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## ***By the Way Meet Vera Stark***

By Lynn Nottage

### **Study Guide**

Created by Creekside High School Literature Class of Carmen Kinnebrew  
As part of the Alliance Theatre Institute for Educators and Teaching Artists'  
Junior Dramaturgy Program  
Under the guidance of Teaching Artist Ebony Tucker

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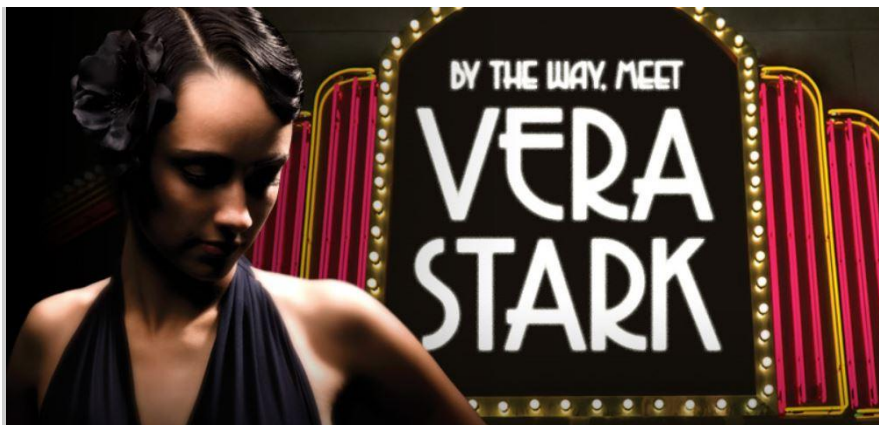
*By the Way Meet Vera Stark* opened Off-Broadway May 9, 2011 at Second Stage Theatre's Tony Kiser Theatre in New York City.

The play can be seen at The Alliance Theatre from October 16, 2013 to November 10, 2013

### **Awards**

Recipient of the 2010 Edgerton Foundation New American Play Award

Jo Bonney's direction of the play received a Lilly Award



### **Reviews**

Hollywood bio-drama about the demeaning career options for black actresses going back to the 1930s smartly showcases scribe's comic gifts. – *Variety*

Playwright Lynn Nottage breaks down the stereotypes and removes the veil of anonymity to delve into the lives of the African-American maids, cooks and nannies that populated vintage Hollywood movies – *The Hollywood Reporter*

### **About the Playwright Lynn Nottage**

Born in 1964, Brooklyn, New York based, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynn Nottage established a relationship with both the art of narrating a story and her political commitment early in life. Her grandmother was an extraordinary storyteller and her mother was a political activist and participant in both the Civil Rights and the Feminist movements.

After earning her Master of Fine Arts from the Yale University School of Drama, the first play she wrote was while working for Amnesty International as a press officer. And although her plays



deal with very different subject matters and take place in different settings, we find a strong woman, a Warrior Woman in each.

“I feel it’s my social responsibility to shine a light on areas that don’t get seen.”

Besides *Ruined*, one of the most produced plays of the decade, Nottage is most known for *Intimate Apparel*. It was a very successful Off-Broadway Production starring Tony Award-winning Viola Davis. In 2010, she won the Distinguished Playwright Award. In the May 2013 *Guernica Magazine* interview by Dwyer Murphy, Nottage was asked about her play *By the Way Meet Vera Stark*. She said,

“Black male stories have found more of a space on film and television now, but as an African-American woman writer, our stories remain frightening or alien and are not invited to be part of the mainstream conversation... That’s what I’m looking at in *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*—the history of omission.” (<http://www.wdchumanities.org/programs/175> 2013)

### **Synopsis of *By the Way Meet Vera Stark***

#### **Act One**

Inspired by the struggles of actresses like Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen, *By the Way Meet Vera Stark* takes a look at film industry racism. With many black actresses of 1930's Hollywood stuck portraying the maid or the nanny, we meet Vera, Nottage’s fictitious title character, who is trying to get the roles black women always play. In meeting her we see her successes and setbacks as a modest celebrity in the 1970's.

Act I opens with Gloria, a film star known as America's Little Sweetie Pie", desperately trying to prepare for a screen test. The film is a Southern epic in the works called, "The Belle of New Orleans", and Gloria is determined to land the title role. Vera, her real-life maid, learns that there's also a part that would be perfect for her own aspirations. Getting the self-absorbed Gloria to put in a good word is part of her dilemma.

