

# Guess Who's coming to Dinner

Adapted by Todd Kreidler

Based on the Screenplay by William Rose

Directed by Skip Greer

**Part of the ESL 2016-2017 Wilson Stage Series**

A Co-Production with Indiana Repertory Theatre

**February 14 - March 12, 2017**

Joanna surprises her liberal, white parents when she brings home John, her African-American fiancé, to meet them. However, she shocks even John by inviting his parents to dinner. A clash of generations and races ensues when both sets of parents must confront their own unexpected reactions and concerns for their children as their long-held beliefs are put to the test. This funny and poignant stage adaptation offers a fresh interpretation of the beloved Academy Award-winning film.



## **Todd Kreidler on re-writing Guess Who's Coming to Dinner for the stage**

December 11, 2013 by [Christopher Henley](#) [3 Comments](#)

"I'm discovering something new." Todd Kreidler was referring to his temporary DC digs. He had just arrived and was exploring them during our phone interview. Earlier in the week, he had opened a show in New York. Then it was out to Chicago for Thanksgiving with his family. On this day after Thanksgiving, he had gone straight from the airport into a rehearsal and was just settling in. Although his remark applied to his housing, it might just as easily have applied to his reason for being in DC. He is here for Arena Stage's production of his stage adaptation of the 1967 film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

Turning the screenplay (by William Rose) of a film he refers to as "iconic" into a play was not Kreidler's idea. In fact, he was at first "skeptical." The value of a stage adaptation was "something I didn't see immediately." The idea to do it came from Kenny Leon, Artistic Director of [True Colors Theatre Company](#) in Atlanta. Both Leon and Kreidler had worked with August Wilson during the last years of Wilson's life, and Leon subsequently invited Kreidler to be Associate Artistic Director at True Colors. Now, five years after Kreidler's first draft, a year and change after a production at True Colors, and after ("long story") the burst of the housing bubble scuttled potential commercial productions, Kreidler has become convinced. This new production plays through Jan. 5 on the Fichandler Stage.

Kreidler talked about how, once he was pushed into examining the idea, he came to embrace the opportunity to take a rarefied cultural artifact, about which many who know it have "strong opinions" in both directions, and discover the ways in which its sensibility and voice speak to us today. This involves a delicate balancing act, preserving the film's "iconic moments," which some in the audience will arrive expecting, while making a work which is "very much of 1967" relevant to a 2013 audience.

The first hurdle was formal: film is one thing, “stage is a whole different kind of animal.” Kreidler said it was relatively easy to conflate the action so that it occurs in a single setting. Also, the plot involves an ultimatum that propels the action, a “ticking clock”; it’s “hard for it to drag with that.”

For anyone too young to remember the movie, or familiar only with its title, which has attained wide usage as code for almost any big and unexpected surprise, it can be capsulized pretty easily. A young woman stuns her upper middle class, liberal white parents by bringing home an African-American fiancé. And, speaking of iconic, the parents were played by Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn, not only huge Hollywood stars on their own, but together one of the most enduring and successful of romantic screen teams. This was their ninth picture together over a twenty-five year period. Neither had made a film for about five years, mostly due to Tracy’s deteriorating health and Hepburn’s care-giving. (The two, though not married to each other, became off-screen as well as on-screen partners.) The fiancé was played by Sidney Poitier, an icon in his own right, who had been breaking barriers for years, becoming, four years earlier, the first African-American actor to win the Best Actor Oscar.

Race was as important a part of the cultural conversation of the time as it was of the political conversation. The Oscar ceremony that year was dominated by another film starring Poitier, *In the Heat of the Night*, which had race central to its concerns. In addition to Best Picture and Best Director, that film’s other star, Rod Steiger, won Best Actor over Tracy (a previous two-time winner who, posthumously, had been nominated again; Hepburn did win Best Actress, the second of her four wins). Steiger, accepting the award mere days after the assassination of Dr. King, memorably addressed Poitier directly and quoted the anthem of the civil rights movement: “We shall overcome.”

