

## STUDY GUIDE

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### THE PLAY

As the Panama Limited train chugs from Chicago to New Orleans, the passengers and employees anticipate great Pullman service and jiving blues music.

**Cephas** is the third generation of proud Sykes men who have worked all their lives as Pullman porters. Working through discrimination and the Great Depression, his grandfather, **Monroe**, and his father, **Sylvester**, have made enough money to send Cephas to college to become a doctor. This summer though Cephas wants to know what it is to be a "working man."

The entire nation is anxiously waiting for the boxing match pitting African-American Heavyweight hero, Joe Louis, against James Braddock. While the "Brown Bomber" fights in the ring, Cephas fights to make his own choices. Can Cephas uphold the Sykes pride and still be his own person? Or will he end up living a life full of the blues that his family has always sung? ●

## PULLMAN PORTER BLUES

Now playing in the Kreeger

November 23rd, 2012 – January 6th, 2013

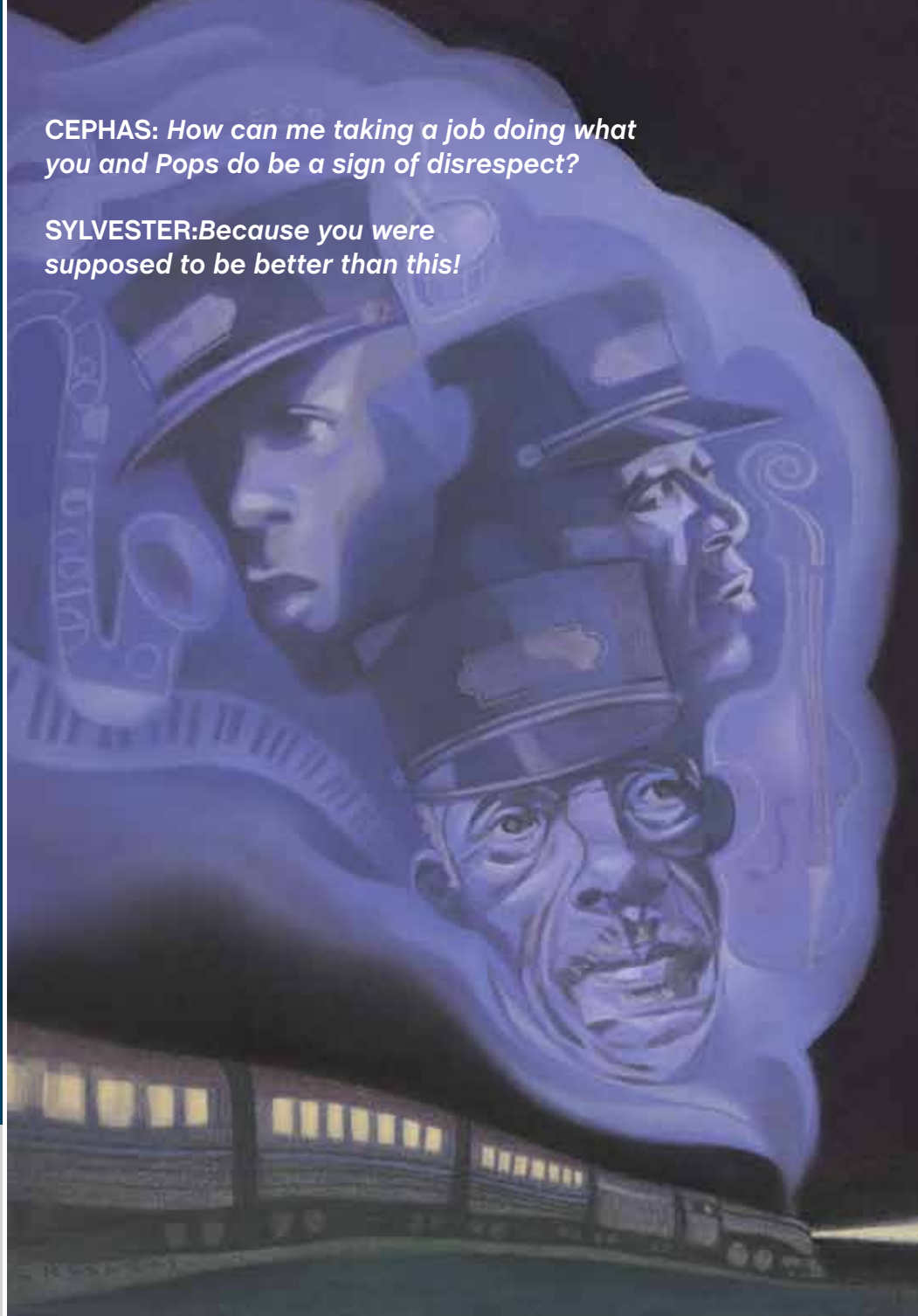
written by Cheryl L. West

directed by Lisa Peterson

a co-production with Seattle Repertory Theatre

**CEPHAS:** *How can me taking a job doing what you and Pops do be a sign of disrespect?*

**SYLVESTER:** *Because you were supposed to be better than this!*



Major support for this program is provided by the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation.

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## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT:



Cheryl L. West

*“That’s what’s beautiful and unique about families, and tragic: people are trying to give you the love that they have, but they don’t always give you what you need.”*

A Seattle-based playwright, Cheryl L. West grew up in Markham, a suburb of Chicago. She felt overshadowed by her talented brother. When West asked her mom what talents she had, she responded, “You’re good with people.”

So West studied social work and journalism in college, receiving several degrees. It wasn’t until her boyfriend read her poetry when they were in their mid-20s that she started writing for theater. It was clear she had found her true passion.

