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study guide

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the play

When the LeVay family opens its house for a weekend visit, they end up airing more than the drapes.

The LeVay brothers have invited the women in their lives to meet their parents at their luxurious Martha's Vineyard summer home. Younger brother **Kent**, who has struggled to find direction and get along with his father, brings his fiancée **Taylor**, who studies insects. Taylor was raised in a lower-middle-class household by a single mother. Unaccustomed to privilege, she is uncomfortable in the LeVays' home, especially with **Cheryl**, who is filling in for her mother as the LeVays' maid. Eldest brother **Flip**, a successful plastic surgeon and womanizer, brings his new girlfriend, **Kimber**.

Tensions flare as race, class and family become prime conversation topics.

Then, when a phone call reveals a family secret, everything unravels. By the end of the weekend, lives have been turned upside-down and a family is left to reassemble the pieces.

Look baby, you just have to look at everyone like they're bugs under a microscope. Like ants. Figure out the patterns."

— Taylor, *Stick Fly*

A hand holding a glass jar containing a miniature scene of a house on a hill with a beach and chairs.

stick fly

Now Playing in Crystal City
January 1 – February 7
Written by Lydia R. Diamond
Directed by Kenny Leon
Presented in collaboration with
Huntington Theatre Company

meet the playwright

Lydia R. Diamond



"I am too hyper-self-conscious to have been a really good actor. And realizing that I was

not an actor after a decade of being an actor ... it was scary. It was also a relief." – Lynn R. Diamond in an interview with *The Boston Globe*

Born in Detroit, Diamond was raised by her mother, a musician and academic. Growing up, she and her mother moved around a lot, settling wherever her mother could find work as a college professor. After several years of piano and violin lessons, Diamond decided that music was not her calling, and in high school she joined the drama club.

In 1987 she enrolled in Chicago's Northwestern University, intent on becoming an actor. Then during her junior year, she happened upon a class in playwriting. It was the only class taught by an African-American professor that year, and she was inspired. After graduating, she started her own theater company in Chicago. She named it Another Small Black Theatre Company with *Good Things to Say* and *a Lot of Nerve Productions*. While she initially continued to act in plays, she eventually decided to focus solely on her writing.

Her plays include *Stage Black*, *The Gift Horse*, *Stick Fly*, *The Inside* and *Voyeurs de Venus*. In 2005, Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company premiered Diamond's dramatic adaptation of Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. It went on to win the Black Arts Alliance Image Award for Best New Play. Diamond's most recent project is a play based on former-slave Harriet Jacobs' 1858 book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Diamond has taught playwriting at Columbia College Chicago, DePaul University and Loyola University. She currently teaches at Boston University.



Martha's Vineyard

Martha's Vineyard is an island located off the coast of Massachusetts. A haven for artists and those seeking relaxation, Martha's Vineyard is well known for its beaches and farmlands as well as for its quaint inns, art galleries and boutiques.

The island, accessible only by boat or plane, is a popular vacation spot for the region's upper classes; in the summer, the population of the Vineyard jumps from 15,000 to 125,000. In 2009, President Barack Obama and his family vacationed there. ●

"You know, they'd hold the bag up to your face ... run the comb through your hair and if the comb can't get through, or if the bag's lighter than you, well ... clearly you're at the wrong party." – Dr. LeVay in *Stick Fly*

Brown Paper Bag Test

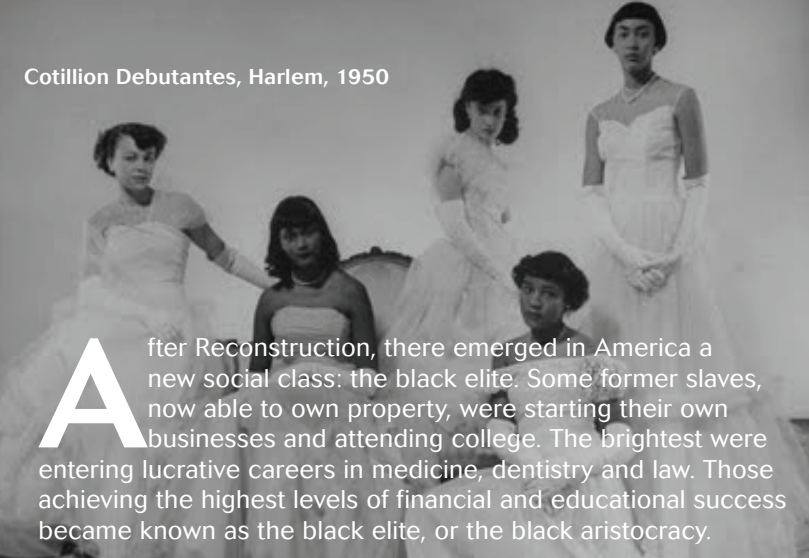
The brown-paper-bag test was a tool for discrimination within the black community. It was used to determine who could participate in certain activities, cotillions, fraternities and events. If your skin was darker than the bag, you were not welcome. The test echoes values from slavery, when the darker slaves worked in the fields and the lighter slaves worked in the house. ●

Cotillion Partner Dance, Toronto, Canada



The Black Elite

Cotillion Debutantes, Harlem, 1950



After Reconstruction, there emerged in America a new social class: the black elite. Some former slaves, now able to own property, were starting their own businesses and attending college. The brightest were entering lucrative careers in medicine, dentistry and law. Those achieving the highest levels of financial and educational success became known as the black elite, or the black aristocracy.