Vera spills the beans about the film to one of her roommates, Lottie, who used to be in the old Broadway revues. We immediately see she has interest in a script that has a part that she could potentially play, even if it is the role of a slave. We are also introduced to the other roommate Anna Mae, a light-skinned black actress who pretends to be Brazilian to try to catch a break.



Gloria throws a dinner party. The attendees include Vera, of course, but also Lottie, as some additional hired help, the big time studio producer Fredrick Slasvick, director Maximillian Von Oster, with Anne Mae, still pretending to be from South America as his date, and Leroy Barksdale, a jazz musician with a little thing for Vera. The director explains that he wants realism in his film, and as he describes the tragic negro plight he envisions, Vera and Lottie's shoulders become slumped, their speech pattern shifts, and they carry out an impromptu audition right there in Gloria's living room. There is some tension between the director and producer who have a different vision for the film. Act I ends with us wondering if the film will happen and if Vera will get the break she's dreamed about since she was a little girl.

## **Act Two**

Act Two takes place decades later, as critics debate the work and legacy of Vera Stark. The second act takes a more serious look at stereotypes in popular culture beginning with a showing of the last few minutes of the realized film, "The Belle of New Orleans", complete with appearances by Gloria, Vera, Lottie and Anne Mae. The film clip from the movie is part of a 2003 panel discussion on Vera Stark and her disappearance from the scene and African-American film history. This panel discussion also looks at a segment from a popular talk show from the 70's in which Vera and Gloria are guests in 1973. The panel consists of an intellectual film geek, a lesbian slam poet, and a college professor. Although we met Vera Stark in Act I, the question becomes what happened to her in Act II.

## Directors

The original Off-Broadway play was directed by Jo Bonney and the Atlanta production will be directed by Leah Gardiner.



“Playwright Lynn Nottage uses many forms of humor to draw you in,” said Gardiner. “She chooses culturally specific styles found within the African-American community to examine race at its core with pain, joy, happiness and fear. It is at these moments when she asks us to think about how race defines the heartbeat of our country. VERA STARK makes us think about the choices we have made in life and asks us to journey into the complexities of our American psyche at a time when we seem to question ‘who are we and how do we fit into this nation of difference which prides itself so much on sameness?’”

(<http://www.broadwayworld.com/atlanta/article/Alliance-Theatre-Presents-By-The-Way-Meet-Vera-Stark-1016-1110-20130829> 2013)

Directing credits include NYC: *born bad* (U.S. premiere, Soho Rep, Obie Award); *Bulrusher* (World Premiere and Pulitzer Prize finalist, Urban Stages); *Kent, CT* (*Zipper Theater*). Nationally: *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Othello* (Houston Shakespeare Festival); *Fences* (Oregon Shakespeare Festival); *Training Wisteria* (Cherry Lane Theatre); *Dance of the Holy Ghosts*, *Sam's Coming*, *Blue Door* (New York Stage and Film); *Sons* (Children's Theater Company workshop); *Sons and Mother* (New Dramatists); *Carve and Stoning Mary* (The hotINK Festival); *Bulrusher* (world premiere and Pulitzer Prize finalist, Urban Stages); *Earthquake Chica* (SPF); *Kent, CT* (*Zipper Theater*); *Wild Black-Eyed Susans* (Center Stage); *Blue Door* (world premiere, South Coast Repertory); *Paper Armor* (GeVa Theatre and Cleveland Playhouse); *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Pillsbury House Theatre); *The Piano Lesson* (Madison Repertory Theatre); *Topdog/Underdog* (Philadelphia Theatre Company); *Birdie Blue* (City Theatre, Pittsburgh); *Orange Flower Water* (world premiere, Contemporary American Theatre Festival); *Angels in America*, Parts I and II (Connecticut Repertory Theatre). Other credits: served as the director-in-residence at the Public Theater; resident director for New Dramatists. Education: graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and the Yale School of Drama.