Common subjects for West are families – traditional or not, African-American culture and history, and of course, blues music. She won a National Endowment for the Arts Playwriting Award in 1995-96. Her play, *Before It Hits Home*, won the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize in 1990, and is being adapted into a movie. *Holiday Heart*, a controversial play about AIDS, drug addiction, transexuality and family, also became a movie. Other works include *Jar the Floor*, *Puddin’ n’ Pete*, *Play On!*, *Birdie Blue*, and *Addy: An American Girl Story*.

# BUILDING A BROTHERHOOD



Pullman porters didn’t make much money. Although George Pullman required 400 hours a month from his employees (which meant sometimes working for 20 hours straight), the average pay of a Pullman porter in 1926 was \$810 a year. This would be about \$7,500 a year today. Porters made most of their income from tips – but still had to pay for their meals, uniforms and upkeep.

By 1925, many Pullman porters had enough. They formed The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) the first African-American workers union to sign a collective bargaining agreement with a major US corporation. A. Phillip Randolph led the

fight for better pay, working conditions and respect for workers. The BSCP won in 1937, the year the play takes place.

BSCP fueled the Civil Rights Movement. E.D. Nixon, who led a local BSCP chapter, helped start the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Pullman porters circulated the *Chicago Defender*, an African-American newspaper, after it was banned. ●

**a! ACTIVITY:** Choose a current group of workers which you feel needs more rights. Discuss what rights its workers should have and why. Make a speech to the class demanding these rights with supporting evidence.

Through the work of the BSCP, Pullman porter jobs became well-respected and desirable. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and Malcolm X were once porters.

## BOOKER T. WASHINGTON VS. W.E.B. DUBOIS— GREAT MINDS IN DISAGREEMENT

Cheryl West’s characters of Monroe and Sylvester disagree on how to best better their position in society. Their conflict echoes a bigger conflict in history between two famous black men: W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington.



**Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)** was an educator, reformer, and the most influential black leader of his time.

He believed that African Americans should accept discrimination for the time being and, instead, elevate themselves by working hard to earn the respect of whites in society. Then they would be accepted as citizens.