The film was directed by Stanley Kramer (*The Defiant Ones*, *Inherit the Wind*, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, *On the Beach*), known for earnest, socially conscious films that struck his admirers as daring and important and his detractors as sanctimonious. The film builds to the climax during which Tracy, as the voice of paternal wisdom, gives his blessing to his daughter’s interracial marriage, as Hepburn looks on with adoring, as well as wise, support. Many people who haven’t seen the entire film will have seen that speech, or excerpts from it. As Tracy speaks of his devotion to his wife, a public aware of the Tracy/Hepburn off-screen relationship (a Catholic, Tracy never divorced his wife) listened to the speech through that prism and the scene was assured a special place in Hollywood history.

Okay. In 2013, without those mega-stars in those roles, and after so much in our society has changed while so much is still unresolved and frequently charged, how is that scene going to play? Will it seem like a relic of a past era? Will the paternalism (sexual as well as racial) evident in the climax sound as tin-eared now as do recent tweets presuming the end of racism? So, Todd, how do you deal with that?

The ending does change, Kreidler told me. But the speech is definitely there. “They’ll hang you if you touch the speech!” Well, he hedged, the “spirit” of the speech is there. He has preserved “the DNA of the story.” He told me that he didn’t approach the project with a sense of “what can I bring from the outside” but rather that he wanted to “work within the material” and engage it in the “spirit of discussion.”

At this point in our conversation, Kreidler held his cards closely. He wanted to avoid “spoilers.” However, he let me know that there’s a “new button” to the show on stage; the Tracy character is not “the last person to come to the table.” He talks about the sense at the end of the film: “We’ve solved racism!” (Gee, thanks, Spence and Kate.) Reacting to that sense, though, Kreidler said there had been a voice missing, there’s a conversation we still need to have: “Coming through the door is someone else.” (Hmm. I’m intrigued!) As he stressed that the issues raised “provoke a conversation we still need to have,” he implied that the stage play has swapped out a pat resolution and taken the opportunity to “push back” at the film’s sense of “comfort and ease,” to opt for something “a little more complicated,” for a resolution that is more “open-ended.”

If that “button” is closely held in order to avoid spoilers, Kreidler is more forthcoming about other tinkering. Telling me that he looked at the film early on in the process of adapting the screenplay, but not since, he made distinctions between the film and the new play. Regarding the “Father Knows Best” aspect of the film, he assured me that the “husband and wife thing has been worked.” He talked about “opening up” scenes between the fiancé and his parents. (As those who have seen the film will remember, the fiancé is not only drop dead gorgeous Mr. Poitier, but a professional, a doctor, the kind of profession that would make the archetypal Jewish Mother ecstatic.) He talked also about how the single setting of the play affects the discussions within the fiancé’s family, now that they occur in the home of the white family. And he pointed out that the relationship between the young couple in the film was “never physicalized.” Whereas a 60s audience could deal with the concept of an interracial relationship more easily

than with an actual expression of affection between the couple, that kind of hypersensitivity need not apply to an audience at Arena in 2013.

Most interestingly, Kreidler has changed what he calls the “prince and princess” aspect of the film script, which involves the love-at-first-sight, whirlwind dimension of the key relationship, where the young couple has only known each other for ten days. So, on stage, the two have had a much longer platonic relationship that evolved during the ten days prior to the action of the play into a romantic relationship.

Similarly, he addressed the “turnaround” of the Doctor’s initially skeptical Mother. One of the twists in the film is that the prospective African-American in-laws are more strongly against the mixed marriage than are the white family. Kreidler asked, “What does she see [that changes her attitude] that we don’t see in the film?”

Apparently, the run in Atlanta “revived interest” in this stage adaptation, “which is why we are here at Arena.” Kenny Leon, who directed in Atlanta, was slated to direct the Arena production. When his schedule precluded his involvement, the baton was passed to David Esbjornson. Though it is “great to have the long histories” he shares with Leon, Kreidler tempered his disappointment that Leon isn’t involved with excitement at having a “whole different sensibility” applied to the piece. Esbjornson is fresh, excited, and brings “an incredible sensitivity to the text.” That said, Kreidler admitted that it’s been “more work than I intended.”

The Poitier role is played at Arena by the television star Malcolm-Jamal Warner, who a generation grew up with as Theo on *The Cosby Show*. In Atlanta, Warner’s fellow *Cosby Show* alum Phylicia Rashad was in the cast. Rashad, despite a history of performances at Arena Stage, hasn’t travelled North for the Arena run.

