

# the next stage NEXT STAGE

A student study guide created by Center Stage's Education Department

**CenterStage**  
1963-2003  
40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

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Baltimore, MD 21202

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World Premiere

February 21—  
March 30, 2003

# Intimate Apparel

By Lynn Nottage  
Directed by Kate Whoriskey  
The Head Theater

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# Intimate Apparel

February 2—March 30, 2003  
By Lynn Nottage

Directed by Kate Whoriskey • The Head Theater  
A co-production with South Coast Repertory

## Preview Notes

**Intimate Apparel**, the second World Premiere of Center Stage's 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary season, is a co-production and co-commission with South Coast Repertory of Costa Mesa, California—a theater renowned for its commitment to developing new work. Lynn Nottage's play is set during 1905 in New York City as experienced through the eyes of Esther, a 35-year-old African American woman blessed with a genius for creating exquisite lingerie. Her delicate undergarments are equally prized in Fifth Avenue boudoirs and Tenderloin bordellos. Esther's talent grants her a freedom few black women experience at that time in American history. In **Intimate Apparel**, Ms. Nottage explores the patchwork of lives brought together through the artistry of Esther's fine hand and flawless craftsmanship as a needlewoman and seamstress. Romance comes to Esther as a result of her correspondence with George, a man from Barbados who has befriended her cousin in Panama where both men are employed to build the Panama Canal. When he finally arrives in New York to meet her, there are surprises in store for them both. **Intimate Apparel** was part of Center Stage's **First Look** play reading series last season.

### Are there any issues of language?

The beautiful corsets and camisoles created by Esther are part of the set and are worn by the women in the play. There are several references to sexual situations.

## Are there any returning artists our subscribers might know?



### PLAYWRIGHT

Lynn Nottage participated in last year's **First Look** series where **Intimate Apparel** was read for the first time. She is working on a companion piece to **Intimate Apparel** for Playwrights Horizons set one hundred years later.

### ACTORS

Kevin Jackson appeared in **The Tempest** and **Joe Turner's Come and Gone**.

### DESIGNERS

Walt Spangler designed the sets for **The Pajama Game**, **Short Plays by Thornton Wilder**, and for **colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf**.

Catherine Zuber designed costumes for **The Pajama Game**, **Triumph of Love**, **Happy End**, **Ghosts**, **A Doll House**, **The Misanthrope**, **My Children! My Africa!**, **The Queen and the Rebels**, and **The Servant of Two Masters**.

Scott Zielinski designed lighting for **Fall**.

# Intimate Apparel

By Lynn Nottage

## THE CAST

(in order of speaking)

**Brenda Pressley\***  
MRS. DICKSON

**Shané Williams\***  
ESTHER

**Kevin Jackson\***  
GEORGE ARMSTRONG

**Sue Cremin\***  
MRS. VAN BUREN

**Steven Goldstein\***  
MR. MARKS

**Erica Gimpel\***  
MAYME

**Mike Schleifer\***  
STAGE MANAGER

**Linda Marvel\*,  
Barbara Rollins\***  
ASSISTANT STAGE  
MANAGERS

## THE SETTING

Manhattan, 1905

*There will be one  
fifteen-minute  
intermission.*

\*Members of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States

# Intimate Conversation

**STEVE LICKTEIG:** What was the inspiration for *Intimate Apparel*?

**LYNN NOTTAGE:** The play was inspired by my great-grandmother, Ethel Boyce, who arrived alone in New York City in 1902. She was an amazing seamstress who specialized in intimate apparel for women. Plain and deeply religious, it was believed by her seven younger sisters that she would never marry. But, despite the family predictions, she began corresponding with a man in Panama who had seen a portrait of Ethel hanging above her uncle's bunk. That man was to become my great-grandfather, George Armstrong, who left us nothing but a few fragmented tales of the hardship of working on the Panama Canal. He died prematurely when he was hit by a stone while proselytizing on a speaker's corner. The story may be apocryphal, but it's what I've come to embrace as the truth.

**SL:** So a family story provided the inspiration. Where did you go from there?

**LN:** I began my research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem and the main branch of the New York Public Library, which I love. I like to begin my research with one central image, and then build outward from there: a photograph of a person, a room, or an article of clothing. I found an image in a lingerie history book of a beautiful white satin wedding corset embossed with orange blossoms. It was delicate and graceful—exactly what I imagined Esther would create for her wedding night. The image was dated 1905. That year became my departure point, my anchor. From there, I spent many hours in the library poring over images of Old New York and the Panama Canal Zone, and newspapers from 1905. The newspaper advertisements and classified pages turned out to be the most valuable source of information. My goal wasn't to become an expert, but rather to familiarize myself with the social and cultural aspects of the period to the point where I felt comfortable enough to abandon the research for the world of the play.

**Before rehearsals began, Center Stage Media Relations Director Steve Lickteig asked playwright Lynn Nottage to talk about the theme of intimacy in her play and what inspired her to write it.**

**LN:** Well, I've had an under-indulged fascination with New York City history and Caribbean history. This play allowed me to merge those interests, while exploring the journey of my ancestors. Tens of thousands of Caribbean people made their way to America via Panama during the early part of the twentieth century; the building of the Canal inadvertently led to one of the most important and overlooked migrations of the twentieth century. It's estimated that one-third of the African Caribbean men from Barbados alone left the island to work on the Panama Canal. It was treacherous work, but most saw it as a stepping-stone to a better life. As it stands, the Panama Canal remains one of the great achievements and great tragedies of the twentieth century. As George says in one of his letters to Esther, "one man drops for every twenty feet of canal dug."

