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The Seat of Justice

By

JULIAN WILES

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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JULIAN WILES

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(THE SEAT OF JUSTICE)

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The Seat of Justice premiered at the Historic Dock Street Theatre in February 2004.

Cast:

Mrs. Ruby Cornwell.....	Marjorie Johnson
Voice of Freedom.....	Aneesah Cooper
Levi Pearson.....	Johnny Heyward
Mrs. Viola Pearson.....	Teresa Smith
James Pearson.....	Ryan Porter
Eloise Pearson.....	Ashli Burnell
Daisy Pearson.....	Ebony Fields
Levi Pearson Jr.....	Kai'Shon Murray
Reverend DeLaine.....	Michael Evans
Isaac.....	Jordan Scott
Daisy Oliver.....	Ashley Brown
Harry Briggs Jr.....	Aaron Green
Maxine Gibson.....	Alissa Holmes
Mr. Sonny.....	Victor Clark
Sonnyboy.....	Mark Davis
Silas.....	John Smalls
Liza.....	Aneesah Cooper
Rosalee.....	Tracie "Trané" Brooks
Mrs. Elizabeth.....	Norma Lynn Higgins
Reverend McCord.....	Lee Blackwell
R.M. Elliott.....	Jimmy Hager
Mr. Howard Boulware.....	John Smalls
Harry Briggs.....	Charles Venning
Mr. Carrington.....	Bill Davis
Emory Rogers.....	Terry Davey
Judge Waties Waring.....	John Edwards
Thurgood Marshall.....	Henry Clay Middleton
Robert Carter.....	Ron Holsey
Robert Figg.....	David Loar
Governor Byrnes.....	Chris Patte
Mrs. Elizabeth Waring.....	Sandra Gordon
Chief Justice Earl Warren.....	Chris Patte
Dr. Kenneth Clark.....	Charles Venning

A revised version of *The Seat of Justice* was performed at the Historic Dock Street Theatre in February 2016.

Cast:

Rev. J.A. De Laine	Marvin Bell
Fireman	Dwaine Bennett
Mr. Sonny.....	Nathan Burke
Mr. Harrigan, Fire Chief	Pen Chance
Judge Waties Waring.....	Victor Clark
Mrs. Viola Pearson, Cora, Ensemble	Letty Clay
Mrs. Elizabeth Waring	Beth Curley
Jury Foreman, R.M. Elliott	Chad Estel
Mrs. Ruby Cornwell.....	Crystin Gilmore
Daisy Pearson.....	Jailyn Blake Harris
Isaac	Moses Lane
States Attorney Figg, Rep. Garrett.....	David Loar
Levi Pearson, Dr. Kenneth Clark	Anthony McCutchen
Thurgood Marshall.....	Henry Clay Middleton
Robert Carter, Ensemble	Randolph Middleton
Liza, Ensemble.....	Lisa Montgomery
James Pearson, Isaac Woodard	Malcolm Johnson Palmer
Eloise Pearson.....	Kayla Peake
Reverend McCord.....	Kent Reynolds
Miss Elizabeth, Gossip.....	Maggie Saunders
Silas, Mr. Howard Boulware, Ensemble	John Smalls
Rosalee, Ensemble	Teresa Smith
Sonnyboy	Tawes Wenz
Harry Briggs.....	Adolphus F. Williams
Harry Briggs Jr.....	Gregory Lamarte Coulter Williams
Levi Pearson Jr.....	Roemello Young

The Seat of Justice

CHARACTERS

MRS. RUBY CORNWELL: A legendary black Civil Rights leader in Charleston, S.C. Narrates and comments on the action.

LEVI PEARSON: A black cotton farmer in Clarendon County.

VIOLA PEARSON: His wife.

LEVI PEARSON JR.: Their son.

JAMES PEARSON: Their teenage son.

DAISY PEARSON: Their daughter.

ELOISE PEARSON: Their daughter.

REVEREND J.A. DE LAINE: A black AME preacher, leader of the movement that led to Briggs v. Elliott.

REVEREND L. B. MCCORD: A white Presbyterian minister and the Superintendent of Schools for Clarendon County.

SCHOOL BOARD CHIRMAN ELLIOTT: The white owner of the local sawmill.

