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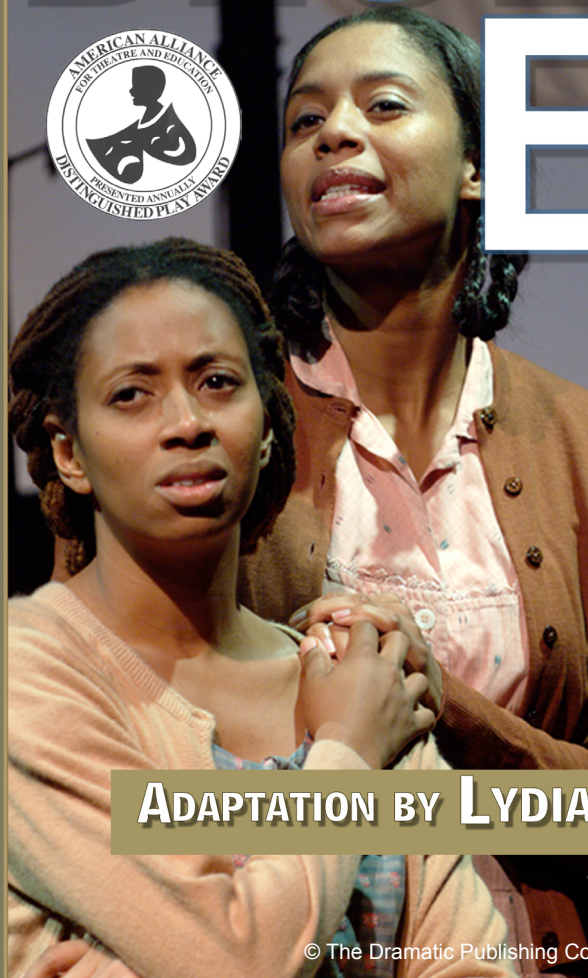
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TONI MORRISON

THE

BLUEST EYE



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THE BLUEST EYE

Drama. Adapted by Lydia R. Diamond. From the novel by Toni Morrison.

Cast: 2 to 3m., 6 to 10w. Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is about the tragic life of a young black girl in 1940s Ohio. Eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove wants nothing more than to be loved by her family and schoolmates. Instead, she faces constant ridicule and abuse. She blames her dark skin and prays for blue eyes, sure that love will follow. With rich language and bold vision, this powerful adaptation of an American classic explores the crippling toll that a legacy of racism has taken on a community, a family, and an innocent girl. "Diamond's sharp, wrenching, deeply humane adaptation ... helps us discover how an innocent like Pecola can be undone so thoroughly by a racist world that, if it sees her at all, does so only long enough to kick the pins out from under her." (*Chicago Reader*) "A spare and haunting play ... The playwright displays a delicate touch that seems right for the theme spiraling through the piece: that of the invidious influence of a white-majority nation not yet mature enough to validate beauty in all its forms." (*Washington Post*) *Flexible staging. Approximate running time: 90 minutes. Code: BC4.*

Front cover photo: Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago, Ill., featuring Libya Pugh and Monifa Days.
Photo: Michael Brosilow. Cover design: Jeanette Alig-Sergel

ISBN-10 1-58342-538-1
ISBN-13 978-1-58342-538-1



www.dramaticpublishing.com



Dramatic Publishing

311 Washington St.
Woodstock, IL 60098-3308
ph: 800-448-7469



Printed on Recycled Paper

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Toni Morrison's

THE BLUEST EYE

Adapted

by

LYDIA R. DIAMOND



Dramatic Publishing

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Printed in the United States of America
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For inquiries concerning all other rights, contact:
International Creative Management, Inc.,
825 Eighth Ave., 26th Floor, New York NY 10019
Phone: (212) 556-5636

ISBN: 978-1-58342-538-1

IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

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In addition, all producers of the play must include the following announcement on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“*The Bluest Eye* was commissioned and developed through the Steppenwolf for Young Adults and the New Plays Initiative by Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago, Illinois (Martha Lavey, Artistic Director, David Hawkanson, Executive Director), where it received its world premiere in February 2005.”

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

I am so pleased to have played a part in bringing Toni Morrison's exquisitely rendered novel to audiences in a new way and will always be appreciative that she agreed to let it have this new life. The process of adapting this piece has been challenging and rewarding. The journey has been a playwright's dream, an initial production in a safe and nurturing environment with brilliant theater artists followed by more readings and productions with generous, talented and smart collaborators. I cannot begin to thank everyone who has helped shape this piece, so I will limit myself to the people who touched it first: the Steppenwolf Theatre Company; Lenora Inez Brown, the play's first dramaturge; Hallie Gordon, the amazing director of its two productions at Steppenwolf and then at The New Vic in New York; David Muse, with whom I got to workshop the piece in between Steppenwolf productions and who eventually directed a thoughtful and elegant production at Theatre Alliance in Washington, D.C., and finally, two other illuminating productions—Playmakers Rep in North Carolina and Plowshares Theatre Company in Detroit.

I'd like to share a couple of lessons I've learned along the way. Actors and directors can easily get pulled into a maddening process of trying to separate the "kid" voices from the "mature narration" handled by Claudia and Frieda. It's an understandable dilemma, as so many narrative passages are said with a hindsight and sophistication not readily evident in the playful dialogue exchanges. Not only are Frieda and Claudia precocious, but also there is a convention that

allows the characters subtle shifts in maturity and tone independent of vocal variances. The play works best when the young narrators retain a mature, natural, conversational tone and rhythm when addressing the audience and each other. (Also, we have a tendency to underestimate the rich emotional and verbal life of young adults...the play is quite purposeful in its attempt to honor the sophisticated, syncopated rhythms of young speech.)

I worked hard in this adaptation to approach the story as a tale of the damaging trickle-down effect of a rather crippling societal racism, not merely as the story of a dysfunctional family and community. I feel strongly that this most serves the intention of the book and also serves the dramatic intention of the play. To this end, I think it is very important that the piece be spared graphic, realistic representations of sexual violence. As soon as we are made to watch a heinous act of incest on stage, we are forced to assimilate that act first and foremost. We lose sight of its place in the story and ultimately end up diminishing the tragic effect of the act itself as well as obscuring Pecola's story.

Thank you for your interest in this work.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* was commissioned by Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago, Ill. (Martha Lavey, Artistic Director and David Hawkanson, Executive Director), where it received its world premiere in February 2005.

The production was directed by Hallie Gordon, the assistant director was Jocelyn Prince, with scenic design by Stephanie Nelson, costume design by Alison Heryer, lighting design by J.R. Lederle, sound design by Victoria Delorio, dramaturgy by Lenora Inez Brown, choreography by Ann Boyd and casting by Erica Daniels. The stage manager was Deb Styer.

CAST

Claudia:	Libya V. Pugh
Frieda & Darlene:	Monifa M. Days
Pecola Breedlove:	Alana Arenas
Mama:	TaRon Patton
Pauline Breedlove:	Chavez Ravine
Soaphead Church:	Sati Word
Cholly Breedlove:	Phillip Edward Van Lear
Maureen Peal:	Noelle Hardy

Steppenwolf Theatre Company remounted the production in Chicago in October 2006; the New York City premiere of Steppenwolf's production was subsequently presented in November 2006 by The New 42nd Street at The Duke on 42nd Street. In the remount, James Vincent Meredith (Soaphead Church & Daddy) and Victor J. Cole (Cholly Breedlove) joined the cast. Beth Stegman was the assistant stage manager.

THE BLUEST EYE

A Play in Three Acts

CHARACTERS

CLAUDIA: Precocious, sensitive girl. She must be able to move gracefully between the innocence of youth and the wisdom of the narrator who has lived through it all. Dexterity with direct address a must.

FRIEDA/DARLENE: Claudia's older sister. Somewhat more practical than Claudia. Possibly more stern, slightly less personable.