**SL: Intimate Apparel shows us the lives of several different women who live in the same society, yet who share similar dramas. What is your play saying about the shared experiences of even the most seemingly different women?**

**LN:** The women in the play are bound by circumstance; they've all been imprisoned in some way by society's limited expectations. In 1905, the suffragette movement was in its infancy, and the average American man did not view women as his equal. The women in the play, while they may not be able to fully give voice to their frustrations, understand on some basic level that they share a common struggle. But there also remains a racial and social gulf that divides them.

**SL: Esther's talent as a designer and creator of lingerie somewhat frees her financially, but also artistically. Do you think Esther would think of herself as an artist?**



Lynn Nottage

**LN:** Esther is an expert craftsperson plying her trade during an era when fine clothing still reflected a personal touch. Yes, she's talented, but not an artist in the traditional sense. I don't believe that she views herself as an artist. She doesn't consciously set out to create art, which is part of her tragedy. If she viewed herself as an artist, then perhaps she wouldn't have such complicated issues of self-esteem.

**SL: Who would Esther be today? Who is her modern equivalent?**

**LN:** Esther would probably be a successful public relations executive. But on her days off she would create the most wonderful little handcrafted quilts and colorful silk camisoles that she'd sell on eBay for a fortune. No doubt, she'd be a modern woman pursuing her dreams. She would no longer be defined or valued based upon her relationship to a man.

**SL: There's a lot left unsaid in Intimate Apparel. For example, the relationship between Esther and Mr. Marks, the Jewish shop owner, is full of emotional action but little is spoken. Can you talk about that a bit?**

**LN:** The play is set during a period when class, race, and social mores erected such insurmountable barriers, that even the most unadorned of emotions were impossible to express freely. Remember, the language of emotions that has evolved from a hundred years of a culture of psychology did not exist for Esther

or Marks. So they communicated through subtle gestures. How does one who's bound by tradition break tradition? And what does that do to one's understanding of the world? This is one of the dilemmas that both Esther and Marks face.

**SL: Why do you write plays as opposed to novels, essays, prose, etc.?**

**LN:** I am drawn to the interplay of voices on a stage. But I think mostly I write plays because I love the collaborative aspect of theater. A play begins with a solitary act, a few words and ideas typed across the computer screen. Those words then get interpreted by a director, by actors, by designers, and finally by an audience. It is then that it becomes something more complicated and layered; it becomes the voice of many artists.

I find it exciting to sit through a production of one of my plays, knowing that I have a level of intimacy with the characters, but still not entirely sure who they will be from night to night. I almost always make discoveries about the play. An actress might lift her finger in a subtle way that suddenly and brilliantly elucidates character or the audience might fall silent and that silence will resonate in unexpected way that opens a door for me. Someone likened writing a play and the collaborative process to skillfully introducing a topic at a dinner party. It's fascinating to listen to how people respond to an idea, how they build upon it, deconstruct it, twist and turn it until it becomes their own. I write plays because I find a lively conversation more informative and engaging than an evening alone with my computer and a glass of wine. ■

# Setting the Stage

**Intimate Apparel** is the story of a single, African American woman, Esther Mills, who migrated to New York City in search of a dream. A woman alone, she now faces an important crossroads in her life: her 35<sup>th</sup> birthday. In her eighteen years of independence, she has fashioned her way into some of the most exclusive enclaves and now has the financial freedom to make a real investment in her future.

**Setting:** Lower Manhattan, New York City, 1905.

## Characters:

**Esther Mills**—a plain looking, African American entrepreneur.

**Mrs. Dickson**—an attractive, 50 year-old widow who owns the boarding house where Esther lives. She married Mr. Dickson, who had an opiate addiction, because she was “thirty-seven years old... had no profession and there wasn’t a decent colored fella in New York City that would have” her.

**George Armstrong**—a native Barbadian working in the Isthmus of Panama.

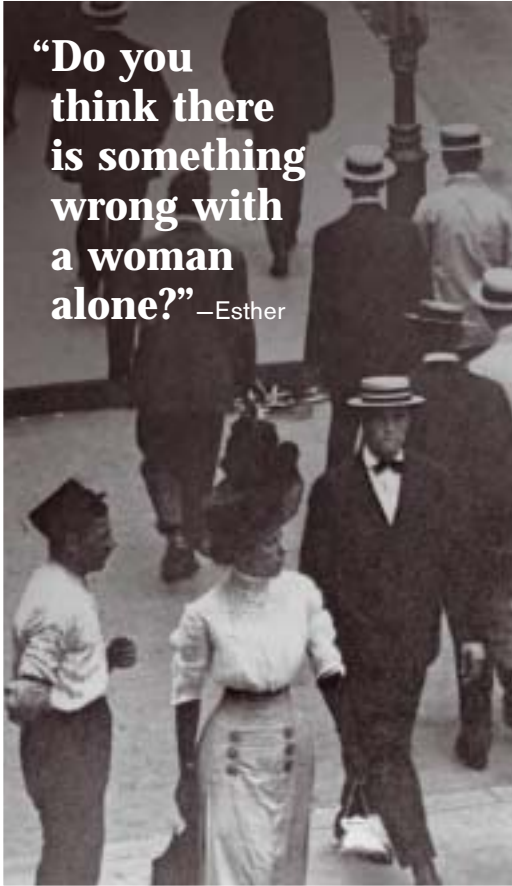
**Mrs. Van Buren**—a wealthy society woman; one of Esther’s clients.