([http://americantheatrewing.org/biography/detail/leah\\_gardiner](http://americantheatrewing.org/biography/detail/leah_gardiner))



## Actors

### **Original Off-Broadway Cast**

Vera Stark: Sanaa Lathan  
 Gloria Mitchell: Stephanie J. Block  
 Leroy Barksdale/Herb Forrester:  
 Daniel Breaker  
 Anna Mae/Afua Assata Ejobo:  
 Karen Olivo  
 Lottie/Carmen Levy-Green:  
 Kimberly Hebert Gregory  
 Maximillian Von Oster/Brian Blaze:  
 Kevin Isola  
 Slasvick/Brad: David Garrison

### **Alliance Theatre Cast**

Vera Stark: Toni Trucks  
 Gloria Mitchell: Courtney Patterson  
 Leroy Barksdale/Herb Forrester::  
 Genesis Oliver  
 Anna Mae/Afua Assata Ejobo:  
 Tiffany Rachelle Stewart  
 Lottie/Carmen Levy-Green:  
 Nikya Mathis  
 Maximillian Von Oster/Peter Rhys-Davies:  
 Daniel Triandiflou  
 Mr. Slasvick/Brad Donovan: Andrew Benator

## Characters

Vera Stark is a 28 year-old African American that works for Gloria Mitchell. She is a maid with aspirations of becoming an actress.

Gloria Mitchell 28 year-old white starlet, known as “America’s little Sweetie Pie”. Although she is Vera’s employer, she and Vera have a friendly relationship.

Leroy Barksdale is the African American Man Friday or loyal aide of Maximilian Von Oster. He shows interest in Vera, and just like Vera couldn’t live without acting, Leroy couldn’t live without his trumpet. He is studying music theory and composition at a university.

Anna Mae Simpkins is a fair skinned an African American woman who uses her looks to get what she wants. She is a roommate of Vera and Lottie.

Maximillian Von Oster is from Russia and is the director of the film “The Belle of New Orleans”.

Mr. Slavick is the owner of the studio looking to produce the film “The Belle of New Orleans”. He’s not interested in producing a bluesy film about slaves during the great depression. He

challenges Von Oster to add a couple musical numbers (among changing other things) in “The Belle of New Orleans” script to make it more appealing to audiences.

Herb Forrester is a filmmaker, musician and entrepreneur from Oakland, California. He is the facilitator for the “Rediscovering Vera Stark, the legacy of The Belle of New Orleans” Colloquium.

Carmen Levy-Green is a stout and stylish academic. She is the professor of media and gender studies at USVC. She serves as a panelist “Rediscovering Vera Stark, the legacy of The Belle of New Orleans” Colloquium.



Afua Assata Ejobo is a journalist, poet and performer. She is very hip and slightly masculine. She also serves as a panelist “Rediscovering Vera Stark, the legacy of The Belle of New Orleans” Colloquium.

Brad Donovan is the host of “The Brad Donovan Show”, a 1970’s talk show. He tries to avoid controversial topics such as racism.

Peter Rhys-Davies is a groovy English rock musician who is also a guest on the Brad Donovan Show with Vera Stark in 1973.

### **From the Playwright**

“I was interested in seeing the full journey of Vera Stark across time, and I was interested in seeing how she was treated in various media,” says Nottage, who has created a Web presence for Vera ([www.meetverastark.com](http://www.meetverastark.com)) that treats the fictional actress as real. “It’s important to me that it not be a marketing tool but a storytelling tool,” the playwright says...

The playwright began watching more old movies featuring [Theresa ] Harris and other actresses whose skin color consigned them to roles as slaves and maids, sometimes without a character name, sometimes entirely uncredited. (Look up [Harris’s bio on imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0369716/) and it says her nickname was “The Beautiful Maid.”)

“The first time I saw Theresa Harris, I immediately began asking questions,” Nottage says. “Who was she? What was her life like? Where did she come from? What were her dreams, what were her desires? When I sat down to write the play, it was to answer all those questions I had, not just about Theresa Harris but about a whole generation of African-American actresses like her”. <http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/theater-art/2013/03/28/with-lynn-nottage-meet-vera-stark-looking-hollywood-black-and-white/9YYbRQegxpHStmkIrx6HOO/story.html>

**Unfamiliar Words and Phrases from *By The Way, Meet Vera Starks***



- Assertive- having or showing confident.
- Brothel- A house of prostitution
- Cannibalized- Destroy
- Cavorting- to jump or dance excitedly
- Cinephile- A person who is found of motion pictures."
- Coax- Manipulate
- Consumption- Infection or a chronic cough.
- Diminished- Similar or less.
- Ebullient- Cheerful and full of energy.
- Esteemed- Respect or admire.
- Genuine- Sincere
- Gimpy- A person who limps.
- Grotesque- Very ugly disorder figure or person.
- Indignity- A action you're not proud of
- Involuntary- Done without will.
- Majestic- Showing beauty.
- Mammy- A black women who takes care of the white children.
- Man Friday- An Loyal Male or employee.
- Octoroon- One Eighth Black.
- Ofay- An Offensive term for a white women.
- Perplexed- Very Puzzled.
- Radicalized- The cause of racial reform.
- Succumbs- Fail to resist.
- Sumptuous- Expensive looking.

