

Arden

T H E A T R E C O .

SUPPLEMENTARY STUDY GUIDE
for

Gee's Bend

By ELYZABETH GREGORY WILDER

Directed by ELEANOR HOLDRIDGE

On the Arcadia Stage

October 9 - December 7, 2008

Additional copies of this study guide are available online at www.ardentheatre.org.

Gee's Bend

By Elyzabeth Gregory Wilder
Directed by Eleanor Holdridge

Cast:

Sadie Pettway..... Edwina Findley
Alice Pettway/Asia Pettway..... Marjorie Johnson
Nella Pettway..... Kala Moses Baxter
Macon Pettway..... Kes Khemnu

Direction:

Director..... Eleanor Holdridge
Music Director..... Walter Dallas
Stage Manager..... Stephanie Cook
Asst. Director..... Davina Stewart
Asst. to the Stage Manager..... Hillary Rea

Designers:

Scenic Designer..... Marjorie Bradley Kellogg
Lighting Designer..... Les Dickert
Costume Designer..... Alison Roberts
Sound Designer..... Christopher Colucci



PLOT SYNOPSIS

How we got over.

How we got over, oh my Lord

You know my soul looks back and wonder

How we got over.

The story begins in 1939, and through the darkness, we hear the few lines written above being sung as Sadie Pettway, a 15 year old girl from the isolated hamlet of Gee's Bend, Alabama, stands on the banks of the Alabama River, describing one of her recent recurring dreams. In her dream, Sadie is being carried away by the river, protected by its current. She does not fear the river because she trusts that it will keep her safe. As she stands beside the water, she prays and asks the Lord to bring her the meaning of this dream. Just before the close of the scene, we see that this is Sadie's baptism.

The second scene opens in Sadie's home. Her mother, Alice Pettway, is piecing the top of a new quilt, as Sadie's older sister, Nella, prepares the quilt backing. Sadie reads from the newspapers that cover the walls to keep out the cold. We briefly learn that Sadie's family is preparing to move into a new house. Nella complains that she is sick of hearing Sadie read, but Alice remarks that Sadie is getting so good that the Reverend wants her to read during church services. Nella has not yet been baptized because she has not yet experienced a vision or message from the Lord and she explains that she feels silly going out into the woods waiting for the Lord to send her a sign. Sadie and Nella bicker in a sisterly way, and Alice tells Nella that if she wants a husband, she'll need to learn how to "tend house" and fulfill her domestic obligations. Nella complains about doing her chores and remarks that Macon, a local man, watched her doing the wash recently. Sadie and Nella tease each other about Macon, and Alice warns her daughters to stay away from him, as he is too old for them.

In the next scene, Sadie and Macon, who is 25, are having a picnic. Macon compliments Sadie on the pie she baked and how well she read in church. Sadie tells Macon that her mother specifically told her to stay away from him. However, when Macon offers to take Sadie home, she declines. Macon explains that a new age is starting for the people of Gee's Bend, now that they can own and tend to their own land. Sadie and Macon flirt and Macon excitedly shows Sadie all the land he now owns. He adds an imaginary house to this landscape and maps it out for her, explaining that he is going to marry her and they are going to have many children together. He gives Sadie a key and promises her that one day he will build her a house and start a family with her.

At the start of the fourth scene, Sadie, Nella, and Alice are doing daily chores in their new house. Sadie is fiddling with the key that Macon gave her, which prompts Alice to question her about where she obtained it. Sadie lies, claiming that she just found it and wanted to see if it worked. Alice sits Sadie down and tells her that she doesn't believe in locking doors. She explains to Sadie that they are blessed to have so much, and her philosophy is, "You leave your door open for people, they leave theirs open for you." Alice then tells Sadie that it's time for her to learn how to piece quilts. This is a pivotal moment in Sadie's life. Piecing a quilt is a very personal process for a woman of Gee's Bend, and learning to piece is essentially a rite of passage. When Sadie asks why it is her turn to learn to piece and not Nella's, Alice and Nella reveal that they believe Sadie is pregnant. They know that Sadie has been spending a great deal of time with Macon and it is

becoming obvious that she is going to have his child. Alice tells Sadie that she cannot return to school, she must instead learn to piece quilts and care for a family.

At the start of the fifth scene, a pregnant Sadie is standing beside Macon, in front of their new house. Sadie, afraid to go inside, tells Macon she's been sleeping next to Nella her entire life. Macon promises to keep her warm and safe when they sleep together, and Sadie shows Macon the wedding quilt she made for their bed. Sadie has obviously put a great deal of time and effort into this quilt, but she modestly claims that it isn't nice enough for their new home. Macon proudly tells Sadie that his new land, house and life are all the result of how hard he's always worked. Just before Macon and Sadie enter the house, Sadie returns the key Macon gave her during their first picnic together. Sadie tells Macon that she, just like her mother, will not allow locks on her doors. Sadie makes Macon promise that their house will never be closed off from their surrounding community. Macon promises, and as the first act ends, Sadie and Macon's new life together begins.

When the second act of the play opens, 26 years have passed in Gee's Bend. Alice, Nella, and Sadie are in Sadie and Macon's house, doing their usual busy routine of household chores and quilting. Alice expresses exhaustion and confusion about how Nella came to be 43 years old without learning how to piece quilts. Nella considers herself lucky, and it is obvious that Nella has remained quite particular throughout the years about the type of man she'd like to start a life with. Her refusal to settle for the simpler men of Gee's Bend has left her alone, waiting for a rich man from Birmingham to come sweep her off her feet and shower her with expensive things. Macon has not yet arrived home from work across the river in Camden, but there is a sweet potato pie, his favorite, waiting for him in the oven. Alice and Nella both hint that Sadie is trying to bribe Macon. Macon finally arrives home, soaking wet and exhausted from the ferry ride across the river. He is now 51 years old and we can see by the way Sadie tends to him that his health is just starting to fail. Sadie starts to get Macon ready to go out with her, but Macon claims that the weather is too cold and rainy and he's unsure about going to see the man that "likes to stir things up." When Macon refuses to go, Sadie begs him to let her go with Nella, claiming that this man is going to talk to the people of Gee's Bend about registering to vote. Macon is still skeptical, but Sadie refuses to back down and Macon finally lets her go with Nella.

When the next scene opens, Sadie and Nella are sitting in a church pew, waiting for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to arrive and talk to the people of Gee's Bend. While they wait, Sadie spreads a quilt over them and hands Nella her registration papers for voting, explaining that everybody is going to take the ferry out to Camden to register at the courthouse. Nella is doubtful that they will actually be allowed to vote, no matter what Dr. King claims. She also tells Sadie that Macon will never allow her to take the ferry across the river. Sadie explains that she doesn't plan on telling him, and she is confident that he will never find out.

At the start of the next scene, Nella and Sadie have made it across the river to Camden, and are standing in a large crowd of people outside the courthouse. Nella briefly mentions that there is a minister coming to Gee's Bend, interested in buying their quilts. She is anxious to get back on the ferry and head home, but Sadie is fixated on Dr. King, who is standing at the front of the crowd. As he drinks from a water fountain marked "White's Only," Sadie becomes empowered and begins to move toward the fountain. As she walks away from Nella, Macon appears at her side, shocked and angry to find out that the rumors he had heard about his wife taking the ferry to Camden were true.

Macon tries to drag Sadie home, but she is adamant about staying and drinking from the water fountain. After a short struggle, Sadie breaks free and defiantly drinks from the fountain. When Nella asks her how it tastes, Sadie replies, "Like a little piece of heaven."