**Mr. Marks**—an observant, Orthodox Jewish fabric shop owner, business associate, and friend of Esther.

**Mayme**—an Oberlin College-educated, African American composer, pianist, and prostitute; Esther’s client and friend.

**“...It’s just a matter of finding the right gentleman.”** —Mrs. Van Buren

**“Do you think there is something wrong with a woman alone?”** —Esther



## Anti-Miscegenation Laws

In 1664, Maryland passed the first anti-amalgamation law, prohibiting interracial marriages. Similar anti-miscegenation laws that forbade marriages between whites and anyone having Negro blood “to the fourth generation” (1/16th Negro blood—as much as one Negro great-great-grandparent) were passed in Virginia (1691), Massachusetts (1705), North Carolina (1715), South Carolina (1717), Delaware (1721), and Pennsylvania (1725). Inter-marriage bans were lifted during Reconstruction in the early 1870s, but by the end of the decade mixed marriages were declared void. In 1967 and 1968, the United States Supreme Court finally overturned all state anti-miscegenation laws.

### “Negro” Categories

Negro	3/4 or more Negro blood
Griffe	1/2 Negro, 1/2 mulatto
Mulatto	1/2 Negro, 1/2 white
Quadroon	1/4 Negro, 3/4 white
Octoroon	1/8 Negro, 7/8 white

**Among the evidence of whiteness declared to be admissible by the courts is testimony to the effect that a person:**

- Is reputed to be white.
- Associates with whites.
- Enjoys high social status.
- Exercises the rights of whites (attends white theaters, votes, etc.)

# Immigrants, inventors, and engineers

gave early 20<sup>th</sup> century New York City its reputation as “The New Colossus.” Manhattan bustled with industry and sparkled with hope, while the surrounding boroughs sagged with poverty and disease. The following is a brief sketch of the highs and lows of life in New York in the early 1900s.

## 1900

Electric lights replace gas, and Broadway becomes “the Great White Way.”

Almost a quarter of the city’s residents are German.

Cloak makers start the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU).

## 1901

Electric streetcars make faster commutes possible.

83,000 tenements house 70% of the population in unsafe and unsanitary conditions.

Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie funds a 65-branch public library project.

## 1902

The Fuller Building, known as the Flatiron Building for its shape on a little triangle of land, reaches 300 feet at Broadway and Fifth Avenue.

Russian American candy store owners create the Teddy Bear. President Theodore Roosevelt sanctions the use of his nickname for the toy.

The Algonquin Hotel opens on West 44<sup>th</sup> Street.

## 1903

The Williamsburg Bridge opens Williamsburg, Brooklyn, once an upscale German and Austrian haven, to the poor masses of the Lower East Side. By 1920, 250,000 tenants are packed into cold-water flats and tenements there.



Opening the New York City subway, City Hall Station, 1904.

## 1904

The IRT (West Side Subway) runs its first train from City Hall to 145<sup>th</sup> Street through 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Broadway. The ride takes twenty-six minutes and costs a nickel. It is the first underground system with both express and local tracks.

The white middle class fails to move uptown with the advent of the subway, so African Americans buy and rent new row homes and apartments in Harlem.

1,300 New York City residents contract typhoid.

## 1905

The Staten Island Ferry is taken over by the city, and its five new boats are named after the five boroughs. The ride costs five cents until 1974.

At the new nickelodeon theaters, a nickel buys the latest entertainment: one-minute movies, ten-minute one-reelers, and honky tonk music.

## Intimate Terms:

**Appliqué**—a sewing technique in which fabric patches are layered on a foundation fabric, then stitched in place by hand or machine.

**Barbados**—island nation in the Caribbean, situated about 100 miles east of the Windward Islands.

**Bert Williams**—famous African American vaudeville performer.

**Bimshire**—another name for Barbados.

**Bohemian**—a person (often a writer or an artist) living an unconventional life, usually in a colony with others.

**Chattel**—a person held in servitude as the property of another.

**Cholera**—an acute diarrheal disease.

**Flamboyant Tree**—a showy tropical tree widely planted for its immense racemes of scarlet and orange flowers.

**Heliotrope**—a variable color averaging a moderate to reddish purple.

**Mangroves**—tropical maritime trees or shrubs that send out many prop roots and form dense masses important in coastal land building.

**Salvation Army**—an international religious and charitable group organized along military lines and founded in 1865 by William Booth for social betterment.

**Spinster**—an unmarried woman past the common age for marrying.

**Tenderloin**—a district of a city largely devoted to vice, moral depravity, or corruption.

**Vanderbilt**—one of the wealthiest and most prominent families in the United States. Cornelius Vanderbilt (1794-1877), American industrialist, amassed vast holdings in railroads and steamship lines; built Grand Central terminal, N.Y. City.

## Textile Terms

**Cambric**—a fine, thin, white linen fabric.

**Cashmere**—a fine wool from the undercoat of the cashmere goat.

**Chiffon**—a sheer fabric, especially of silk.

**Crêpe de Chine**—a soft fine or sheer clothing crêpe, especially of silk.

**Gabardine**—a firm, hard-finish, durable fabric (such as wool or rayon), twilled with diagonal ribs on the right side.

**Muslin**—a plain-woven sheer-to-coarse cotton fabric.

**Nainsook**—a soft, lightweight muslin.

**Satin**—a fabric (such as silk) in satin weave with a lustrous face and dull back.

**Silk**—a lustrous, tough, elastic fiber produced by silkworms and used for textiles.

**Tulle**—a sheer, often stiffened silk, rayon, or nylon net used primarily for veils or ballet costumes.

# Are Women Persons?

## WOMAN SUFFRAGE TIMELINE

Historically, women have been primarily defined in relation to men. Marriage was the way in which women could improve their social and financial stations. By 1905, however, women worldwide were challenging notions of womanhood and seeking the power to define themselves and their world outside of marriage. They wanted the opportunity to choose their leaders, have a voice in their nations, and shape their lives. They wanted to vote.

In representative government, **suffrage** is the right to vote to elect public officials and adopt or reject proposed legislation.

**Woman Suffrage** is the right of women by law to vote in national and local elections.



This 1903 comic strip reflects the commonly held belief at the time: that woman suffrage would disempower men.