**W.E.B. DuBois (1858-1963)**, an intellectual, political thinker and scholar who was also influential in the black community, disagreed. He thought that accepting discrimination at all was a problem.

He wanted immediate civil action and helped found the **NAACP**. He thought that African Americans would be saved by their “exceptional men” – what he called the “Talented Tenth.” These men were college educated (like Sylvester wants Cephas to be) and could advance their race.

**NAACP** – the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

**a! ACTIVITY:** As a class debate the positions taken by Washington and DuBois. Which better served African Americans in their quest for respect and equality? Which man’s methods do you see in use today?

# PULLMAN SLEEPING CAR PORTERS

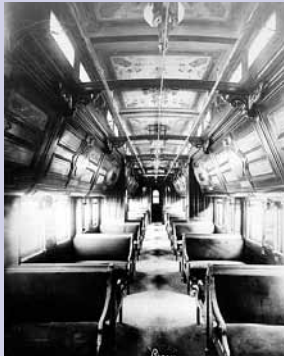


## Job Expectations:

The company came to favor young black men of about 25, with at least five years of work experience, hoping that they would settle into a long career. Training was rigorous – new hires learned the basic mechanical aspects of a Pullman car as well as service standards covering everything from berth (bed) preparation to the proper pouring of a beverage. Their performances were reviewed throughout their careers.

## Description:

Sleeping car porters were often in charge of a car of 15-20 passengers. The job was a cross between a bellhop, valet, housekeeper, mechanic, baby sitter



and security guard. A Pullman porter was expected to perform any task asked of him by a passenger, especially if he wanted a good tip.

Any missing items or mistakes came out of his pay. All the while he must remain an “ambassador of good will” for the Pullman Company.

## Conductors:

Conductors (the supervisors) were usually white males and responsible for record keeping and collecting and selling tickets. In other railroad companies, a conductor’s main responsibilities were focusing on the safe and efficient movement of the train. A Pullman conductor’s

main job was ensuring that all Pullman service was perfect and all passengers were happy. ●

“My first train ride at the age of five was both exhilarating and fascinating. I remember being utterly enamored with the train’s compulsively smiling Pullman porters. With the naiveté of the innocent, I remember concluding that the porters must smile all the time because they were so happy to ride the train all day, every day. Little did I know that the effusive smiling was one of many rules and that, in order to receive full pay, the ever-smiling Porters were required to work 400 hours per month or 11,000 miles—whichever occurred first—sometimes standing 20 hours straight while being humiliated similarly as they were on a slave plantation.”

—Cheryl West, playwright



**ACTIVITY:** Sometimes we don’t fully understand what we see when we’re young.

Think of something you understand better about the world now that you are not seeing through a child’s eyes.

# JOE LOUIS AND THE FIGHT OF 1937

*“Mr. Louis’ record speaks for itself. He won’t need the ‘speed of the jungle’ nor ‘the killer instinct.’ He will beat him with his mind, target his weakness.*

*That’s how you always beat an inferior opponent, with your mind.” – Sylvester*

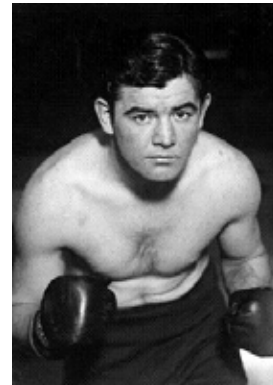
## Joe Louis (The Brown Bomber)

was born May 13, 1914 near Lafayette, Alabama. As a child, he had a speech impediment and didn’t speak much until he was about six years old. In 1926, after a scare from the Ku Klux Klan, his family moved to Detroit with many other African Americans in what was called “The Great Migration.” There are rumors that Louis’s mother wanted him to play violin. When he began boxing at 17, he hid his boxing gloves in his violin case to keep his mother from knowing. He quickly became a star not only in the African-American community, but in the worldwide boxing community. He was 23 when he went up for the Worldwide Championship Title, one of the youngest contenders ever.

