



Wolfe, George C. (b. 1954)

by Linda Rapp

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Director, writer, and producer George C. Wolfe has had a distinguished career in the theater. Among the numerous awards and prizes that he has garnered are two Tony Awards.

In addition to directing such important works as Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Wolfe has also written a number of plays and musicals, several of which have had successful runs on Broadway.

Since 1993, he has been the producer and artistic director of the New York Shakespeare Festival and the Joseph Papp Public Theater, positions that give him one of the most influential voices in American theater.

Origins in Kentucky

Wolfe was born on September 23, 1954 in Frankfort, Kentucky, a segregated city at the time. He recalls the "very tight black community" in which he grew up as nurturing. As a child, he says, he "was told that [he] was magical . . . special and extraordinary," and he "grew up with no concept of racial inferiority."

He did, however, encounter racism. He experienced what he called a "defining event" when, at age seven, he could not get into Frankfort's Capitol Theater to see the animated Disney film *101 Dalmations* because he was black.

He used his altogether justified outrage in a positive manner. He determined to strive for excellence in everything he did so that he could get "into any place [he] wanted to get into." He adds that "it was also a given that once I got into the room, I was supposed to open the windows and doors and let in other people."

As a young child Wolfe attended the private all-black school where his mother taught and later was principal. Eventually, when the family moved and Wolfe began going to an integrated school, he felt rather isolated until he started directing plays in high school.

Wolfe says that he was "obsessed with theater." Beginning at an early age, he wrote his own plays. At twelve he saw his first Broadway shows, including a particularly memorable production of Jerry Herman's *Hello, Dolly!* starring Pearl Bailey.

After high school, Wolfe enrolled at historically-black Kentucky State University, the alma mater of his parents, Costello and Anna Lindsey Wolfe. Following his first year, he transferred to Pomona College in California, where he studied theater.

The Move to California

In 1975 Wolfe's play *Up for Grabs* was performed at Pomona College, and was chosen as the Pacific Southern Regional winner at the American College Theater Festival (ACTF). The following year, the college staged his *Block Party*, which earned Wolfe a second ACTF award.

After his graduation in 1976, Wolfe remained in California, teaching at the Inner City Cultural Center in Los Angeles, where his plays *Tribal Rites* and *Back Alley Tales* were staged in the 1978-1979 season.

Wolfe's experience in Los Angeles taught him the uses of theater as a political and social force. It also brought him into contact with communities that he had not encountered back in Frankfurt--Hispanics, Asians, and gays. In this setting, he began coming out publicly.

The Move to New York

Wolfe achieved something of a cult following in Los Angeles, but in 1979 he moved to New York, where he taught at City College and the Richard Allen Center for Cultural Art while studying at New York University, from which he received a master's degree in dramatic writing in 1983.

Wolfe's musical *Paradise*, produced off-Broadway in 1985, turned out to be a critical failure, but his next play, *The Colored Museum*, won the admiration of Joseph Papp, the director of the New York Shakespeare Festival, who included it in the program at the festival's Public Theater in 1986.

One of the play's eleven vignettes, "The Gospel According to Miss Roj," features a feisty drag queen character, a fierce black snap queen who rages against exploitation and indifference.

The satirical *Colored Museum* was not universally hailed. Some African Americans viewed the play as anti-black. It was a success with the critics, however, and Wolfe won the Dramatists' Guild's Elizabeth Hull-Kate Warriner Award for the best play dealing with a controversial social, political or religious topic.

Three years later, Wolfe received critical acclaim for his play *Spunk*, an adaptation of three stories by Zora Neale Hurston. He also won an Obie as best director of an off-Broadway production.

Papp selected Wolfe, clearly a rising star in the theater world, to be a resident director at the Public Theater in early 1990. Wolfe's play *Blackout* was included among the theater's offerings in the next season.

Success on Broadway

At the same time that he was directing at the Public Theater, Wolfe, renowned for his seemingly boundless energy, was bringing to fruition a project on which he had been working for four years, a musical about the life of jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton.

Jelly's Last Jam opened in Los Angeles in 1991, and the next year moved to Broadway, where it garnered eleven Tony nominations, including best book of a musical and best director.

Up to this point Wolfe had directed plays with mostly African-American characters and themes. This changed in 1993, when Tony Kushner asked him to direct the Broadway production of his much-acclaimed AIDS drama, *Angels in America: The Millennium Approaches*.

When Wolfe's direction--which *New York Times* critic Frank Rich described as being of "crystalline lucidity"--earned him a Tony, he became the first person of color to win the award for directing a "white" play.

The production earned three other Tony Awards, five Drama Desk Awards--including one for Wolfe as best director--and the New York Drama Critics Award. Wolfe went on to direct the second part of *Angels*, *Perestroika*, the following year.