Women's Suffrage rally Union Square, 1916

### 1792

British author Mary Woolstonecraft argues for the equality of the sexes in her book, *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*.

### 1840

The World's Anti-Slavery Convention is held in London, England. When the women delegates from the United States are not allowed to participate, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton determine to have a women's rights convention when they return home.

### 1848

Mott and Stanton call the first women's rights convention. The New York State Legislature passes a law which gives women the right to retain possession of property they owned prior to their marriage.

### 1851

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony meet and begin their fifty-year collaboration to win economic, educational, social, and civil rights for women.

### 1868-69

Stanton and Anthony launch their women's rights newspaper, the *Revolution*, in New York City. Anthony organizes the Working Women's Association, which encourages women to form unions to win higher wages and shorter hours. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution grants suffrage to African American males, but not to women. The National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association are founded. In 1890, the two associations merge to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and Anthony becomes its president in 1892.

### 1911

The National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage is founded.

### 1916

Jeannette Rankin, a Republican from Montana, is elected to the House of Representatives and becomes the first woman to serve in Congress.

### 1919

The 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution—granting woman suffrage—is adopted by a joint resolution of Congress and sent to the states for ratification.

### 1920

The 19<sup>th</sup> amendment is adopted; women in the United States are enfranchised.



Sojourner Truth

### Sojourner Truth

(1797-1883), born into slavery and named Isabella Baumfree, was one of 13 children. When New York ended slavery in 1828, she settled in New York City, where she worked as a domestic for several religious communes. Her dictated memoirs were published in 1850 as *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*. Soon after its publication, she used her personal testimony to advocate against slavery and for woman suffrage. In 1851, she spoke at a Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio. The legendary phrase, "Ain't I a Woman?" was associated with Truth after this speech.

## Ain't I A Woman?

Delivered in 1851 at a Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.



**Susan B. Anthony** (1820-1906), noted advocate of temperance, anti-slavery, and woman suffrage, was arrested in 1872 for casting a vote in the Presidential election. She was fined \$100, refused to pay it, and delivered the following speech in 1873 in response to the arrest and punishment.

## Susan B. Anthony

### On Women's Right to Suffrage (1873)

Friends and fellow-citizens: I stand before you tonight under indictment for the alleged crime of having voted at the last Presidential election without having a lawful right to vote. It shall be my work this evening to prove to you that in thus voting, I not only committed no crime, but, instead, simply exercised my citizen's rights, guaranteed to me and all United States citizens by the National Constitution, beyond the power of any State to deny.

The preamble of the Federal Constitution says: "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure *domestic tranquility*, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

It was we, the people; not we, the white male citizens; nor yet we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed the Union. And we formed it, not to give the blessings of liberty, but to secure them; not

to the half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people—women as well as men. And it is a downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty while they are denied the use of the only means of securing them provided by this democratic-republican government—the ballot.

Webster, Worcester, and Bouvier all define a citizen to be a person in the United States, entitled to vote and hold office.

The only question left to be settled now is: Are women persons? And I hardly believe any of our opponents will have the hardihood to say they are not. Being persons, then, women are citizens; and no State has a right to make any law, or to enforce any old law, that shall abridge their privileges and immunities. Hence, every discrimination against women in the constitutions and laws of the several States is today null and void, precisely as is every one against Negroes.



Cost of the Panama Canal project by 1914:  
**\$639 million**  
(equal to \$11.3 billion today)

President Roosevelt, in white, checks the progress of the Panama Canal.

# The PATH TO PANAMA

For half a century,

ever since the California Gold Rush, the United States government had been wondering how it might shorten voyages from the East Coast to the West Coast. Because Great Britain, the world's most formidable naval power at the time, shared the same goal, the two nations agreed in the 1850 Clayton-Bulwer Treaty to guarantee the neutrality of any canal built across Central America. The most likely spots for such a canal were Nicaragua and the Isthmus of Panama, which was then a part of Colombia.

By 1901, however, America was eager to build a canal that it could control exclusively. In November 1901, Secretary of State Hay negotiated a new arrangement with British diplomat Julian Pauncefote that superseded the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty and granted the United States "the exclusive management and policing" of a Central America canal, as long

as ships of all nations could use the canal on an equal basis.

The next step was to decide where this canal would be built. A commission recommended Nicaragua, but the New Panama Canal Company began lobbying President Roosevelt hard to site the canal in Panama. A French company led by Ferdinand de Lesseps, the man who built the Suez Canal, had begun work on a sea-level waterway in Panama in 1881, but political and financial concerns forced an end to that venture. Subsequently, the New Panama Canal Company had optioned the French rights, which were now being offered to the United States government for \$109 million. Roosevelt waited until the price dropped to \$40 million before buying them. Once the canal commission had revised its recommendation accordingly, Congress passed the June 1902 Spooner Act, which authorized the president to proceed with the construction of a canal across the Isthmus of

Panama—provided that the government of Colombia could be induced to cede the United States an appropriate amount of land (the French lease being about to expire).

In January 1903, Secretary of State Hay and Colombian foreign minister Tomás Herrán signed a treaty that turned over to the United States a ten-mile-wide strip of land in Panama. In exchange for a hundred-year lease, the United States government agreed to pay \$10 million plus annuities of \$250,000 beginning after nine years. The United States Senate ratified the deal immediately, but the Colombians held out for more money. When Roosevelt refused, the Colombians rejected the treaty in August amid a burst of patriotic pride and complaints of "Yankee imperialism."

