



Occasionally we hear the claim that the first rule of art is to “entertain.” But that’s really not quite correct. The first – and, in fact, only – rule is to “engage.” Once the artist has and holds our attention, he can give us a deep experience that is not quite possible in any other way.

Painting isn’t just for decoration. And theater isn’t just for storytelling.

Still, I’ve never been a big fan of the “message play” – even if I agree with the message. Maybe it started in high school when I was forced to read excerpts from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* with its subtle story of a hero, Christian, who makes a pilgrimage to Celestial City with travel companions, Faithful and Hopeful, and, along the way, encounters people with names like Mr. Worldy Wiseman and Lord Hate-Good.

If your art comes with its own embedded Sparknotes, kindly make a note to put more spark in your art.

But there’s a far worse way to disengage the audience: allow them to comfortably sit outside the action. It’s much easier for them to feel superior that way. Is there anything more clichéd than the high school jock who bullies other students? Or the greedy industrialist stripping the Earth to line his pockets? Or the Nazis as the universal metaphor for any and all evil?

Extreme archetypes permit us, the audience, to pat ourselves on the back. “These things would never happen if I were around,” we tell ourselves. But, of course, “these things” do happen. And happen again and again. How is that possible? Who allows it?



Fabled Southern Manners on display when several blacks decided to sit at a Woolworth lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi on May 28, 1963.

We do. Our nuanced consent is all that it takes for things to go south. This was an easy concept for Americans to grasp when we prosecuted Nazis for war crimes. We determined “just following orders” doesn’t excuse bad behavior.

Or at least that was the idea when we were the ones sitting in judgment.

In clichéd morality plays, there are just three character types: the perpetrator, the victim, and the hero. Most people imagine themselves the hero. In the real world, there is a fourth character type: the enabler. That’s actually where most of us fit. A victim’s terror is not just built from specific, violent instances which are, in fact, easy to identify and stop. Instead, the real terror is a result of a relentless social pressure and its associated atmosphere which empowers bad behavior. The perpetrator requires the tacit consent of the mob – that would be you and me – to operate.

Which brings me to a remarkable production currently running at [The Antaeus Company](#) in North Hollywood, *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*, a 2-act play about the tribulations of a white/black couple living in rural South Carolina. Alice

Childress wrote this play back in 1962 in the thick of the Civil Rights movement and during a time when it was [still illegal to have a racially mixed marriage in twenty-one states](#). In fact, in some states [such couples were even prohibited from cohabitating](#). The majority of these laws defined “racially mixed” as white/black couples only. To add to the dramatic irony, Childress sets the play in 1918 when mixed race couples could legally marry in only 20 states – while black men could still help defend the United States (and its ideals) against the Germans.



The caption of this Nazi propaganda piece, “The Result of Racial Pride Disappearing,” could easily have been written by your basic Confederate American 70 year earlier. Or your average Southerner during the time of Childress’s play.

Today, it would be easy to view this play from the simple perspective of gay marriage rights. However, at the time when Childress wrote **Wedding Band**, such a metaphor would have been unthinkable and therefore could hardly be central to the play. Moreover, there isn’t a one-to-one correspondence between race/orientation marriage issues beyond the superficial. Unlike the foolishness of “praying the gay away,” it *is* possible to choose *not* to be in a racially mixed relationship. Moreover, gay couples do not live in the grey area between two distinct cultural experiences as do black/white couples. Anti-miscegenation laws may sound similar to those preventing gay marriage but their underpinnings come from a very different, and complex, place.

Childress didn’t write a simple play about the nature of prejudice. Her play is about the corrosive effects of tribalism in human interactions.

As if to underscore the point, the Antaeus production opens with a Negro Spiritual – music that is awful and haunting and yet strangely beautiful; a collective cry of human souls crushed by 400 years of bondage and then refined into a distillate that is, unfortunately, uniquely American. The sounds of the slave past literally reverberate into the time of the play, the time the play was written, and the time we experience the play. And the social assumptions that helped create and mold those sounds also reverberate into the characters’ time – and ours.



A 1920 lynching in the northern city of Duluth, MN. This photo is from a postcard. Postcards of lynchings were popular in the United States during this time. Subsequent examination showed these three lynched black men were innocent of the crimes of which they were accused.

And that makes this play difficult. Very difficult. Because the Antaeus production of **Wedding Band** engages us in a way that a political discussion can’t. There are no polemics here. There is no Simon Legree to hate nor Uncle Tom to pity. Childress neither

ennobles her blacks nor condemns her whites. The play is about neither a conveniently insular community nor a reaction to a distant outside world. Instead, it's the messy real world we are stuck in: where cultural boundaries leak across spatial ones and where times past form attitudes present.

More importantly, both the play and the production demolish the idea that "experimental theater" is required to engage us with complex, cutting-edge themes. Here there are no puppets, no trap doors, no projections. The Antaeus production is "ordinary," but ordinary in a most extraordinary way: the natural-style acting is exceptional, the light and sound design service the play not themselves. There is nothing to distract us. Nothing to separate us from the play. We cannot righteously stand outside this work. We are immersed inside the action. We experience it first hand.