HARRIGAN: Owner of the Sinclair Service Station in Summerton.

SGT. ISAAC WOODARD: A black soldier.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY: For Chief Shull.

JUDGE WATIES WARING: Scion of an established white Charleston family, serving as a federal judge in Charleston.

ELIZABETH WARING: His outspoken second wife.

CORA: Mrs. Waring's black maid.

HARRY BRIGGS: A World War II veteran.

HARRY BRIGGS JR.: His son.

HAROLD BOULWARE: Lead attorney for the S.C. chapter of the NAACP.

THURGOOD MARSHALL: Lead attorney for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

ROBERT CARTER: Marshall's associate.

ROBERT FIGG: Attorney for the State of South Carolina appointed to defend the Briggs v. Elliott case in federal court.

MR. SONNY: A white cotton farmer in Clarendon County.

MRS. ELIZABETH: His wife.

SONNYBOY: Their 10-year-old son.

ROSALEE: Mr. Sonny's black cook.

ISAAC: Her grandson.

JOHN DAVIS: An attorney.

ELIZA

SILAS

DR. KENNETH CLARK

REPRESENTATIVE CHARLES GARRETT

JURY FOREMAN

ENSEMBLE

White firemen

Black cotton pickers

Black members of Liberty Hill Church

A white gossip

Guests at the black YWCA

SUGGESTED DOUBLING

Figg/Garrett

Harrigan/Fire Chief

Jury Foreman/Elliot

Rosalee/Ensemble

Mrs. Elizabeth/Gossip

Eliza/YWCA Guest/Ensemble

Viola/YWCA Guest/Cora

Levi/Clark

James/Isaac Woodard/Jacob

SET

A bare stage with a semicircular ramp UC. Often, characters will go up and around this ramp as they go from scene to scene. Hanging upstage are two large signs with the words “white” and “colored” emblazoned upon them. There is a collection of period wooden table and chairs in different styles scattered about the stage. Actors will arrange these tables and chairs to create the different locales in the story. There are also four wooden slat wings framing the stage, and additional wooden chairs hang from these. All chairs, tables and the wooden wings are painted a bluish-gray color.

At C sits a special wooden chair. Its style is unlike any other used in the play. This chair’s finish is a rich golden hue to separate it from the other blue/gray chairs in the play. This special chair will represent the “Seat of Justice” throughout the play. In every scene, the Seat of Justice is bathed in warm golden light. This golden glow is obvious but should be very subtle.

As scenes in the play unfold, the characters who take their places on the Seat of Justice, or at times simply place their hands on it, are those whose courageous decisions move the cause of justice forward in some way.

MUSIC

The songs throughout are traditional spirituals and meant to be sung a capella. MP3s have been provided for reference at: www.dramaticpublishing.com/the-seat-of-justice.

NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Because *The Seat of Justice* is based on real historical events that took place in rural South Carolina from 1948-1954, the racial language used in the play is historically accurate. Some of the racial terms used in the script, while common in the 1950s, are abhorrent to modern ears. To many, they were abhorrent even when these events took place. Because the goal of the play is to transport the audience back to that segregated time in the most accurate way possible, the racial terms of the period were employed. However, producers may use their own discretion in deciding whether to use the racial terms as written in the play or substitute other language they feel would be more appropriate for their audience's sensibilities. The several "n-word" references, for instance, could be replaced with "colored." While this substitution would still indicate the offense intended by the play's characters, it would perhaps be less jarring to modern sensibilities.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The Seat of Justice is based on historical events, the genesis of the landmark 1954 "Brown v. Board of Education" Supreme Court decision. Additional background information, notes on sources and a note from the playwright are available at: www.julianwiles.com/the-seat-of-justice

The Seat of Justice

ACT I

Scene 1: In the Middle of Nowhere

(#1: “Ain’t You Got a Right”)

SOLO VOICE (*off*).

AIN’T YOU GOT A RIGHT?

OTHER VOICES (*off*).

AIN’T YOU GOT A RIGHT?

AIN’T YOU GOT A RIGHT?

TO THE TREE OF LIFE?

AIN’T YOU GOT A RIGHT?

AIN’T YOU GOT A RIGHT?

AIN’T YOU GOT A RIGHT?

TO THE TREE OF LIFE?

(As the offstage voices continue to hum another verse, a lovely, statuesque, middle-aged black woman enters. This is MRS. RUBY CORNWELL, a revered Civil Rights leader from Charleston, S.C. MRS. RUBY makes her way to the Seat of Justice, stands beside it and places one hand on the back of this special chair. After a moment of reflection she addresses the audience.)

NOTE: “Mrs.” should be pronounced “Miz.”)

MRS. RUBY. In the middle of nowhere,
In the middle of the twentieth century
The Seat of Justice sat waiting.

In the distance the sound of freedom could be heard.
The voices, the faces of that distant time almost forgotten.
But we are here to remember.
A place called Summerton
A time called yesterday
A dream called freedom.
The role of storyteller has fallen to me.
My name is Ruby, Ruby Cornwell,
And I was privileged to have a front row seat to history.
I even played a small role,
But that comes later.
Let me start at the beginning.
It began with this simple seat, the Seat of Justice
Many, over the years had taken their place here.
From this seat—
Moses demanded Ramses release of the Israelites.
Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation,
And in 1896, from this very seat,
Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan. Issued the
only dissent
in a ruling known as Plessey v. Ferguson.
A ruling, that, with the shackles of separate but equal,
Re-enslaved a fifth of a nation.

(Actors enter and place a table and two chairs upstage of MRS. RUBY. This represents the kitchen of LEVI PEARSON's home in Clarendon County, S.C. As MRS. RUBY continues to speak, LEVI moves the Seat of Justice from C to the Pearson home upstage, where it becomes one of the chairs at his kitchen table. After the Seat of Justice takes its place

in the Pearson home, the warm golden halo-like glow about it returns. This will happen whenever the Seat of Justice is moved to a new location.)

MRS. RUBY (*cont'd*). By the middle of the twentieth century,
The Seat of Justice had made its way,
to a simple cabin
in Clarendon County, South Carolina.
It was 1947.
It was a time of change.
One day,
A little girl pulled a string,
And brought light into a community
that for generations had only known darkness.

Scene 2: Light in Darkness

(A single unlit bare electric lightbulb flies in over the kitchen table. The Pearson family enters: LEVI, VIOLA, LEVI JR., ELOISE, DAISY and JAMES. They are all excited because on this day electricity has come to their home for the first time. LEVI helps DAISY stand on the table so she can reach the string that hangs from their new electric light. DAISY pulls the sting, and the magical glow of incandescent light washes over the scene.)

DAISY. Wow!

(The family applauds.)

VIOLA. Will you look at that?

ELOISE. Electricity in our house!

LEVI JR. It looks like a firefly in a bottle.

DAISY. A hundred fireflies.

LEVI (*to VIOLA*). Did you ever think we would live to see the day?

VIOLA (*to LEVI*). I had no doubts. (*To her children.*) Your daddy's made something of himself, children. He's worked hard. I'm not surprised to see electricity in his house. Let that be a lesson to you, all of you.

JAMES. We're proud of you, Daddy.

ELOISE. Yes, sir, real proud.

LEVI. I've done all right, but you children can do even better one day if you work hard at school and apply yourselves.

ALL CHILDREN. Yes, Daddy.

DAISY. What can we do with our new light, Daddy?

LEVI. We can do all kinds of things—I could even dance with your mama. (*Gives VIOLA a twirl.*)

VIOLA (*trying to pull away*). Oh, Levi. Go on now—

(The children laugh.)

VIOLA (*cont'd*). I'm sure we can find more important things to do under our new light.

DAISY. Like what?

ELOISE. We can read, Mama. James has been teaching us. He's been reading to us about Mr. Moses.

VIOLA. Then James, run get your Bible and let's see what Mr. Moses is up to.

JAMES. Yes, ma'am. (*Exits.*)

ELOISE (*running ahead of JAMES*). I'll get it.

DAISY & LEVI JR (*following*). Let me. Let me.

LEVI. Smart children.

VIOLA (*pouring a cup of coffee for LEVI and then one for herself*). Take after their father.

LEVI. I'm just happy that James has taken to school so.

VIOLA. The younger ones will too. I just worry about the girls though—walking to school all alone—now that James is in high school. Most folks keep their little ones home when it rains or the weather is cold. We ought to keep ours home, too.

LEVI. No child of mine is missing school, not even for a day. I'm not going to see them start life with one hand tied behind their backs.

VIOLA. But it's such a long walk, Levi, almost nine miles round trip now that the lake has cut off the old road, and that's a busy highway they have to walk down.

LEVI. You're right. I guess someone ought to do something about that.

VIOLA (*with hands on her hips and a wifely stare*). And who do you reckon that someone's going to be?

LEVI (*with a smile, taking a seat in the Seat of Justice*). I reckon it's going to be me.

JAMES (*returning with the Bible*). Here we go, Daddy.

DAISY. Me first!

LEVI. All right, all right. (*To the other children.*) Gather 'round, everyone.

(*DAISY crawls up in LEVI's lap.*)

JAMES (*leafing through the Bible to find the place where they left off reading last time*). All right, do you remember where we left off?

DAISY. Mr. Moses had just parted the Red Sea.

LEVI. Headed for the promised land.

DAISY. How do you know that, Daddy?

LEVI. Because that's where we are all headed, children, to the promised land.

LEVI JR. Where are we now?

LEVI. In the wilderness, children, in the wilderness.

JAMES (*placing the Bible in DAISY's hands and pointing out which verse to start on*). All right Daisy here you go— Exodus 15:22.

DAISY (*reading*). “So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea and they went out into the wilderness ...”

(Lights crossfade to MRS. RUBY in a tight spotlight DC.

As she speaks, the table and chairs from the Pearson home are taken away, the lightbulb flies out and the schoolroom is set up. The Pearson table now represents the teacher's desk. The Seat of Justice becomes the teacher's chair. Schoolchildren enter with wooden stools that will serve as their desks. To indicate there are students absent from the class, there are a number of extra stools in this scene.)

MRS. RUBY. We were all in the wilderness in those days,
Trying to find our way.

Levi was just one of many looking for the promised land.

And so, the Seat of Justice began its journey.

From a simple cabin to a simple schoolhouse

Four and a half miles from the Pearson home.

It was a colored school,

One that had no running water,

No electricity.

Even books were few and far between.

The schoolmaster there did the best he could.

His name is the Reverend J.A. De Laine.

(REVEREND J. A. DE LAINE enters.)

MRS. RUBY *(cont'd)*. He was a man who did double duty,
preaching on Sunday
Teaching during the week.
He had faith in God,
And faith in learning.
A college graduate, he dedicated his life to sharing his faith
And sharing his knowledge.

(A huge 48-star, fullstage American flag unfurls upstage of the classroom. DE LAINE stands behind his desk, which holds a globe, his roll book and some textbooks standing between two bookends.)

Scene 3: With Liberty and Justice for All

(Three black students, HARRY BRIGGS JR., MAXINE GIBSON and ISAAC enter and take their places in front of their desks [stools]. They stand, hands over hearts, joining DE LAINE in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.)

STUDENTS. I pledge allegiance, to the flag, of the United States of America. And to the republic, for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all.

(NOTE: "Under God" is omitted here because those words were not added to the Pledge of Allegiance until later in the 1950s.)

DE LAINE. And in what state do we live?

STUDENTS. South Carolina.

DE LAINE. And in what county?

STUDENTS. Clarendon.

DE LAINE. And we're all held?

STUDENTS. In the hands of God.

DE LAINE (*seeing that his schoolroom is only half full*).
Now where is everyone, else?

HARRY JR. Out cotton picking today, Reverend.

DE LAINE. Well, as soon as cotton-picking season's over, I expect everyone back in school.

HARRY JR. Some folks ain't coming back to school.

DE LAINE. Aren't coming back to school

HARRY JR (*sinking into his seat*). Aren't.

DE LAINE. Now who's not coming back?

ISAAC. Benny Robinson's not coming back. He's going to work with Mr. Tindal.

(LEVI enters with DAISY, ELOISE and LEVI JR. in tow.)

LEVI. Sorry these children are late, again, Reverend De Laine.

DE LAINE. I know it's a long walk, Levi.

LEVI. Even longer for James to get over to Scotts Branch.

DE LAINE. How's he taking to high school?

LEVI. Right fine, Reverend.

DE LAINE. Glad to hear it, so many his age don't go on to high school. It's a waste.

LEVI. It's because it's so hard to get there, Reverend. And I can see you have a lot of empty places today too.

DE LAINE. Yes, between the cotton picking and the long road to school, it's hard to make much progress.

LEVI. Well, what if we could get up a bus for these children?

DAISY (*standing up*). The new white school has buses.

ELOISE (*also standing*). Lots of buses.

ISAAC (*standing as well*). Bright yellow buses.

DE LAINE. Are we in this school to study white folks, children?

STUDENTS. No, Reverend.

DE LAINE. I didn't think so. Now tend to your business and you let Mr. Pearson and me tend to ours.

STUDENTS (*sinking back to their seats*). Yes, sir.

LEVI. They're right, Reverend. Do you think we could convince the county to provide a bus for our children?

DE LAINE. A bus? We're lucky we have even have schools, Levi, and the ones we have aren't high on the county's priority list and with such up and down attendance it's—

LEVI. Well, maybe we could get some folks together and see if we could raise some the money ourselves for a bus. We might be able to afford a second-hand army surplus one. I can ask around.

DE LAINE. You think folks around here would reach that far down in their pockets?

LEVI. With a few inspiring words from you, Reverend, I believe they might. Sounds like Sunday's sermon to me.

*(LEVI smiles and pats DE LAINE on the shoulder; then exits.
Lights tighten on DE LAINE as he moves DC.)*

DE LAINE. Lord, I hate to bother you about this but my classroom is seldom full.

On rainy days it is mostly empty.

Lord, these children need a bus.

Lord, help the folks around here to see that.

Loosen their pocketbooks,

and let the miracle of generosity

Rain down upon us.

(Lights crossfade to MRS. RUBY in a tight spotlight DR.)

MRS. RUBY. Reverend De Laine,
being in good standing with the Lord,
soon found that his prayers were answered.
And the rains came.

(Coins fall from above, and children scramble to pick them up. DE LAINE holds out his hat and the children place the coins in the hat. Once it is full, he crosses and deposits the hat on his desk. The children go back to their stools.)

MRS. RUBY *(cont'd)*. Nickels and dimes and pennies and quarters.

Soon freewill donations filled the coffers of the colored bus fund.
Reverend De Laine had inspired his congregation,
and they dug deep in their pockets.

And bus was purchased.

An old second-hand bus—

One that liked to break down a lot.

(The wheezing of the broken down, asthmatic bus is heard. Time has passed. LEVI enters carrying a part from the bus.

Lights crossfade to LEVI in a tight spotlight DL.

Students exit upstage with their stools, the teacher's desk is carried off and the huge American flag flies away.

DE LAINE crosses DR to meet LEVI.)

DE LAINE. Broken down again?

LEVI. I'm afraid so, and there's no money left to fix it. What with gas and repairs and paying the driver a little, we're out of money and we just can't ask folks for more.

DE LAINE. Seems such a shame we have that bus and can't get it to go.

LEVI. I was wondering if we might get the school district to help us out.

DE LAINE. We could ask.

LEVI. Who would we go to?

DE LAINE. Well, I reckon that would be Mr. McCord, the superintendent of schools.

LEVI. You know him?

DE LAINE. Oh, yes, he's the one that hired me to teach here.

LEVI. Is he a fair man?

DE LAINE. He's always been fair with me. He's a preacher too, pastor at the Presbyterian Church over in Manning.

(DE LAINE and LEVI exit L. The scene changes to a cotton field. Black COTTON PICKERS enter and dump cotton from sacks they carry onto large sheets of burlap that are spread out on the ground. The corners of these burlap sheets—"cotton sheets"—will be tied together to form bundles of cotton. As the scene unfolds, these bundles will be weighed so the farm owner, MR. SONNY, will know how much to pay each of the cotton pickers for their day's labor. A wooden device called a "cotton horse" and scale are brought on to weigh up the cotton. The Seat of Justice is also moved into this scene and placed DR. One of the stools from the schoolroom is placed beside it.

Lights rise full stage.)