An angry Roosevelt decided to cut the Colombians out of the deal entirely and began supporting opposition politicians in Panama who favored the construction of

a canal. In October, he ordered three navy warships to the region, and on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, when the anticipated uprising came, he used those ships to prevent Colombian troops from landing in the province. With breathtaking haste, the United States recognized the new independent government of Panama on November 6<sup>th</sup>, and Hay nearly as quickly negotiated a deal with French engineer Philippe Bunau-Varilla, an agent of the New Panama Canal Company (and newly named Panamanian minister to the United States) whose financial terms matched exactly those of the recently rejected Hay-Herrán Treaty. Some members of Congress griped about the heavy-handed role Roosevelt had played in securing the Canal Zone, but the president simply ignored their objections. "I took the Canal zone and let Congress debate," Theodore Roosevelt declared in a 1911 speech, "and while the debate goes on, the Canal does also."

Supplies required for the eradication of Yellow Fever among those digging and constructing the Canal:

- 50,000 gallons of kerosene per month
- 300 tons of sulfur
- 1,000 brooms
- 1,200 fumigation pots

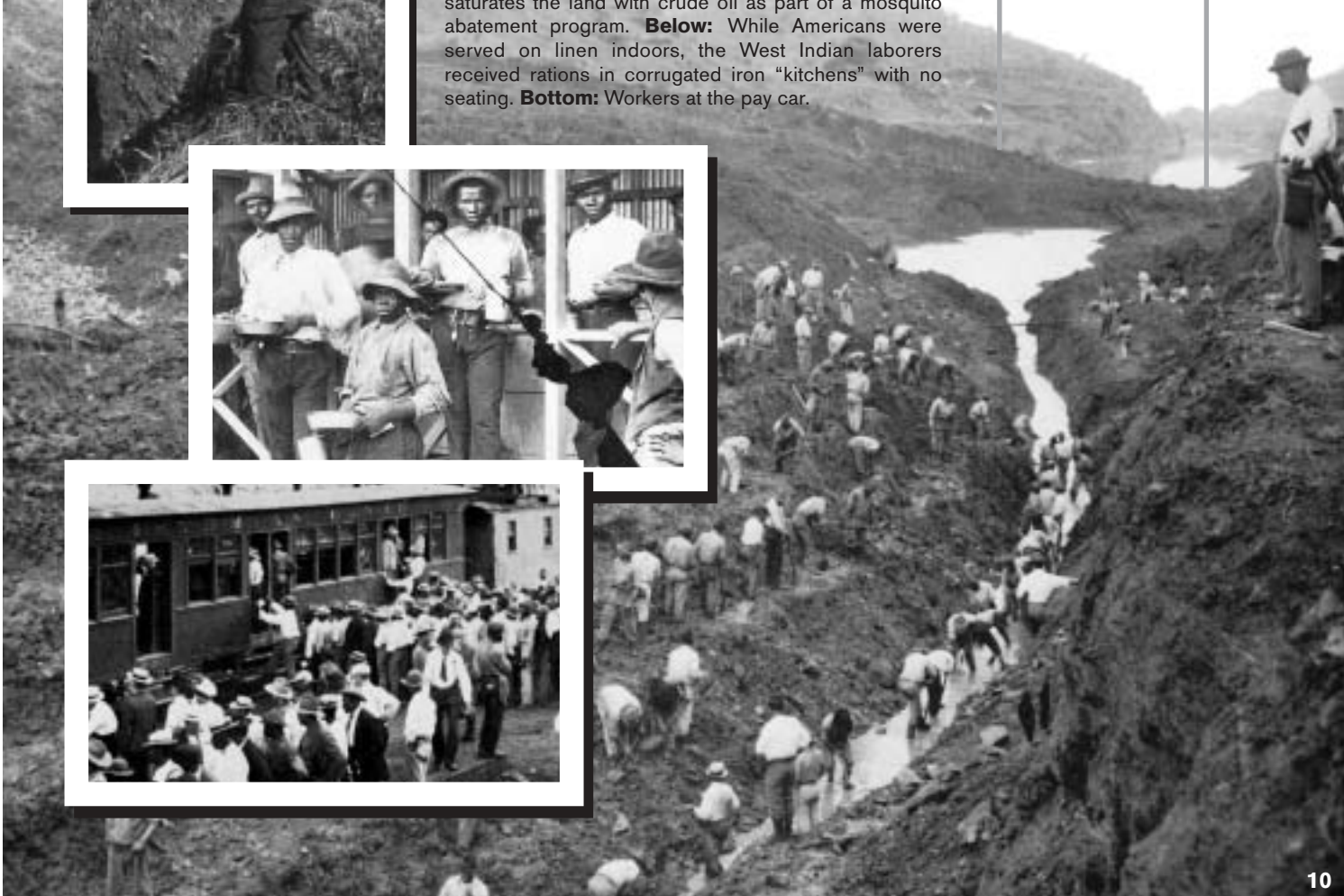


On June 24, 1904, a postal service was established as a part of the Department of Revenues and under the supervision of the Treasurer of the Canal Zone. On that date, post offices were opened at Ancon, Cristobal, Gatun, Culebra, and La Boca. A small supply of 2, 5, and 10 cent Panama stamps, overprinted "Canal Zone" were obtained and used until July 18, 1904, when United States stamps overprinted "Canal Zone" were received and placed in use. The United States stamps were used until December 12, 1904 when they were withdrawn and replaced by Panama stamps overprinted "Canal Zone" in compliance with an executive order issued on December 3, 1904 by Secretary of War William H. Taft.

Canal workers lived in segregated living quarters, and were often assigned jobs according to ethnicity. These West Indian excavators lived in a one-room, military style bunkhouse with no indoor plumbing. **Left:** A worker saturates the land with crude oil as part of a mosquito abatement program. **Below:** While Americans were served on linen indoors, the West Indian laborers received rations in corrugated iron "kitchens" with no seating. **Bottom:** Workers at the pay car.

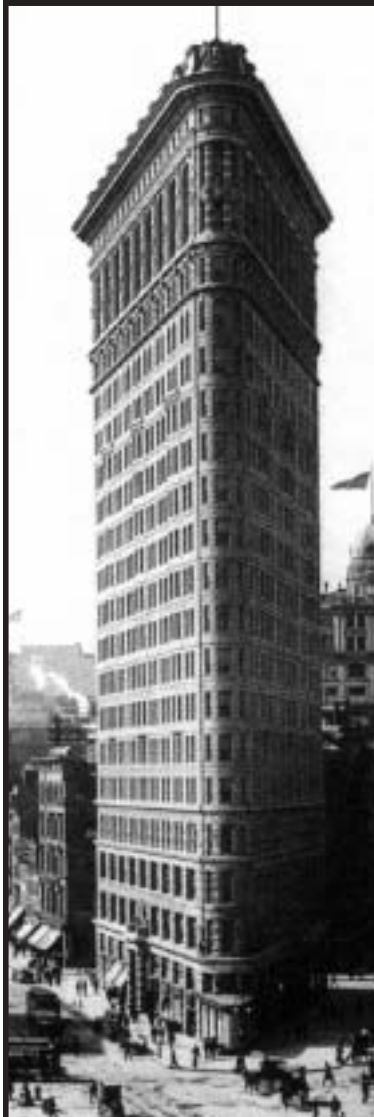


Estimated  
height of the  
262,000,000  
cubic yards of  
earth excavated  
if it were piled:  
1 city block wide  
and  
19 miles high.





# THE NEW COLOSSUS



## **The Flatiron Building**

With steady streams of immigrants pouring into Ellis Island, land was at a premium in New York City. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the growing demand for commercial real estate forced architects to consider increasingly tall buildings. The invention of the Otis elevator in 1853 made it possible to build multi-storied skyscrapers. One of New York's earliest skyscrapers was the 20-story Flatiron Building. Completed in 1902, it immediately became a cultural icon.

**Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,  
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”**

Emma Lazarus's famous poem, "The New Colossus," written in 1883, was inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty in 1886.

**Top left:** Brooklyn Bridge, 1900. **Above:** Statue of Liberty under construction in France, 1883.

“We can not have too much immigration of the right kind, and we should have none of the wrong kind.”

(Excerpt from Theodore Roosevelt’s Third Annual Message to Congress, 1903)

**The Great Migration**

Between the years 1900 and 1960, over 4,809,000 African Americans fled the South’s oppressive conditions, in several major waves known collectively as The Great Migration. The vast majority of these migrants settled in Northern cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and New York. The Great Migration stands as the largest internal movement of people in the history of the United States.



**Ellis Island**

In 1882, the United States Immigration Bureau opened a major central facility for handling the flood of immigration. Ellis Island, within sight of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, was a place where immigrants could be examined for disease, evaluated as fit or unfit for entry, and either admitted to the mainland, quarantined, or deported. During the 62 years of its operation, from 1892-1943, Ellis Island processed as many as one million immigrants per year.

Ellis Island: Physical examination at the turn of the century.



**The Slums of New York City**

The influx of immigrants in New York City in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to a serious housing crisis. Families lived in congested tenements, substandard buildings usually five stories tall, with four tiny apartments on each floor. In 1864, the first systematic sanitary survey of the city revealed the extent of the problem. Legislation set out to reform the basic tenement design, but dilapidated tenement buildings, usually made of wood, continued to be constructed behind city lots, making New York’s lower East Side one of the most densely populated urban areas in the world.

**Jewish Migrants**

Between 1880 and 1920, two million Jews from Eastern Europe arrived in the United States; most settled in New York City. Many of the new arrivals worked in some area of the garment industry. Adults and children alike worked for long hours at home doing piecework, or in poorly lit, overcrowded sweatshops. Still others sold goods from pushcarts or opened small shops or restaurants. Despite the dismal conditions, Jewish culture and religion thrived. Hundreds of synagogues and religious schools were established, and Yiddish theater and Hebrew and Yiddish newspapers emerged as cultural outlets.

Streets and markets, Lower Manhattan.



*The Migration Series, Panel No. 1* by Jacob Lawrence. (The Phillips Collection)



A woman and her children in a lower East Side dwelling, New York, 1910.

Background: Italians arriving on the SS *Patricia*, 1906.

# Defining SPACES

Because of the virtual flood of people into New York City in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, negotiating space was one of the biggest challenges in “The New Colossus.” Housing was constructed quickly and cheaply to accommodate the increasing demand. However, because every immigrant brought with him both an expectation of what the new world would hold—as well as a cultural memory of how things should be—neighborhoods and districts were defined and redefined as much by their new residents as they were by speculators and architects.

**Intimate Apparel** set designer Walt Spangler had the exciting challenge of creating a visual representation of the many facets of 1905 New York City: industry and intimacy, wealth and poverty, duty and vanity, hope and desperation.

On the peripheral edges of the set, Spangler used **copper trusses(A)** which function as structural support and indicate the focus on constructing New York’s public spaces. Then he selected two set pieces to serve as unifying private icons: pieces that everyone uses and, therefore, transcend gender, ethnicity, culture, and economic status. The **“every bed” (B)** in the center, for instance, functions as the beds of Esther, Mayme, and Mrs. Van Buren, and as a fabric table for Mr. Marks. There is also an “every chair” used in several different settings.

Along with the “every” furniture pieces, each character has a defining symbol on the set. The focal point is **Esther’s sewing machine(c)**, which defines both her public profession and her private space. It is the symbol of construction and intimacy, because she uses it to “build” intimate apparel. Mrs. Dickson enters and exits from basement stairs, which mirrors her ascension into financial stability through her marriage to Mr. Dickson.

Mrs. Van Buren’s boudoir is defined by the most luxurious piece of furniture on the set, a **vanity dressing table(D)**.