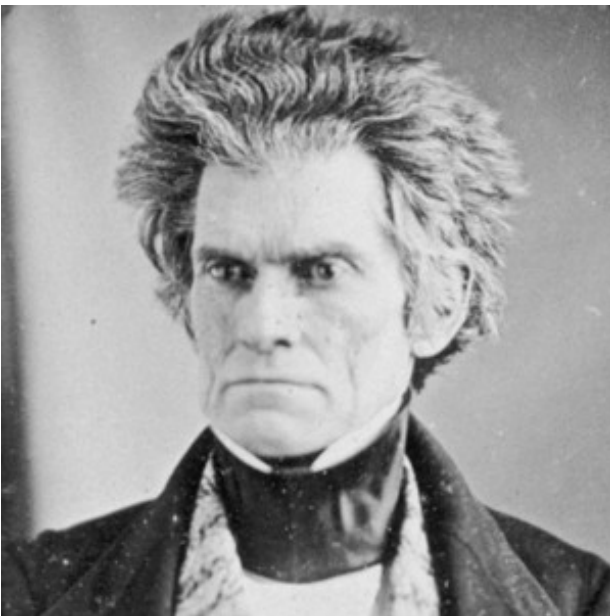


On August 20, 1959, American patriots in Little Rock, AR protested against the integration of their high school. From the signs, we learn that integration is apparently akin to communism and the work of the Anti-Christ.

We swim in Childress's Lowcounty Boil of ironic prejudice; a stew of meaningless human taxonomy that is simultaneously practiced by and applied to everyone. The 1918-era whites patriotically flag-wave for fear of being classified as German by fellow whites. The blacks speak of Catholics and Jews with unconscious scorn. Two young girls – one white, one black – innocently sing a nursery rhyme laden with numerous Asian slurs. The white "hero," a man who deigns to love a black woman, isn't really enlightened: he just believes that the socially accepted racial stereotypes don't apply to "the good ones."

**Wedding Band's** world is deliberately sloppy unlike the clean and tidy one of the morality play. This is art exposing life and Childress resists the easy academic arguments which are often ensconced more in rhetoric than realism. How many of us innocently chanted "Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Moe" on playgrounds without knowing that [it wasn't always a tiger caught by the toe](#)? What does it say about our society when some of the strongest *supporters* of President Obama, the first black man to occupy the White House, use racial language to prove his qualifications for office (as both [Vice President Joe Biden](#) and [Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid](#) have done)?

Art prevents the clever use of political words to cover uncomfortable concepts. Art reminds us of what we can miss, sometimes intentionally, in our day-to-day routine – the ugly as well as the beautiful.



John Calhoun

Americans like to use Adolf Hitler as the epitome of evil and, indeed, [Godwin's Law](#) states that any Internet discussion will eventually degenerate into someone bringing up either Hitler or the Nazis. But, again, that rather conveniently puts the evil at arm's length from us. For America produced its own racist master politician 100 years earlier in the form of South Carolina's John Calhoun. Calhoun was a Congressman, a Secretary of War, a Secretary of State, a Vice-President. He was a Phi Beta Kappa from Yale University. In his role as a United States Senator, Calhoun's elocution was considered as potent as his contemporaries Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky and Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts.

And John Calhoun used those rhetoric skills to argue that [slavery is "a positive good"](#) on the floor of the US Senate, perverting both his oratory and that institution. Childress inconveniently reminds us of this and places Calhoun's speech central in her story. She reminds us, too, that many whites of 1918 (as well as 1962) placed a positive premium on that speech. Today, Calhoun's crazy eyes (captured even [in painting](#)) might occupy the symbolic place reserved for Hitler's toothbrush mustache were it not for the reverence that the South holds for him. It was Calhoun, after all, who also formulated and popularized the "States' Rights" arguments that seek to prevent the Federal Government from protecting all citizens' rights against abuse by a local majority. Even a casual glance at current political punditry reveals we live in the echos of Calhoun's miserable arguments as much as the Negro Spirituals.



So, yes, **Wedding Band** is a difficult play. It's not a play about the illegality of racially mixed marriages, it's a play about the attitudes that created those laws in the first place. Attitudes that are still with us and permeate deeply throughout our entire society. **Wedding Band** reminds us how much we, as individuals, contribute to the tone of America whether by action or inaction. I may not have physically bullied anyone in high school but I sure knew how to follow social orders to maintain an atmosphere where others could. Where else have I stripped humans of their individual dignity by grouping and sorting them – by race, by nationality, by religion, by gender, by orientation, by physical attractiveness – simply out of social convenience or convention? Have I enabled bad behavior as a result?

Childress's play points to these painful questions with an urgency that transcends the time in which it was written. Little wonder that **Wedding Band** is rarely performed.

We must therefore be grateful to Artist Veralyn Jones who rescued Childress's work from undeserved obscurity and brought it to Antaeus for consideration. We must also be grateful to Artist Gregg Daniel for his nuanced director's vision and for presenting the work in its pure form. And we must be grateful as well to The Antaeus Company and its leadership, especially Artistic Directors Bill Brochtrup, Rob Nagle, and John Sloan, for committing to this work and allowing Los Angeles to experience it. We must be grateful to those artists who are brave enough to engage us when it would be far easier to simply entertain us.

The American painter, Edward Hopper, once said:

"If you could say it in words, there'd be no reason to paint."

The same is true here. Childress reminds us that it's not enough to be equal in the eyes of the law. We must be equal in the eyes of each other. But that's hard to express directly without sounding like an easily dismissed platitude. "Don't judge a book by its cover." Yeah? What else is new?

We need a means to fully articulate this complexity which neither political debate nor message plays can. In this age of the instantaneous digital feed, it's still difficult to fully appreciate the minority experience in this country. No amount of Trayvon Martins or Michael Browns, it seems, can make the point with finality that, even today, we deal with the echoes of America's Original Sin. And that's precisely why the Art written by Alice Childress and resurrected by The Antaeus Theater Company is so vitally important.

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