A subdued yet tense mood characterizes the opening of the next scene. Sadie speaks to Macon rather distantly as she stacks a pile of quilts. It is evident that Macon's health is continuing to fail, as he coughs frequently. Sadie tells Macon she is compiling a collection of quilts to sell to a preacher. Macon finally brings up the cause of the discomfort between them, claiming that the people of Gee's Bend have been talking about what Sadie did at the courthouse the day before. He is worried about Sadie continuing to act out, making him look bad. It is revealed that Macon physically assaulted Sadie to punish her and that Sadie is deeply hurt, offended, and resentful of him. When Sadie matter-of-factly informs Macon that instead of going to church, she's going to Selma to march across the bridge with Dr. King, Macon tries to stop her, but is yet again unsuccessful. The situation is still uncomfortable as Sadie leaves to go to Selma, and Macon tells her not to come back.

As the fifth scene of the second act begins, beating and cries of pain can be heard. An injured and disheveled Sadie approaches her home, but she is unable to get in because the door, for the first time ever, is locked. Sadie calls out to Macon, struggling, in need of help, explaining to him what happened in Selma. She recalls how she was horribly beaten by the police after crossing the bridge, and how she endured the pain by asking the Lord to make her strong. She begs Macon to let her in the house and to help her, but there is no reply. Unable to continue standing, Sadie wraps herself in one of her quilts and falls to the ground.

At the start of the next scene, Sadie, Nella, and Alice are standing by the roadside, waiting for a preacher who promised to buy their quilts and sell them in department stores in the North. As they wait with their quilts, they talk about the recent disappearance of the ferry from Gee's Bend to Camden. The ferry's absence marks a feeling of total isolation in Gee's Bend, as they are now stranded, without a way across the river to Camden. Nella once again claims that she is going to leave Gee's Bend to find a man somewhere else, this time remarking that she plans to head up north. Alice yet again calls her eldest daughter's bluff, joking that Nella would never be able to stand the cold weather in the North. Alice then notices that Sadie doesn't seem like herself. Sadie explains that Macon has been keeping the door to their home locked, breaking the cardinal rule of their home together. Alice tells Sadie that maybe she should apologize to Macon, but Sadie refuses, saying that she'll sleep outside every night, but she won't say she's sorry.

At the start of the next scene, it is nighttime, and Sadie climbs through the bedroom window to get into her house. Macon is already awake, and Sadie tells Macon that she came into the house only to say goodbye to her children before she leaves. When Macon asks why she's leaving and where she's going, Sadie explains that she cannot live with him because he beat her, and that she wants to continue marching and fighting for her rights. Macon tries once more to stop Sadie, but he begins to have a coughing attack. The scene ends as Sadie comes to Macon's aid, instead of leaving.

When the next scene opens, Sadie is tending to a very ill Macon. Macon gives Sadie the key to their house, telling her that he only ever put locks on their doors to keep her safe. He asks Sadie to lay with him for a little longer, telling her, "I should have loved you better."

As the last scene of the second part of the play opens, Sadie is standing in her special place in the swamp, wrapped in the quilt she pieced from Macon's old clothing. Sadie asks the Lord to forgive her for feeling such a great deal of freedom and relief after Macon's death. She puts Macon's key in a mason jar and buries it as she describes the current peacefulness of Gee's Bend despite the disappearance of the ferry to Camden. Sadie talks about how the newly established Freedom Quilting Bee now allows the women of Gee's Bend to make their own money by selling their quilts in department stores up north. At the close of the second part of the play, we see that Sadie is empowered by her new freedom from Macon and excited for the future.

The third and final part of the play begins 35 years later. It is 2000 and Sadie and Nella are both old women now. Sadie finds Nella standing by the edge of the river and tells her that a man from Atlanta wants to put their quilts in a museum and that they are going to travel to the museum to see the exhibit. Nella tells Sadie she doesn't want to go, and begins asking where the ferry is, even though it hasn't been running for the past 35 years. Nella has become mentally disoriented in her old age.

