

# Excerpt terms and conditions



This excerpt is available to assist you in the play selection process.

You may view, print and download any of our excerpts for perusal purposes.

Excerpts are not intended for performance, classroom or other academic use. In any of these cases you will need to purchase playbooks via our website or by phone, fax or mail.

A short excerpt is not always indicative of the entire work, and we strongly suggest reading the whole play before planning a production or ordering a cast quantity.

*Dramatic Publishing*

# FREE MAN OF COLOR

A Play in Two Acts

by

CHARLES SMITH

Recipient of the 2004 Joseph Jefferson Award for  
Outstanding New Work in Chicago



**Dramatic Publishing**

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

\*\*\* NOTICE \*\*\*

The amateur and stock acting rights to this work are controlled exclusively by THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY without whose permission in writing no performance of it may be given. Royalty must be paid every time a play is performed whether or not it is presented for profit and whether or not admission is charged. A play is performed any time it is acted before an audience. Current royalty rates, applications and restrictions may be found at our Web site: [www.dramaticpublishing.com](http://www.dramaticpublishing.com), or we may be contacted by mail at: DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, P.O. Box 129, Woodstock IL 60098.

COPYRIGHT LAW GIVES THE AUTHOR OR THE AUTHOR'S AGENT THE EXCLUSIVE RIGHT TO MAKE COPIES. This law provides authors with a fair return for their creative efforts. Authors earn their living from the royalties they receive from book sales and from the performance of their work. Conscientious observance of copyright law is not only ethical, it encourages authors to continue their creative work. This work is fully protected by copyright. No alterations, deletions or substitutions may be made in the work without the prior written consent of the publisher. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, videotape, film, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. It may not be performed either by professionals or amateurs without payment of royalty. All rights, including, but not limited to, the professional, motion picture, radio, television, videotape, foreign language, tabloid, recitation, lecturing, publication and reading, are reserved.

For performance of any songs, music and recordings mentioned in this play which are in copyright, the permission of the copyright owners must be obtained or other songs and recordings in the public domain substituted.

©MMV by  
CHARLES SMITH  
Printed in the United States of America  
*All Rights Reserved*  
(FREE MAN OF COLOR)

For all other inquiries, contact:  
Barbara Hogenson, The Barbara Hogenson Agency, Inc.  
165 West End Ave., Suite 19C,  
New York NY 10023 - Phone: (212) 874-8084

ISBN: 1-58342-316-8

## IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

All producers of the play *must* give credit to the Author of the play in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and in all instances in which the title of the play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the play and/or a production. The name of the Author *must* also appear on a separate line, on which no other name appears, immediately following the title, and *must* appear in size of type not less than fifty percent the size of the title type. Biographical information on the Author, if included in the playbook, may be used in all programs. *In all programs these notices must appear:*

“Produced by special arrangement with  
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY of Woodstock, Illinois”

*and*

“Originally produced at Victory Gardens Theater, Chicago, Ill.,  
Dennis Zacek, artistic director and production director,  
January 2004.”

The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.

— *James Baldwin*

## SPECIAL THANKS

While ultimately, it is my hope that *Free Man of Color* is a play about three people whose lives intersected at one point in time, it is also a play that touches on other topics including the Presbyterians in Ohio in the early 1800s, the American Colonization Society, the founding of Ohio University and the history of Liberia, all topics about which I knew nothing before beginning this project. While I am certain to unintentionally fail to include some who helped me, I would like to thank George Bain and the staff of the Ohio University Alden Library Archives, Scott Carson, Lisa Carson, Robert Glidden, