, a department store, in New York City in 1924. In the play, Ethel mentions owning a charge card at Saks. Shopping at a top of the line department store gives us an idea of what type of taste she had in clothing. Nothing in there was cheap and it was the best of the best in designer clothing. If you wanted to look good and highly fashionable Saks is where you shop.



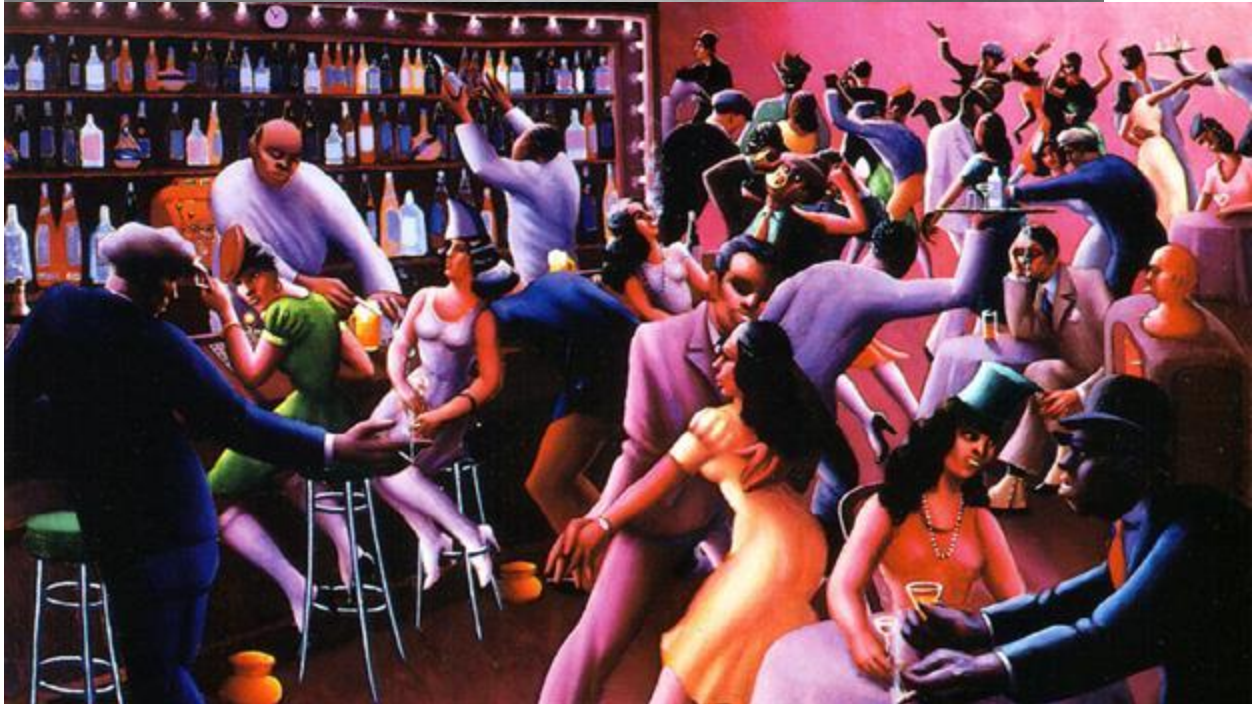
**Jack's Rathskeller** was a saloon in West Philadelphia on the corner of Juniper and South where Ethel sang in 1917. It was Halloween and Ethel's 17<sup>th</sup> birthday when she snuck into the bar. She was wearing a mask so she wasn't recognized initially. One of the singers for the night didn't show up and "Chippie", Ethel's nickname, was suggested as a replacement. That night, Ethel sang and was hired to work in Vaudeville.

## The Soulful Sounds of... the Harlem Renaissance



Occurred from 1918-mid 1930s

- Known at the time as the New Negro Movement
- Harlem was a cultural center, drawing black writers, artists, musicians, photographers, poets, and scholars. Many had come from the South.
- A cultural, social, and artistic movement that revamped the black community of literary artists.
- It helped the African Americans achieve self-confidence and determination, group expression, and it help writers get published and noticed.
- The Renaissance incorporated jazz and the blues, attracting whites to Harlem.
- Harlem's COTTON CLUB boasted the talents of DUKE ELLINGTON. Singers such as BESSIE SMITH and BILLIE HOLIDAY popularized blues and jazz vocals. JELLY ROLL MORTON and LOUIS ARMSTRONG drew huge audiences as white Americans in addition to African Americans caught jazz fever.



Archibald John Motley, Jr. *Nightlife*, 1943.



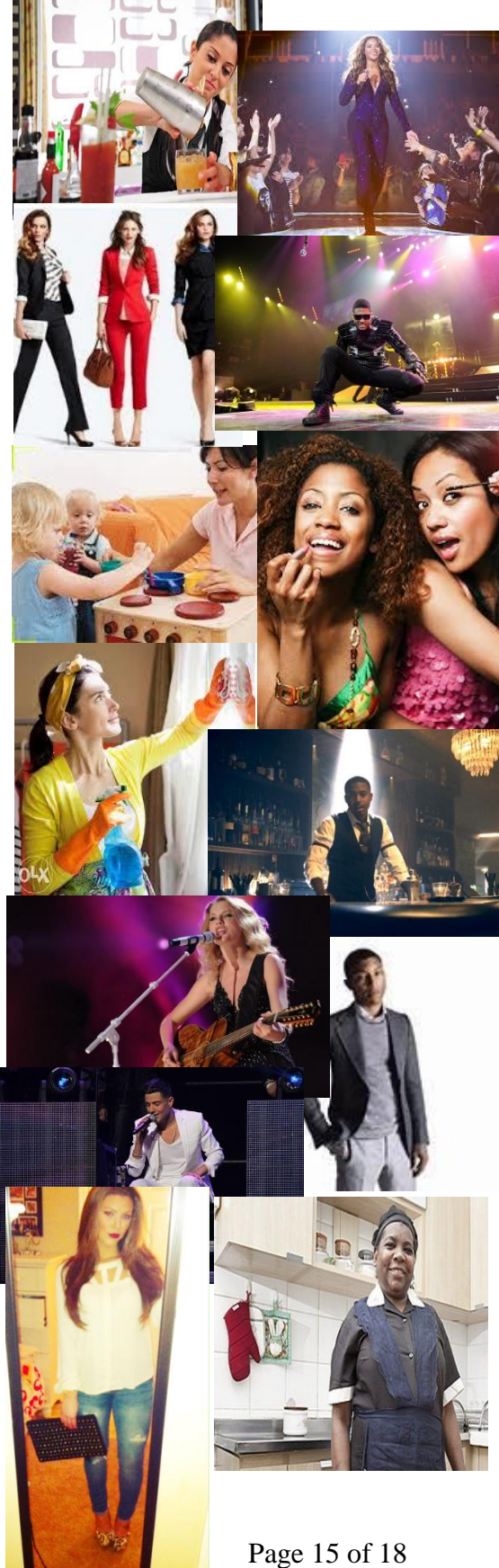
1900s

# The Soulful Sounds of Fashion: 1900's vs. 2000's

2000s

The fashion from the 1900s and from the 2000s has definitely changed. If Ethel were a singer today, she would have a different look than how she will be seen in the stage play *Ethel*.

- Singers in the 1900s predominately wore dresses. Today a singer/performer wears a variety of styles from dresses, jumpsuits and even rompers or leotards.
- We don't see Ethel as a maid in the play; however, she was a maid and waitress in 1903. Maids now dress in slightly shorter dresses before they would wear long dresses.
- Bartenders and waitresses wore a professional look with a tie or suspenders for men. Today, servers can be found in a variety of styles including a casual very revealing look for women.
- The business professional look has changed mostly by the skirts. Before, skirts were long and loose now they are tight and at knee length. Today, some women wear dress pants.
- Nannies now wear regular clothes before they wore long dresses.





## The Soulful Sounds of... Discussion Questions

### Before the play...

Listen to some of Ethel Waters music. Search for songs like:

[Stormy Weather](#)

[Am I Blue](#)

[I've Found a New Baby](#)

**Question:** What is she talking about in each song? How does her music make you feel?



### Pre-show questions

1. How does music relate to your life's situations?
2. While reaching goals in your life, what are some obstacles you've had to face?
3. What can be done for celebrities who suffer financial difficulties or bankruptcy?
4. Who is your role model? What makes them important? And why?
5. What is your biggest dream and how can you achieve it?

### Post-show questions

1. Ethel Waters had a difficult relationship with her mother. What advice would you give to her as a friend?
2. How can you use your talents to deal with your emotions?
3. How can you relate with Ethel's life style?
4. Celebrities' social status changes all the time. How would you deal with losing your social status within society?



## The Soulful Sounds of... the Resources

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