## THE CONTENDERS:



# JOE LOUIS



# JAMES BRADDOCK

## James Braddock (Cinderella Man)

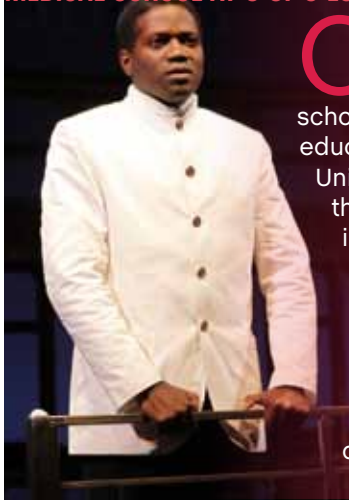
was born June 7th, 1905 to an Irish-Catholic family in Hell’s Kitchen in New York City. He became a professional fighter at age 21, and his career was on the rise until he lost the light heavyweight championship match in 1929. He struggled to put food on the table for his wife and three children. In 1934, his luck changed and “Jimmy” started winning. Always an underdog, he became the new heavyweight champion of the world in 1935’s Madison Square Garden fight against Max Baer. Braddock was thought to be in the prime of his career when he fought Joe Louis to defend his world title. Few knew he was on medication for arthritis. The medication numbed him and limited him from lifting his left arm above his head during the fight.

## BLUES IN THE 1930S



Blues is not just a style of music – it's a mentality; one that fit right in during the tumultuous 1930s. Many southern musicians joined the large migration of African-Americans headed north to look for work. With this, the blues scene changed drastically. The blues started to sound less honky-tonk and southern and used more jazz influences – a more urban sound often tied to Chicago's South Side. It was more sophisticated, but it was still the blues. Bands became bigger than the piano-guitar combinations of the 20s. Singers used four- or five-piece bands (compared to Big Mama Thornton who often sang with just a piano). The Chicago blues men of the late 1930s that are featured in the play were probably more popular than their predecessors. ●

## MEDICAL SCHOOL AT U OF C ESTABLISHED IN 1927.



Cephas Sykes, as the first generation from his family to go to college, is under a lot of pressure when he follows his father's dreams and goes to medical school at the University of Chicago. Most African-American education was segregated if it existed at all, but the University of Chicago was one of the few universities in the US that enrolled African Americans. By 1943, it had issued at least 45 PhDs to African Americans – more than any other university in the US. However, African Americans were a tiny minority at the school and were often excluded by their peers. Many African Americans studying at U of C in the early 1900s took long leaves of absence. Many completed coursework during the summer when there were fewer people around and discrimination would impact their studies less. ●

**THREE BIG QUESTIONS**

**ONE** What responsibilities do we have to the community we come from and what responsibilities do our communities have to us?

**TWO** How do people change their circumstances?

**THREE** Where do expectations come from and how are they received and given?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### BOOKS

*The Rough Guide to The Blues* by Nigel Williamson, 2007.  
*Modern Travel by Pullman: A Century of Service* by Joe Welsch, MBI Publishing Company, 2004.

### ON THE WEB

The Great Fight: Jim Braddock vs. Joe Louis all on YouTube:  
Part 1: <http://tinyurl.com/8o8h7ky>  
Part 2: <http://tinyurl.com/8j6s4pr>  
Integrating the Life of the Mind – African Americans at the University of Chicago 1870-1940: <http://tinyurl.com/8c8hysb>  
NPR Morning Edition September 16, 2010: U.S. Pullman Porters Helped Build Black Middle Class  
Sound Clip: <http://tinyurl.com/8gdpvuq>  
Smithsonian Folkways: Blues – Blues music available for listening with side notes: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/search/genre/blues>

## Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 30 minutes early.
  - Visit the restroom before the show starts.
  - Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.
  - Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.
  - Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!
  - Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum.
  - Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.
  - Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.
  - Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.
  - Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.
  - Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.
- Enjoy the show!**



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