However, I was able to point out another Cosby connection. After the run of *I, Spy*, but before the runaway success of *The Cosby Show* in the 80s, Cosby starred in a less successful sitcom. Called *The Bill Cosby Show*, it ran from 1969-71. I am old enough to have been a fan of that series and remember that his Mother was played by the late Beah Richards. (She was the second of two actresses playing Cosby’s Mother on that series, the first being Lillian Randolph.) It was Ms. Richards who played Poitier’s Mother in the film of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. A Google search I did to confirm my memory reminded me of the additional fact that Ms. Richards was also nominated for an Oscar for the film. (Ms. Richards lost to Estelle Parsons who has just been, funnily enough, on stage at Arena.)

“We’ve had a circle of Cosby people!” Kreidler remarked upon hearing of this connection, before the subject changed to his relationship with August Wilson, and the play from Wilson’s writings that he just opened in New York.

But, that’s another story...

## **By Patti Hartigan** GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 04, 2014

When playwright Todd Kreidler was asked to write a stage adaptation of the iconic 1967 film “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner,” he was skeptical at first. “The first question I had was, ‘Why?’ ” he recalls. “I had two reservations. The first was just the prospect of bringing a film to the stage. The second was that it was of a time and place, and I wondered what resonance it has today.”

But actor Malcolm-Jamal Warner had no such qualms. He stars in the Huntington Theatre Company production, which begins previews Friday and runs through Oct. 5. “When I got the call, it was one of those ‘Let me think about it’ moments, but not really,” he says with a grin. “I knew I wanted to do it. One, it is ‘Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.’ Two, it is Sidney Poitier’s role, and I grew up with Sidney Poitier as an inspiration. He’s been a pioneer.”

In the film, a young white woman brings home an accomplished African-American doctor and informs her mother and father that she intends to marry him. Chaos ensues as her liberal parents grapple with the concept of interracial marriage. It was a vehicle for Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy (who died just days after filming ended). Poitier, who in 1964 became the first African-American to win an Academy Award for best actor, played the doctor. The film was radical in its time, simply because it raised the issue of mixed-race

marriage. It opened just six months after the US Supreme Court, in its landmark *Loving v. Virginia* decision, ruled that anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional. The film was still in theaters when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968.

The play is still set in 1967, yet Warner is convinced that it remains relevant today. “We are not in a post-racial America,” he says, citing the recent shooting of an unarmed, college-bound black teenager in Ferguson, Mo. “It is important for young people to understand the journey and the progress that has been made. But that progress has been slow.”

Warner, 44, who was named after Malcolm X and jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal, is best known for playing Theo Huxtable in “*The Cosby Show*” from 1984 to 1992. He was raised by his mother and manager, Pamela Warner, but he spent summers with his father, a civil rights activist who schooled him in African-American history from a very young age. “As early as 6, 7, or 8 years old, my father made me read books like ‘Great American Negroes,’ and I had to write book reports for him on people like Marian Anderson and Malcolm X,” he recalls. “It was my summer vacation, and I didn’t want to, but as I got older, I realized none of the other kids knew who these people were.”

### *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*

Boston University Theater, 264 Huntington Ave., 617-266-0800.

Warner relates personally to many of the themes in the play. “My father used to tell me, ‘If you marry a white girl, I am not coming to your wedding,’ ” Warner recalls. “His position has since changed.”

He also understands that the character of Dr. John Prentice in the play needs to stop seeking his parents’ approval. “As an adult, I had to let go of my mother at some point,” he says. “We were so close and she had been my manager for so long. I hate the term, but I think it has something to do with the mama’s boy syndrome. Oh man, we had huge blowouts two or three times,” he says. The two remain very close — she’s still his manager (he calls her his “chief of staff”), and she still gives him notes when she sees him perform.

In the film, the Prentice character had to be as close to perfect as possible to be palatable for audiences of the era. His fiancée, Joanna, describes him as “the youngest, most important doctor in the world.” He travels all over the globe discovering cures for diseases in Africa. As a guest, he leaves money when he makes a long-distance phone call. He is polite and unflappable. But Kreidler’s adaptation roughens the edges of this paragon of perfection. “In the film, Dr. John Prentice is so cool and even-keeled that butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth,” Warner says. “We see that calmness dissipate as the play goes on.”