## African American Actresses

**Angela Bassett** is one of the most talented actresses to ever appear on film. This Yale graduate made a name for herself in the movie industry nabbing role after juicy role portraying images of strong, powerful Black women on screen. Throughout her career, Angela Bassett has portrayed several significant Black women in American history on screen including Betty Shabazz, Tina Turner, Katherine Jackson, and Rosa Parks.

**Louise Beavers** enjoyed great popularity as an actress in the 1930s and 1940s, playing domestics in Hollywood films. One of the most constantly working Black actresses in Hollywood, she appeared in 133 films between 1930 and 1950. Her greatest role came in 1934 when she played Annie Johnson opposite Claudette Colbert in the original version of *Imitation of Life*.

([http://juliusspeaks.blogspot.com/2011/05/best-black-film-actresses-by\\_02.html](http://juliusspeaks.blogspot.com/2011/05/best-black-film-actresses-by_02.html))

**Diahann Carroll** made her start as an entertainer in the 1950s when a friend sent her photograph to Ebony Magazine, which subsequently led to a modeling contract. In 1954, she made her Hollywood and Broadway debuts in the iconic all-Black film *Carmen Jones* and *House of Flowers* respectively. In 1959, she appeared in another iconic film with an all-Black cast, *Porgy and Bess*. (<http://juliusspeaks.blogspot.com/2011/05/best-black-film-actresses-by.html>)

**Dorothy Dandridge** With the growing African-American Civil Rights movement growing, singer/actress Dorothy (Jean) Dandridge, (November 9, 1922 – September 8, 1965), was the first black Actress nominated for "Best Actress" Academy Awards...After bit parts in the late 1930's, and small roles in the 1940's, and in "Tarzan's Peril", (1951), with Lex Baxter, (a notoriously volatile actor); and the ground breaking "Bright Road", (with an all black cast), released by MGM; "Carmen Jones", (1954); Dandridge won an Academy Award and BAFTA in England; and was a Golden Globe Nominee, (Musical and Comedy), for "Porgy and Bess", (1959).

([http://americantheatrewing.org/biography/detail/leah\\_gardiner](http://americantheatrewing.org/biography/detail/leah_gardiner))



**Gail Fisher** (left) (August 18, 1935 – December 2, 2000) was an American actress who was one of the first African-American women to play substantive roles in American television. She was best known for playing the role of secretary "Peggy Fair" on the television detective series *Mannix* from 1968 through 1975, a role for which she won two Golden Globe Awards and an Emmy Award. Fisher became the first African-American woman to win a Golden Globe. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gail\\_Fisher](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gail_Fisher))

**Teresa Graves** was one of the first African American actresses to play a lead in a prime time TV show. Graves was best known for her title role as a police detective in the ABC series "Get Christie Love."

(<http://listverse.com/2011/03/27/top-10-actors-who-died-in-fires/>)



**Lena Mary Calhoun Horne** (June 30, 1917 – May 9, 2010) was an African American singer, actress, civil rights activist and dancer. Horne joined the chorus of the Cotton Club at the age of sixteen and became a nightclub performer before moving to Hollywood, where she had small parts in numerous movies, and more substantial parts in the films *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*. Due to the Red Scare and her left-leaning political views, Horne found herself blacklisted and unable to get work in Hollywood.

**Hattie McDaniel** was an actress and radio performer. Hattie McDaniel became the first African American to win an Oscar in 1940, for her supporting role as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. (<http://www.biography.com/people/hattie-mcdaniel-38433>)

**Nina Mae McKinney** was star on Broadway and in Harlem during the 1920s, at one point the highest paid performer on stage. During the 1940s, she appeared in six films, including the iconic *Cabin in the Sky* in 1943. In 1949, she starred in the epic race drama; *Pinky*. Nina Mae McKinney was an American actress who worked internationally during the 1930s and in the postwar period in theatre, film and television, after getting her start on Broadway and in Hollywood. ([http://juliusspeaks.blogspot.com/2011/05/best-black-film-actresses-by\\_02.html](http://juliusspeaks.blogspot.com/2011/05/best-black-film-actresses-by_02.html))