The next scene opens in Sadie's home, as her 45 year old daughter, Asia, attempts to put a lock on Sadie's door with Nella's help. After a few failed attempts, Sadie enters, stopping the work, telling Asia that she's never believed and never will believe in locking her doors. Asia claims that the ferry service is going to start up again and that Sadie will need locks to protect her from the outsiders that travel across the river. Sadie denies any claim that the ferry will ever return, adding that even if it did, it couldn't possibly be safe. Asia and Sadie then occupy themselves with packing as they talk. They are preparing to travel to the museum to see their quilts on display. Asia mentions the possibility of receiving a job promotion and moving her family out to Selma. She also adds that she wants to sell her land. Sadie does not respond positively to this news, but Asia adds that Sadie should sell her land and move out to Selma as well, so that Asia could take care of Sadie and Nella could be closer to a doctor. Sadie adamantly refuses, claiming that she and Macon worked too hard all their lives to obtain and keep their own land.

The next scene begins in the museum displaying the quilts. Nella snaps pictures as Sadie is struck by how big her quilts look up on the wall. Nella cannot believe that people are actually paying to see what she calls "our trash." Sadie is completely overwhelmed by the experience, marveling at the way quilting has stayed alive in Gee's Bend throughout the years, stating, "little pieces of our lives sewn up in those quilts."

The final scene of the play takes place in Sadie's home. Sadie is quilting with her door wide open when Asia walks in, again begging her to close and lock the door for safety reasons. Sadie again refuses, and as she and Asia talk, we learn that Asia has sold her land and is officially leaving for Selma with her children. Asia reveals to her mother that she knows Sadie is the one who bought her land. Sadie never wants to leave Gee's Bend, claiming, "These are my people." As Asia leaves, a very disoriented Nella enters, and Sadie cares for her. As the play ends, Sadie agrees to teach Nella how to quilt, and Nella sings a beautiful gospel song.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Born and raised in Mobile, Alabama, playwright Elyzabeth Gregory Wilder graduated from high school early, and immediately moved to New York City to pursue her acting career. While starring in a small production of *And the Tide Shall Cover the Earth*, Elyzabeth met Roger McFarland, executive director of Broadway Care. McFarland helped Elyzabeth become better acquainted with the New York theatre community, and it was around this time that upon a suggestion from Wendy Wasserstein herself, Elyzabeth began writing plays. Wilder claims she had always been fond of writing short sketches and monologues for herself to use during auditions. Her first play was produced as a reading at the Blackjack Festival of New Plays when Wilder was only 17 years old. Elyzabeth recently received the 2008 Elizabeth Osborn New Play Award for an emerging playwright. This award was based mainly on *Gee's Bend*, which was commissioned by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's Southern Writers Project. There was a staged reading of the play during the project's 2006 Festival of New Plays, and the fully-staged premiere occurred in January, 2007 at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. Prior to writing the play, Elyzabeth traveled to *Gee's Bend* to interview the women of the town who are currently being recognized for their magnificent quilts, created across several generations in their isolated, closely-knit community. Wilder's initial goal was simply to collect anecdotes about life and quilt making. "I wanted to know what was going on in these women's lives while they were making the quilts," she said. "What stories could they tell?" What resulted was a historically and culturally rich, emotional play about family values, perseverance, and character. While interviewing Mary Lee Bendolph, a *Gee's Bend* native and a now famous quilting artist, Elyzabeth was told to "Just write it honest." Wilder later said "That was my promise to her. I just hope my love for these women and these stories can be seen in the work."



QUILTS: A QUICK HISTORY

African Roots

The type of quilt making found in Gee's Bend is of the African-American style. This style is considered unique among others found elsewhere in the United States. The most obvious reason for this is the overt African influence. The use of symbols, asymmetry, bright colors, and vertical piecing are techniques that hark back to African textile creations of years ago. Many of the symbols found in these quilts have also been traced back to religious symbols native to a multitude of African tribes. So although these quilts signify their personal pasts and hopes for a future, these women still respect the culture from which they originated.

The "Inspiration"

These quilts were not originally created as pieces of art—whether for wall hangings or theatrical inspiration. In fact, the quilts were made out of necessity. The very culture that these women were raised in taught them that everything had a use and many of them did not know the meaning of the words "waste" or "trash." So when the nights became cold each winter, the women would scrounge what small scraps of fabric they could find and fashion a blanket to put on the beds of their children and themselves. The inspiration for this approach to construction came from the equally as innovative approach to housing insulation—using layers of paper found in newspapers or magazines. These scraps for the quilts usually consisted of outgrown or worn-out clothes or leftover fabric from sewing projects. These wonderful pieces of art were simply thought of as creative methods of keeping a family warm until 1966. It was then that these women realized that the magic and beauty of the quilts came more from what went into them rather than what came out.

In the Public Eye

It was a common practice in these small communities of quilt makers to "air out" their quilts every spring. For members of the community, this became a time to study other's methods or designs so that they may have inspiration the next winter. However, in 1966, another set of eyes caught a glimpse of these soon to be masterpieces. Father Francis Walter saw something more than function in these quilts. He saw a passion and a history unique to these people. But perhaps more importantly to them, he saw a way to relieve them of their economic dependency on wealthy whites across the river. Walter, a Civil Rights worker, proposed the idea of marketing and selling these quilts to stores in larger cities in the hopes that these women would soon become self-sufficient economically doing what they loved. Working in conjunction with many volunteers and a woman named Estelle Witherspoon (The Freedom Quilting Bee's first president), he was able to get the quilts of small, run-down towns into the Smithsonian Institution. This exposed the work of these women to the world, but also inspired stores such as Sears, Bloomingdales, and Saks Fifth Ave. to sign contracts with them to manufacture and sell their designs. But the true artistic appeal of these quilts was not discovered until as late as 1998. Up until then, the patterns exposed to the public were basic and simple compare to the quilts that each family kept for themselves and their future generations. It was the perseverance of collector William Arnett that led to the recent revival of quilt making as artistic expression.

Some Common Gee's Bend Quilt Patterns

For the quilt making women of Gee's Bend, every scrap of fabric was and still is fair game. Many of these stunning quilts started out as old clothing, sheets, and even flour sacks. Their bold colors, interesting designs, and distinctly African influences are aspects that have been passed down through several generations of quilters. There are also a few traditional designs that help distinguish the Gee's Bend quilts as truly unique.



House Top



Bricklayer



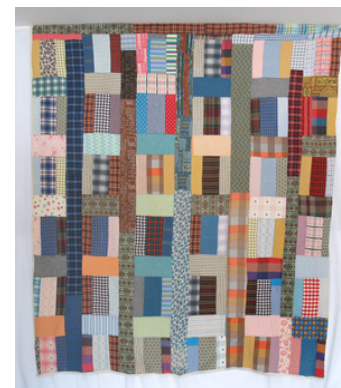
Bars and Blocks



Bars and String-Pieced Columns

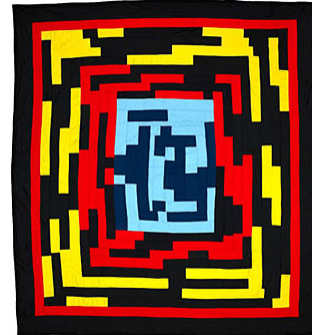


Flying Geese



Strip Piecing

Throughout the years, these women have expanded upon these basic styles to keep up with the ever-changing American aesthetic. The beauty and richness of these quilts, however, remain intact in these contemporary pieces.



"[The quilts] demonstrate how the quilters improvise upon the structure or "architecture" of the quilt to create a work of art that is based upon a traditional quilt pattern while simultaneously creating a visual vocabulary that is stylistically identifiable as Gee's Bend." – The Alliance for American Quilts

"The best of these designs, unusually minimalist and spare, are so eye-poppingly gorgeous that it's hard to know how to begin to account for them. But then, good art can never be fully accounted for, just described." – Michael Kimmelman, Chief Art Critic, The New York Times

"This work transcends the outdated, residual boundaries between art and craft"—Debra Singer

GEE'S BEND QUILTS AS FOLK ART

When you have a type of art that inspires music, textiles, paintings, and many other types of artistic expression, it can become confusing to accurately identify what qualifies a piece as folk art. Below are listed some identifying traits of folk art as defined by The Museum of International Folk Art.

- The art of the everyday
- Rooted in traditions that come from community and culture and expresses cultural identity by conveying shared community values and aesthetics
- Made by individuals whose creative skills convey their community's authentic cultural identity, rather than an individual artistic identity
- Skills and techniques are traditionally learned through apprenticeships in informal community settings
- Great folk artists demonstrate high levels of craftsmanship and creativity—often introducing new materials and innovations that express both traditional and contemporary imagery and values

The quilts of Gee's Bend also acted as inspiration for Set Designer, Marjorie Bradley Kellogg.



A TIMELINE OF CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE UNITED STATES

1783- Massachusetts outlaws slavery within its borders.

1808- The importation of slaves is banned in the U.S., though illegal slave trade continues.

1820- The Missouri Compromise maintains a balance of 12 slave and 12 free states.

1831- In Virginia, Nat Turner leads a slave rebellion during which 57 whites are killed. U.S. troops kill 100 slaves. Turner is caught and hanged.

1850- In the Compromise of 1850, California is admitted into the union as a Fugitive Slave Laws are strengthened and slave trade ends in Washington, D.C.

1857- The Supreme Court rules in the Dred Scott case that slaves do not become free when taken into a free state, that Congress cannot bar slavery from a territory and that blacks cannot become citizens.

1861- Southern states secede and form the Confederate States of America; Civil War begins.

1863- President Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation freeing "all slaves in areas still in rebellion."

1865- The Civil War ends. The 13th Amendment, abolishing slavery, is ratified.

1868- The 14th Amendment, which requires equal protection under the law to all persons, is ratified.

1870- The 15th Amendment, which bans racial discrimination in voting, is ratified.

1896- The Supreme Court approves the "separate but equal" segregation doctrine.

1909- The National Negro Committee convenes. This leads to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

1925- In its first national demonstration the Ku Klux Klan marches on Washington, D.C.

1948- President Truman issues an executive order outlawing segregation in the U.S. military.

1954- The Supreme Court declares school segregation unconstitutional in its ruling on Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas.

1955- Rosa Parks is jailed for refusing to move to the back of a Montgomery, Alabama, bus. A boycott follows, and the bus segregation ordinance is declared unconstitutional. The Federal Interstate Commerce Commission bans segregation on interstate trains and buses.

1957- Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus uses the National Guard to block nine black students from attending Little Rock High School. Following a court order, President Eisenhower sends in federal troops to allow the black students to enter the school.

1960- Four black college students begin sit-ins at the lunch counter of a Greensboro, North Carolina, restaurant where black patrons are not served.

1961- Freedom Rides begin from Washington, D.C., into Southern states. Student volunteers are bused in to test new laws prohibiting segregation.

1962- President Kennedy sends federal troops to the University of Mississippi to end riots so that James Meredith, the school's first black student, can attend. The Supreme Court rules that segregation is unconstitutional in all transportation facilities. The Department of Defense orders complete integration of military reserve units, excluding the National Guard.

1963- Civil rights leader Medgar Evers is killed by a sniper's bullet. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech to hundreds of thousands at the March on Washington, D.C. A church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, leaves four young black girls dead.

1964- Congress passes the Civil Rights Act, declaring discrimination based on race illegal. The 24th Amendment abolishes the poll tax, which originally had been established in the South after Reconstruction to make it difficult for poor blacks to vote. Three civil rights workers, two white and one black man, disappear in Mississippi. They were found buried six weeks later.

1965- A march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, is organized to demand protection for voting rights. Malcolm X is assassinated. Malcolm X, a longtime minister of the Nation of Islam, had rejected Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s policies of non-violence. He preached black pride and economic self-reliance for blacks. He eventually became a Muslim and broke with Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad. A new Voting Rights Act, which made it illegal to force would-be voters to pass literacy tests in order to vote, is signed.

1967- Thurgood Marshall becomes the first black to be named to the Supreme Court.

1968- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. James Earl Ray pleaded guilty of the crime in March 1969 and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing.

1976- Negro History Week becomes Black History Month.

1978- The Supreme Court rules, in a well-known reverse discrimination case (Bakke), that medical school admission programs that allow for positions based on race are unconstitutional.

1983- The Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. federal holiday is established.

1988- The Democratically controlled Congress overrides a presidential veto to pass the Civil Rights Restoration Act. President Ronald Reagan vetoed the law saying it gave the federal government overreaching powers.

1990- President George H.W. Bush vetoes a civil rights bill that he says would impose quotas for employers. A civil rights bill without quotas passes in 1991.

1995- The Supreme Court rules that federal programs that consider race as a category for hiring must have "compelling government interest" to do so. The Supreme Court rules that the consideration of race in creating congressional districts is unconstitutional.

2003- The Supreme Court upholds the University of Michigan Law School's policy, ruling that race can be one of many factors considered by colleges when selecting their students.

2005- Edgar Ray Killen, the leader of the Mississippi murders (1964), is convicted of manslaughter on the 41st anniversary of the crimes. Rosa Parks dies at the age of 92.

2006- Coretta Scott King, widow of slain civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., dies at the age of 78 of a stroke. Mrs. King had moved into the forefront of the civil rights movement after the passing of her husband in 1968.

Gee's Bend and the Civil Rights Movement



During the winter of 1965, in the middle of a storm, in front of a massive crowd, Martin Luther King Jr. stood in a church in Gee's Bend, Alabama and stated, "I came over to Gee's Bend to tell you, you are somebody." It was the peak of the civil rights movement, the fight for racial equality that took place generally between the 1950s and the 1970s in America. Soon after Dr. King's visit, a large number of Gee's Bend residents attempted to register to vote at the Camden courthouse, and joined Dr. King during the Selma to Montgomery freedom marches. The people of Gee's Bend were able to be so active in the movement because at the time, they were just starting to own and work their own land. However, the Alabama police found a way to quell their efforts by stopping the ferry service that transported Gee's bend citizens across the Alabama River to Camden in 1962. The ferry was the lifeline from Gee's Bend to the outside world, and its disappearance meant that even a trip to purchase basic supplies would now take well over an hour. It wasn't until 2006 that the ferry service returned. However, the excitement of the Civil Rights movement was hardly over for the women of Gee's Bend. In 1966, an Episcopal priest came to Gee's Bend, saw the magnificent quilts, and immediately began offering money for them. This came as a surprise to the quilt makers, who had previously only used their quilts for practical purposes in their homes. The priest started the Freedom Quilting Bee, setting up contracts with large department stores in the north like Bloomingdale's and Saks. Through their quilts, the women of Gee's Bend were now earning their own money and gaining power.

VOTER REGISTRATION

In *Gee's Bend* Nella has a fear of having to read in public in order to register to vote. In order to register to vote in Alabama before the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act citizens were required to complete an elaborate registration procedure often referred to as the "literacy test". Part of this test was to read selections aloud from The Constitution and answer questions pertaining to the US government. Visit <http://www.crmvet.org/info/liithome.htm> to see if you would have passed the test.

The ladies of Gee's Bend still take the right to vote very seriously. On a recent visit to Arden Theatre Company the women indicated that they will not make any public appearances or travel this November 4. They will all be in Gee's Bend to cast their votes.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the gospel music enhance the action of the play? What does the playwright say through song that is not said through dialogue?
2. How was Nella's role in the family different due to that fact that she never learned to piece quilts? What was she given or denied on the basis of her position in the family?
3. What do you think it would be like to be suddenly told that a common ritual and tradition of your close-knit community is nationally recognized as fine art? How does this challenge or support the ways in which we define art?
4. How do you think Alice's "open door" philosophy applies to the play as a whole?
5. Do you agree with Sadie's decision to stay with Macon? Why or why not?
6. How does the production deal with the passage of time? What devices does the playwright use? How do the technical elements (lighting, sound, costumes) indicate the sections of the play?
7. Do you think the double-casting of the actress who plays Alice and Asia is effective? Why do you think the playwright might have made this choice?