Kreidler says he maintained many of the film’s iconic moments, but added subtle plot elements that speak to our era. The play focuses more on the generational divide than the film did, and it adds more depth to the African-American characters, including an African-American maid who clearly runs the house, as well as the doctor’s parents.

This adaptation has been in the works for some time. In 2007, a commercial producer approached director Kenny Leon, artistic director of Atlanta’s True Colors Theatre, about bringing an adaptation to Broadway. He enlisted Kreidler, who was a protégé of the playwright August Wilson, to adapt the film’s script (which was written by William Rose). But then the economy tanked, and Kreidler moved on to other projects (which included “*Holler If Ya Hear Me*,” a musical about rapper Tupac Shakur that closed in July after a six-week run on Broadway). Two years ago, the pair dusted it off and mounted it at True Colors and then planned a 2013 production at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. There is talk of a Broadway production down the road.

Leon bowed out of the Arena production when he got an attractive film offer, and he asked director David Esbjornson to step in at the last minute. Esbjornson had his share of reservations. He asked Leon if it was

appropriate for a white man to direct the play. “I’m a straight, white guy who has directed plays that focus on race and gay culture,” he says. “There is a little bit of hubris in thinking I am the one to take this on, but I go back to the process. The rehearsal process becomes a microcosm for what should be happening in the world, which is an exchange of information.”

The play maintains an explosive scene in which a character describes the couple’s love affair as a “forbidden animal attraction.” Joanna’s mother, played by Julia Duffy, bites back. “If someone said that about my own daughter, I can’t even imagine what I would do,” Duffy says. “There are two things going on there: the unbridled racism and the aspersion on her child.” It is a turning point for her character in the play.

Duffy’s character, portrayed in the film by the indomitable Hepburn, has an iron backbone, but she still defers to her husband, which is a reflection of the era. There is a speech in which Joanna’s father, a self-made newspaper publisher, pontificates for pages, playing the omnipotent patriarch who controls all decisions. But Kreidler says he has tried to defuse the speech. “I bust open the idea that he somehow gets the last word,” the playwright says. “The way the play is set up, by the time he delivers that speech, nobody cares what he says. Everybody has already made up their mind.”

And for Duffy, the patriarchal speech resonates with her childhood. “This family and this woman remind me of, for lack of a better word, the Catholic women who surrounded me growing up in Minneapolis,” she says. “They were very strong and very influential in their families and communities, but they were comfortable deferring to their husbands. Those women had a lot to do with forming me, and I feel a kind of tribute to them in playing one of them.”

*‘Linguistically things have changed, and maybe our eyes have become more accustomed to racial difference, but I don’t think our minds and hearts are settled on it.’*

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Duffy, 63, is best known for playing spoiled, ditsy Stephanie on “Newhart,” the television sitcom that ran in the 1980s. “It doesn’t get in the way of what I do now,” she says. “I was an ingénue, a very immature person, and nobody is going to write a role like that for me at my age.”

Warner, on the other hand, is followed around by his “Cosby” fame. People still call him Theo Huxtable when he is out in public, but he takes it in stride. “They still call Ron Howard Opie [from television’s ‘The Andy Griffith Show’], and it hasn’t affected his career,” Warner says. “I knew going into ‘Cosby’ that it was something I would have to deal with my whole life. It goes with having a show that was so popular and ran for so long. I think it gives me a slight advantage because it leaves more room for the pleasant surprise when I am doing other work.” He is a performance poet, has released a CD of his music, and is currently enrolled in two online courses at Berklee College of Music.

And both he and Kreidler are adamant that the subject is still provocative. “The racial issues that the piece touches on are still very much alive and relevant today,” Kreidler says. “Linguistically things have changed, and maybe our eyes have become more accustomed to racial difference, but I don’t think our minds and hearts are settled on it.” He says that in today’s age, the play can be seen through the lens of any cultural difference, be it a Palestinian and an Israeli or a gay couple seeking their parents’ approval to marry. He recalls a conversation with a young African-American man in Atlanta, who confided that his Nigerian girlfriend had to hide his existence from her father, who insisted she could date men only from her native land.

And unlike the film, the play doesn’t end with the white patriarch’s speech. The doctor gets the last word, and the two families sit down at the table, where the real conversation is about to begin.