Artistic Director and Producer

Meanwhile, Wolfe had taken on a new and daunting task as artistic director and producer of the New York Shakespeare Festival and the Joseph Papp Public Theater.

Following the death of its founder, Papp, in 1991, the institution was administered by artistic director JoAnne Akalaitis and producing director Jason Steven Cohen. Dissension was rife within the organization, however, particularly with regard to the work of Akalaitis. In 1993, the board of directors decided to relieve her of her duties and give the artistic direction role to Wolfe, who would also serve as producer, thus making him the principal administrator of the enterprise.

Wolfe's mission was two-fold: he was responsible for the budget and organizational structure and also for the artistic vision of the theater.

Wolfe was able to increase the theater's endowment considerably and to balance its budget. In the wake of the economic downturn and the events of September 11, 2001, funding has fallen off, but Wolfe remains optimistic about the institution's future.

As artistic director, Wolfe wanted to "create a theater that looks, feels and smells like America." Accordingly, he has sought to reach beyond the Public Theater's traditional clientele group--"uptown white"--and attract black, Asian, and Hispanic spectators as well.

Commitment to Diversity

Early on, he introduced a community affairs department to attract new theater-goers, including inner-city children, to the Public. In the effort to promote such diversity, Wolfe chose plays such as Oliver Mayer's *Blade to the Heat*, about black and Latino fighters and a homophobic murder, and Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own*, about four gay men, two of them Chinese.

Wolfe speaks of hoping to create positive "cultural collisions" among members of the audience at the Public by offering plays that will appeal to different segments of society.

Wolfe's own musical *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk* was presented at the Public, and then moved to Broadway, where it earned Wolfe his second Tony Award in 1996. The Public Theater then sponsored a national tour for the play. Taking a show on the road was a new and controversial move for the organization, but the gamble paid off when the production was well-received around the country.

In the late 1990s Wolfe faced a serious health problem caused by kidney failure. After a year on dialysis, he had an organ transplant. His older brother, William Wolfe, was the donor. With characteristic energy, Wolfe kept working throughout the health crisis, citing the ethic instilled in him by his family: "keep delivering."

Recent Projects

Among Wolfe's recent projects have been three musicals, *The Wild Party*, *Harlem Song*, and *Caroline, or Change*, and an acclaimed drama.

The Wild Party is based on a 1928 poem by Joseph Moncure March. Wolfe wrote the book for the musical in collaboration with Michael John LaChiusa, who also provided the music and lyrics.

The piece, which "evoke[s] the racial, sexual, and intellectual ferment of New York in the 1920s," features "a parade of bizarre characters," including a "sexually ambitious" vaudeville actress, an "ambisexual" playboy, a lesbian stripper, and two gay, black, incestuous songwriter brothers.

Although described by one reviewer as "easily the most fascinating Broadway show of the year," *The Wild Party* received mixed reviews and closed after a short run.

Harlem Song--"a combination Broadway-style musical and Harlem history lesson"--is a multi-media show featuring photographs and newsreel footage from the 1930s through the 1960s as well as musical numbers from the various periods. Wolfe wrote the piece for the reopening of the refurbished Apollo Theater in 2002.

In 2003, Wolfe directed the acclaimed and unusual musical *Caroline, or Change* by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori. Set in Civil Rights-era Louisiana, the story focuses on a Black maid who works for a Jewish family at a time of profound social change. In May 2004, the musical moved to Broadway, where it ran for four months.

Wolfe also recently has directed Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*, which won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The play, about two black brothers, has been widely praised for its insights into family dynamics and competitiveness. After its run at the Public, it was moved to Broadway.

"Democratic Fascist"

As a director, Wolfe calls himself "the most democratic fascist you'll ever meet," listening to all opinions before handing down a final decision--one consistent with his own vision of a project.

Joe Mantello, directed by Wolfe in *Angels* and himself the director of Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, echoes this assessment, calling Wolfe "a patient tyrant...[who] sees very clearly what he wants, and you end up there--but feeling that you've done it all on your own." *Blade* playwright Oliver Mayer says that Wolfe encouraged him "to push the envelope, to be brave."

Wolfe is widely admired for his exuberance and energy, his strong work ethic, and his abiding commitment to bringing cultural diversity to the stage and a culturally diverse audience to the theater.

After more than a decade of success at the helm of the Public Theater, Wolfe announced in late 2004 that he would be leaving the post to pursue opportunities in film direction. His first project was *Lackawanna Blues*, a screen adaptation of Ruben Santiago-Hudson's semi-autobiographical play.

The movie was enthusiastically received at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2005 prior to being broadcast on HBO in February. Robert Bianco of *USA Today* called *Lackawanna Blues* "an auspicious film directing debut" for Wolfe, adding that "in his hands what was on stage a man telling stories is now a storybook come to life."

Wolfe seems poised for further success in this new phase of his career.

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