Still separate from whites, they started their own social and civic organizations, such as **Jack and Jill**, and hosted their own formal events.

In cities, one of the most popular social events was the cotillion ball – a formal dance dating back to 18th-century France. Generally sponsored by an elite social organization, cotillions were chances to introduce wealthy young women – called *debutantes* – to well-to-do society. In preparation for these balls, debutantes learned formal dances and proper etiquette, and they shopped for fancy dresses. Young men from other wealthy families served as their escorts and dance partners.

Cotillions are becoming less common, but they remain popular in many Southern cities, including Raleigh, Charleston, Memphis and Baltimore. ●

a! **Activity!** Look up pictures from cotillions, both past and present. Select your favorite image. Imagine you're a person in that photograph. Write a 1- to 2-page narrative describing your experience at the cotillion. What did you wear? Who was your dance partner? What drama unfolded?

Jack and Jill – an invitation-only social organization for elite black children and teenagers; well-known for hosting cotillions, trips abroad and social gatherings

White Privilege & Race

Taylor shares the story of an honors seminar she took in college, and, in telling it, unleashes her anger about racial inequality and white privilege.

Taylor expresses her frustration at taking a class on 20th-century feminism that does not include any authors of color. She also rails at “teaching cultural sensitivity 101 every time I turn around.”

Critical race theory often focuses on the disadvantages people experience because of their race. White privilege focuses on the advantages white people have by virtue of being white. Through the lens of white privilege, white people view their lives as normal, rather than advantaged.

In her paper “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh writes, “I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group.” As a white woman, she lists 50 examples of white privilege from her daily life. These include:

- “I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.”
- “I am never asked to speak for all people of my racial group.”
- “I have no difficulty finding neighborhoods where people approve of our household.”
- “I can choose blemish cover or bandages in ‘flesh’ and have them more or less match my skin.”

McIntosh points out that some aspects of white privilege, like feelings of safety, should be true for all people in a just society. Other aspects, like not having to pay attention to the art, issues or voices of other races, should be true for no one.

Some theorists argue that approaching race from the angle of white privilege involves all people – including whites – in changing the systems in America and making them more just and equal. ●

a! **Activity!** Race is not the only issue the LeVays and their guests discuss. When you watch the play, notice the moments when class intrudes. How do the characters feel about and react to class?

"Well, I got here, and this incredible house,
and all these beautiful black folks."

– Taylor, *Stick Fly*

Family Drama



Photo by Scott Suchman

S*tick Fly* is one in a long line of American family dramas. The formula is simple: the curtain rises on a seemingly typical day in a seemingly typical household; tensions between the characters slowly build; a family secret is revealed; turmoil ensues; and lives are left in shambles. Two of the most famous family dramas are *Long Day's Journey into Night* by Eugene O'Neill and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by Tennessee

Williams — both written by white men about affluent white families.

Conversely, the most well-known black family dramas, such as *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Piano Lesson*, focus on members of the working and middle classes. *Stick Fly*, however, depicts an upper-class African-American family. Why do you think *Stick Fly* is the exception rather than the rule? ●

a! **Activity!** Read *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry or *The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson. Compare the characters to those you encounter in *Stick Fly*. How are the families similar? How are they different?

Additional Resources

Books/Plays

Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class by Lawrence Otis Graham
Stage Black by Lydia R. Diamond
The History of Martha's Vineyard by Arthur R. Railton

On the Web

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack www.case.edu/president/aaction/UnpackingTheKnapsack.pdf
The African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard www.mvheritagetrail.org/
Social Influence: History of Interracial Relationships in America <http://personal.georgiasouthern.edu/~jkyser1/histrel.html>

On DVD

Closing the Achievement Gap, PBS DVD, 2004

Sub/Text

For links and research related to Arena Stage productions, compiled by Arena Stage **dramaturgs**, please visit **Sub/Text: Your Virtual Dramaturg** at www.arenastage.org/season/08-09/sub-text/.

dramaturg— a theater specialist who does research for productions and represents the intentions of the playwright

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!



1101 Sixth Street, SW
Washington, DC 20024
Phone: (202) 554-9066
Fax: (202) 488-4056

Community Engagement
Phone: (202) 234-5782
Fax: (202) 797-1043

Written by Sarah Yount
Edited by Rebecca Campana
illustration by Marc Burckhardt

Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.