PECOLA: A shy, quiet, resigned and somewhat pained presence. She should be completely innocent. We must love her and want to take care of her, but not pity her. Perhaps there is a certain quiet pride that won't let us tip over into pity. It is imperative that she have very dark brown skin.

MAMA: She possesses an imposing presence. She loves her children and this should be evident despite her stern manner.

MRS. BREEDLOVE: An older version of Pecola, also dark brown. Painfully shy and insecure, and still very adept at addressing the audience.

DADDY/SOAPHEAD CHURCH: Charismatic, odd, charming, mature.

CHOLLY: Mrs. Breedlove's age, the shell of a man who may have been physically impressive at one time, dark brown complexion.

MAUREEN PEAL/WHITE GIRL: Light skinned, very pretty. More complicated than merely "snotty." She is a real person, as complicated as the other characters.

Note; The children are played by adults. Women 1, 2 and 3 can be played by any of the women available.

ACT I

Scene i

(Lights rise on PECOLA standing, dwarfed in a splash of light. She wears a dingy loose fitting white dress with a matching bow in her hair; she holds a large red book. She opens it and reads to audience:)

PECOLA. Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty.

(MRS. BREEDLOVE and CHOLLY enter.)

MRS. BREEDLOVE & CHOLLY. Here is the family, Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house.

(FRIEDA and CLAUDIA enter. As cast members enter their voices join the chant at a point it is frenetic, no longer in unison.)

FRIEDA & CLAUDIA. They are very happy. *(Add MAUREEN.)* See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? *(MAMA.)* See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? *(Add CHOLLY.)* See Father. He is big and strong. Father will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Fa-

ther, smile. (*Add SOAPHEAD.*) See the dog. Bow-wow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane?

PECOLA. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game.

(PECOLA turns, we see in profile that she is pregnant, she closes the primer. Lights and sound out.)

Scene ii

(Lights rise. CLAUDIA stands DR, holding FRIEDA's hand. She wears an orange dress much like PECOLA's dingy white. A matching bow in her hair. FRIEDA's dress is brown. Autumn.)

CLAUDIA. Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. We thought, at the time, it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt, just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt.

FRIEDA. The seeds shriveled and died; Pecola's baby too. (*Beat.*) There is really nothing more to say—except why.

CLAUDIA. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.

(Lighting changes.)

FRIEDA. Pecola came to us in autumn.

(PECOLA appears, her dingy dress now cinched at the waist by the bow that was in her hair. She carries a large, worn paper bag, and stands in the same spot. She is the embodiment of loneliness and dejection...one dingy sock is up, the other around her ankle...her shoulders are slumped and her head down.)

CLAUDIA. In autumn school starts and Frieda and I get new brown stockings and cod-liver oil. Daddy spends hours cutting and stacking.

DADDY. You need to make sure the wood is stacked perpendicular...

FRIEDA. Perpin...?

CLAUDIA. That's up and down, not sideways...

FRIEDA. I knew that. *(To audience.)* I did.

DADDY. What you need to do is make sure the pieces on top slant down so the rain slides off. Not gonna stay warm on damp wood.

CLAUDIA. Daddy goes on and on...

DADDY. And damp wood makes moldy wood,

CLAUDIA. And on...

DADDY. and moldy wood's no good, presents a whole n'other set of problems. Remember kindling goes in the bucket under

CLAUDIA & FRIEDA. And on...

DADDY. the shed. Kindling has to stay dry. And, girls, remember if it's not smaller than your ring finger,

FRIEDA, CLAUDIA & DADDY. it's not kindling.

DADDY *(overlapping MAMA)*. What you need to do is make sure the flue's clean before the first frost...if you wait you got yourself a mess, and...

MAMA. Lord, if it's not one thing it's the other. It's cold.

Girls. Girls? Are you listening to me?

DADDY. Are you listening to me?

CLAUDIA. Mama has Frieda stuff rags in the window to stave off the cold.

FRIEDA. And we collect the coal that falls off of the trains onto the railroad tracks.