**Phylicia Rashad:** Phylicia Rashad is an African American actress who is best known as mother and attorney Clair Huxtable on NBC sitcom *The Cosby Show*. She stayed with the show for eight years. Rashad starred in many Broadway and off-Broadway productions and was the first African American actress to win a Tony Award, given for her portrayal of Lena Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*. (<http://www.biography.com/people/phylicia-rashad-12816787>)

**Hazel Scott** was one of the most prominent African Americans of the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Scott began appearing in films in the 1940s and by the 1950s was such a popular presence that she earned the distinction of becoming the first Black woman to host her own television show, *The Hazel Scott Show*, which aired in 1950. Her career waned soon after the start of her television show, however, as she was blacklisted because of her criticism of McCarthyism and her public defense of friends and colleagues who had been targeted by McCarthy and because of her Civil Rights activism. In the 1950s, she appeared in two films, *A Bullet in the Gun Barrel* and *The Night Affair*, both in 1958. (<http://juliusspeaks.blogspot.com/2011/05/best-black-film-actresses-by.html>)

**Dorothy Van Engle:** Dorothy Van Engle, an African American leading lady known for her beauty, sophistication and intelligence in "Murder In Harlem" and other so-called "race films" of the 1930s. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2004/may/14/local/me-vanengle14>)

**Ethel Water** was the highest-paid actor on Broadway in the mid-1930's. She headed up her own national radio show. At the beginning of TV she starred as the black maid 'Beulah' in the series of that name, then accepted occasional guest dramatic roles for the next 20 years, plus singing on *Ed Sullivan & the Hollywood Palace*. (<http://juliusspeaks.blogspot.com/2011/05/best-black-film-actresses-by.html>)

**By The Way, Meet Vera Stark in The Classroom**  
**Pre-Show Questions**

1. How much does the situation you were born in affect your future?
2. What are some common stereotypes in today's film and TV?
3. What types of roles do African-American Actress usually play in today's TV and film?
4. Is there an equality for all female actresses in Hollywood today? Why or Why not?
5. What do you know about the Great Depression?
6. Why do you think the playwright created a Vera Stark website, as though Vera were a real person? (See [www.meetverastark.com](http://www.meetverastark.com) from page 6 of this Study Guide.)

**Post-Show Questions**

1. Why did Anna Mae lie about her race?
2. Would you lie about who you are to advance your career or to get something you really want?
3. Describe the relationship between Gloria and Vera.
4. How is this play relevant today?
5. What happened to Vera Stark? Why do you think the playwright concluded the play as she did?
6. Having seen the show, has your answer to Pre-Show Question #6 become stronger, completely different or changed in some other way?
7. If you did not fully examine Vera's website before seeing the show, are you interested in learning Vera's back-story, that helped Lynn Nottage bring Vera's character to life?
8. If you did examine Vera's website, before seeing the play or just now, why do you think the playwright said about it, "It's important to me that it not be a marketing tool but a storytelling tool"?
9. How is a marketing tool different from a storytelling tool?

**Did You Know?**

**Hollywood and the Great Depression**

"During the Depression, when the spirit of the people is lower than at any other time, it is a splendid thing that for just 15 cents an American can go to a movie and look at the smiling face of a baby and forget his troubles." -President Franklin Roosevelt

(<http://www.classicmoviegab.com/2009/02/pre-code-movies-food-for-the-soul-in-a-sour-economy/>)

The 1930s and most of the 1940s have been nostalgically labeled "The Golden Age of Hollywood." Why?

Did you know that Hollywood movie star, Lincoln Perry, the creator and actor of the role, Stepin Fetchit, was the first black actor to become a millionaire?

(<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5245089>)

Did you know the 30s was also the decade of the sound and color revolutions and the advance of the 'talkies', and the further development of film. (<http://www.filmsite.org/30sintro.html>)

As unemployment reached an all time high in 1933, this decade, sandwiched between the roaring twenties and World War II, left little to be highlighted other than the dismal consequences of the Great Depression. From failed farmers to discouraged businessmen to working mothers to displaced children, the Depression between 1929 and 1939 invaded homes across the nation. Twenty-five percent of the country was unemployed at the peak of the Depression in 1933 while even more just barely made ends meet. Despite the excruciating economic hardship faced by nearly all of the country, 60-70 million Americans still packed into theaters each week. This phenomenon forces the question: Why go to a movie during such a troubled time? What made sitting in a theater for an hour and a half worth a hard-earned 15 cents?

<http://www.filmsite.org/30sintro.html>)

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