Mayme’s apartment spans the length of the stage and utilizes the most furniture, including the bed, the **liquor cabinet(E)** that she shares with Mrs. Van Buren, a sink, and a piano.

## Questions to consider:

- \* Why is George not bound or defined by a stationary object or set piece?
- \* What do these set pieces say about the characters and spaces they define?



13

# Tackling the Text: *On Self Esteem*

“

**Mrs. Van Buren**

So, what do you think? I look ridiculous, and I'm behaving absolutely foolishly, but I'm not sure what else to do. I've spent a fortune on feathers and every manner of accouterment... They've written positively splendid things about me in the columns this season. Did you read what they said about the gown I wore to dine at Sherry's on Wednesday? ...But does it matter, I ask? Does it matter? Has he spent an evening at home? Has he so much as complimented my gowns this season or noticed that I've painted the damn boudoir vermilion red? Just look at this awful color—looks like a bohemian garret. But, does he notice?

**Esther**

Well he should. You look lovely, Mrs. Van Buren.

**Mrs. Van Buren**

I've given him no children. I can't. He is an important man, travels in circles where progeny is essential. It's not for the lack of trying. One takes these things for granted, you assume when it comes time that it will happen, and when it doesn't who is to blame? They think it's vanity that's kept me childless—I've heard the women whispering. If only I were that vain. But it's like he's given up, as if he knows that my womb is barren, and that emptiness has drained his interest.

**Esther**

But you're so beautiful.

**Esther**

... I live in a rooming house with seven unattached women and sew intimate apparel for ladies, but that ain't for a gentleman's ears. Sure I can tell him all there is to know about fabric, but that hardly seems a life worthy of words.

**Mr. Marks**

... I can see from your hands that you are blessed with the needle and the thread, which means you'll never be without warmth.

**Esther**

I'm afraid it was either learn to sew or turn back sheets for fifty cents a day.

**Mr. Marks**

You make it sound so simple. My father sew, my brother sew, yes, for the finest families. But I don't have the discipline, the fingers. Look at the size of these hands, like *carnati*, Romanian sausage. I wish for your hands.

”

(continued)

What we want can affect how we feel about ourselves. In the following passages, each of the characters from *Intimate Apparel* wants something. Read each passage to discover what we know about these characters because of what they want.

What do we know about the relationship that exists between the characters talking to each other?

How does the use of detail make these characters come alive for us?

How does it reveal their background?

## Tackling the Text: *On Self Esteem*

“

### Mayme

You think I ain't tried to make a go of it? You think I just laid down and opened my legs 'cause it was easy? It don't look like anything, but this saloon is better than a lot of them places, ask anybody. So sometimes I gotta do other things, but I'm singing every night, ain't I? And a lot of important folks come here. Only last night one of Bert Williams musicians sat up front, and stayed through the entire show and offered up his compliments freely. You think some of those gals in the big shows didn't start right where I am?

### Esther

You got this beautiful piano that you play better than anyone I know. There are a hundred church choirs and Sunday schools that would be blessed to have you.

### Mayme

Let me tell you, so many wonderful ideas been conjured in this room. They just get left right on the table, in that bed there, or on this piano bench. They are scattered all over this room... Esther, I ain't waiting for anybody to rescue me. My Panama Man come and gone long time now... And what does it matter? You think half the men that come in here bother looking at my face? You think they care that I studied classical piano at Oberlin, or that my daddy was an Alderman. No ma'am. Morning after I could pass any of them in the street and they wouldn't know me from a matron in the Salvation Army. And they'd bed her right quick if they had a chance...

### George

I want to build things, not polish silver or port luggage. Them fine jobs for your Yankee gentlemen, but not for me. They'll have me a bootblack 'fore long, let the damn Italians blacken their hands, I says. Mine been black long enough. A man at the saloon—smart looking fella—say the onliest way for a colored man in this country is for he to be he own man. Have he own business, otherwise he always be shining the white man nickel. You understand, no? And really, how it look to people? Me, sitting here, waiting on fortune, you out there courting it.

### Esther

I am your wife, and whatever I got, yours.

### George

'Least in Panama a man know where he stand. He know he chattel. That as long as he have a goat, he happy. He know when he drunk, he drunk, and there ain't no judgment if so.

### Mrs. Dickson

... But there are many a cautionary tale bred of overconfidence. When I met the late Mr. Dickson, he was near sixty and I forgave his infatuation with the opiates, for he come with this rooming house—and look how many good years it's given me. Sure, I cussed that damn pipe, and I cussed him for making me a widow, but sometimes we get to a point where we can't be so particular.

”

How old is each character?

What is his/her occupation?

Social status?

Race? Religion?

What choices have these characters made?

Do you understand why they made these choices?

Why do you want to know more about the characters?

# RAAGTIME

**“My daddy gave me fifteen lashes with a switch for playing this piece in our parlor—one for each year I studied the piano. He was too proper to like anything colored, and a syncopated beat was about the worst crime you could commit in his household. I woke up this morning with the sudden urge to play it.”**

—Mayme

For most of the 1890s, having a piano in the parlor was a symbol of family prosperity. Because it was considered a woman’s instrument, however, it required a daughter, wife, aunt, or sister to play it. Then came the ragtime era.

Ragtime’s heyday was the turn of the century. It was one of the most popular American music form from the mid-1890s the First World War. Although no one is certain, many historians believe that the term “ragtime” is probably based on the music’s characteristic syncopated rhythm: that is, because of its syncopation, it sounds “raggedy.”

Although syncopated music existed before ragtime became popular, syncopation was only a stylistic feature of its predecessors. In contrast, syncopation is the *basis* for the underlying structure of ragtime.