DADDY. You need to get the medium-sized pieces...

Small pieces turn to dust, won't help us none, you need the medium pieces that fall from the top of the heap.

Make sure you keep your eyes up and your ears open, no piece of coal's worth a flattened girl.

FRIEDA. Staving off the cold is a family project.

CLAUDIA. And I get a cold anyway. *(Sneezes.)*

MAMA. Great Jesus.

FRIEDA. That's what she always does in the fall.

CLAUDIA. I get sick and Mama fusses.

(Light fades on PECOLA. Light in different area rises on MAMA, she fusses, partially under CLAUDIA's words.)

MAMA. Get on in that bed. How many times do I have to tell you to wear something on your head? You must be the biggest fool in this town. Frieda?

FRIEDA. Yes ma'am?

MAMA. Stuff that window and get the cod-liver oil. Lord, If I ain't told Claudia once I ain't told her a thousand times, keep that jacket on when the weather starts to cool. Frieda,

FRIEDA. Yes ma'am?

MAMA. Get me the Vicks salve. *(MAMA's words continue under CLAUDIA's.)* I know I don't work my fingers to

the bone so my childrens can be laid up in bed sick. Next thing I know, Claudia done pass it to Frieda then we all sick. Lord have mercy and help us all.

CLAUDIA. I lie in the bed. No one speaks to me or asks how I feel. When I throw up Mama says...

MAMA. What did you puke on the bedclothes for? Frieda...

FRIEDA. Yes, Mama?

MAMA. Get me the clean sheet from the line. Don't you have sense enough to hold your head out of the bed? Now, look what you did. You think I got time for nothing but washing up your puke? (*MAMA continues to fuss, soundlessly.*)

CLAUDIA. Mama's voice drones on. She is not talking to me. She is talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name.

MAMA. Claudia, Claudia, Claudia, Lord knows I don't have time for wiping up after girls without enough since to puke outta the side of the bed...

CLAUDIA. But maybe it wasn't that bad.

(*MAMA's gestures soften.*)

MAMA. Frieda, I said get me the Vick's salve.

FRIEDA. Yes ma'am.

MAMA. And some flannel.

FRIEDA. Yes ma'am.

CLAUDIA. Mama's hands are large and rough. She takes two fingers full of the salve at a time and massages it into my chest until I am faint. Just when I think I will tip over into a scream she scoops out a little and puts it in my mouth, telling me to—

MAMA. Swallow.

CLAUDIA. She wraps the flannel around my neck and chest and covers me up with heavy quilts.

MAMA. Now sweat, Claudia.

CLAUDIA. —which I do promptly.

FRIEDA. But it wasn't all bad.

CLAUDIA. Mama meant well. In our household there was love. Love from Mama and Daddy, thick and dark as Alaga syrup. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. When the flannel came undone in my sleep and I coughed dry and tough in the night, Daddy stood in the doorway while Mama's hands re-pinned the flannel and rested a moment on my forehead.

(MAMA's light fades.)

CLAUDIA. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die.

FRIEDA. And Daddy's strong silhouette looking over us, quiet and serious and concerned.

CLAUDIA. And Pecola.

FRIEDA. That's right. Pecola Breedlove.

(PECOLA's light rises again. She looks up, a doe caught in the headlights.)

CLAUDIA. Yes. That's what I was trying to say, isn't it. That there was enough love in that house to give a little to Pecola, who was sorely in need of someone to care.

Scene iii

(PECOLA enters, pulls a primer out of her paper bag, opens it to a marked passage and begins to read.)

PECOLA. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane. They are very happy.

CLAUDIA. Mrs. Breedlove was a peculiar sort.

PECOLA. Come and play. Come play with Jane.

(Light rises on MRS. BREEDLOVE standing in same spot Claudia and Frieda's mother stood in earlier. She wears a pristine maid's uniform.)

FRIEDA. All of the Breedloves were peculiar.

CLAUDIA. Frieda!

FRIEDA. It's true. Peculiar and funny looking.

MRS. BREEDLOVE. When I had my girl, I 'member I said I'd love it no matter what it looked like.

(PECOLA kneels, clasps her hands in prayer.)

CLAUDIA. Actually the Breedloves were not ugly so much as they were just poor and black and believed that they were ugly.

FRIEDA. They were peculiar.

CLAUDIA. You already said that.

FRIEDA. Well, they were.

PECOLA. Please, God. Please make me disappear. Please, please, please, please, God.

FRIEDA. Peculiar like they lived in a storefront 'stead of a regular house.

CLAUDIA. And Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove.

FREIDA & CLAUDIA. Peculiar.

MRS. BREEDLOVE. I went to the hospital when my time come. Didn't want to have it at home. They put me in a big room with a whole mess of women. The pains was coming, but not too bad. The doctors come to examine me.

PECOLA. Please, God. Make me invisible... Please, please, please, please, please...

(PECOLA's pleads of "please" are whispered under MRS. BREEDLOVE's...)

MRS. BREEDLOVE. One old doctor was learning the young ones about babies. When he got to me he said, now these here women you don't have any trouble with. They deliver right away with no pain. Just like horses.

CLAUDIA. Pecola's pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine. I wanted to force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets.

FRIEDA. But she held her misery where it could lap into her eyes.

PECOLA. Amen. *(Stands, to audience:)* If I squeeze my eyes shut, real tight, little parts of my body go away. I have to do it real slow like, then in a rush. First, off my fingers go, one by one, then my arms disappear, all the way to my elbows. My feet now. Yes that's right good. My legs go all at once. Above my thighs is the hardest part. I have to be real still and pull and pull and pull... when my stomach goes away the chest and neck follow

'long pretty easy. The face is hard too. Almost done, almost. But my eyes is always left.

MRS. BREEDLOVE. Only one of the doctor students ever looked at me, looked in my eyes. I looked right back at him. He dropped his eyes and turned red. He knowed, I reckon, that maybe I weren't no horse foaling.

PECOLA. It don't matter how hard I try, my eyes is always left. And I try. Every night I pray for God to deliver me blue eyes. I have prayed now going on a year, but I have hope still. I figure God is very busy, and I am very small. To have something wonderful as that happen would have to take a long, long time. Blue eyes like Shirley Temple, or Mary Jane, on the Mary Jane candies. Or Jane in the primer at school.

MRS. BREEDLOVE. I seed them doctors talking to them white women: "How you feel? Gonna have twins?" Nice friendly talk. When them pains got harder I moaned something awful. They wasn't as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women. Just 'cause I wasn't hooping and hollering didn't mean I wasn't feeling pain. They think just 'cause I knowed how to have a baby with no fuss that my behind wasn't pulling and aching like theirs? Besides, that doctor don't know what he talking about. He must never seed no mare foal. Who say they can't have no pain? Just 'cause she don't cry? 'Cause she cain't say it, they think it ain't there? If they look in her eyes and see them eyeballs lolling back, see the sorrowful look, they'd know. (*Beat.*) Anyways the baby come.

PECOLA. And people would have to be nice and the teachers would see me, they would really look at me in

my eyes and say, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We musn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes. Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes. I would be very happy, like Jane, and Shirley and the candy girl.

MRS. BREEDLOVE. She was a big ole healthy baby. All big brown eyes and hair. A right smart baby she was. I used to like to watch her nurse. You know they makes them greedy sounds when they nurse. Eyes all soft and wet, like a cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly, head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.

PECOLA. They are very happy.

(PECOLA closes the book. Lights fade.)

Scene iv

(CLAUDIA and FRIEDA cross to downstage. The BREEDLOVES stand near them.)

CLAUDIA. The Breedlove's ugliness was a unique kind of ugliness.

FRIEDA. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly.

CLAUDIA. Except for Cholly,

FRIEDA. whose ugliness had more to do with his behavior...

CLAUDIA. Mrs. Breedlove and Pecola wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them.