**Even though refined turn-of-the-century ladies and gentlemen played “rags” on their parlor pianos, the real spawning ground for ragtime was in the bordellos and saloons. Ragtime was composed and performed mostly by African Americans who were generally barred from work in more reputable establishments.**





## Supplementary Activities

### Intimate Apparel

By Lynn Nottage

#### Activities that can be used for further exploration of the production.

1. Through references to fabrics and textures, Lynn Nottage weaves her characters together into a patchwork snapshot of the early twentieth century. Place a variety of textile samples in a bowl: wool, silk, cotton flannel, lace, and satin. Have each member of the class select a swatch of fabric. Write descriptions of the fabric. Use all of your senses. Do some of these fabrics seem inherently masculine or feminine? Devise a character based on what has been discovered about the swatch.
2. Esther remarks that the twentieth century is “going to be a century of miracles.” Before seeing the show, see how many “miracles” the class can name. Discover how many things we take for granted—for example, electricity. Can we imagine life without these miracles? What one item would be most impossible to live without?
3. The creation and wearing of fancy lingerie is one way in which the heart of human connection—intimacy—is explored. Of the six characters in the play, only two are men, George and Mr. Marks. Several other men are spoken of, but are never seen. Nonetheless, the women characters often focus on the men present or absent in their lives. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this artistic choice? Do you consider this a feminist play? Why or why not? Who among the unseen men is most interesting and why?
4. In her famous essay, “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf claimed that a woman needs money and a room of her own to discover and express her **genius**—that unique creative potential within each of us. Do you agree or disagree with this premise? Why or why not? Esther Mills provides an interesting affirmation of Woolf’s premise. Explore the ways in which the production actualizes Woolf’s famous statement. How are each of the women in the play—Mrs. Dickson, Mrs. Van Buren, Esther, and Mayme—defined by their “rooms” and their economic situations?



Costume sketches by Catherine Zuber for the Center Stage production of **Intimate Apparel**.

(continued)

## Supplementary Activities

### Intimate Apparel

By Lynn Nottage

5. Esther asks, “Is there something wrong with a woman alone?” In 1905 this was a radical thought, since women were expected to marry. Discuss how each of the women in the play chooses to accept or reject this idea. Since 1905, there have been significant changes in the legal status of women: a woman’s ability to own and inherit property, the right to vote, the right to choose birth control, the right to one’s own name, and access to formerly all-male institutions and activities. How do these changes reflect and influence the expectations women have for their lives today?
6. You have seen the play and are about to appear on a radio talk show to review it. In the course of your review, you must make clear to the listening audience why this statement is true: “The fabric functions as a character in the play.” Be sure to include a description of the set, costumes, names of fabrics, and garments mentioned in the play, as well as the use of color, lighting, and sound. *Outcome IV: Aesthetic Criticism, Expectation C: Evaluate theatrical performances and productions using a variety of aesthetic criteria, #1: Evaluate and describe verbally the primary scenic, auditory, and other physical characteristics of selected theatrical performances.*
7. Compare the way in which the smoking jacket becomes the “smoking gun,” that reveals George’s extramarital activities in the same way Desdemona’s handkerchief is used by Iago to confirm her infidelity to **Othello**. How are the two different? *Outcome II: Historical, Cultural, and Social Context, Expectation C: Read, perform, and attend selected performances, #2: Compare the treatment of similar themes in drama from various cultures and historical periods.*

(continued)

## Supplementary Activities

### Intimate Apparel

By Lynn Nottage

8. The exchange of letters transforms the lives of two people in **Intimate Apparel**. A similar epistolary relationship drives the action of Edmond Rostand's **Cyrano de Bergerac**. The bogus letter in **Twelfth Night** turns Malvolio's world (and fashion sense) upside down. A.R. Gurney's **Love Letters** is simply the correspondence the two characters have written to each other over a lifetime. In the first two plays, the letters are written by a ghostwriter on behalf of someone else. After reading these plays, further explore letter writing as a theatrical convention by devising an epistolary play/scene. What advantages does this form provide? What are its inherent limitations? *Outcome IV: Aesthetic Criticism, C: Evaluate theatrical performances and productions using a variety of aesthetic criteria, #4: Evaluate performances and productions by comparing them to similar or exemplary models.*
9. After seeing the play, devise a sequel in which Esther, Mayme, and Mrs. Dickson open Esther's dream beauty parlor. Include details derived from historical research about hair treatments (i.e. straightening, perming, and coloring) to provide realistic details to create the world of the play. Present the results to the class. *Essential Learner Outcomes for Fine Arts, Outcome III: Creative Expression and Production, # 2: Construct imaginative scripts and collaborate with actors to refine scripts so the stories and their meaning are conveyed.*
10. Half of *The Great Migration*, a monumental 36-painting epic by Jacob Lawrence, is owned by The Phillips Collection in Washington D.C. (However, the paintings are traveling for the next two years.) These paintings vividly portray the same period in history as the setting for **Intimate Apparel**: Esther has come to New York City from North Carolina as part of the Great Migration. Several of the paintings mirror George's experience in trying to find employment in New York City in 1905. The following website allows one to view the paintings in the order intended by Lawrence: [www.Columbia.edu/itc/history/odonnell/w1010/edit/migration/migration.html](http://www.Columbia.edu/itc/history/odonnell/w1010/edit/migration/migration.html). See painting # 1 in Part I, as well as, paintings #5 and #7 in Part IV. This website is extremely accessible and fast, the images are readily enlarged and in color. The powerful and elegant imagery of the paintings make wonderful starting points for improvised and written scenes.



*The First Wave of the Great Migration (1916-1919) part IV* by Jacob Lawrence. (The Phillips Collection)

"Many Northern workers were angry because they had to compete with the migrants for housing and jobs. There were riots." —Jacob Lawrence



*The Migration Series Panel No.1*, by Jacob Lawrence. (The Phillips Collection)

"During World War I, there was a great migration north by southern African Americans"—Jacob Lawrence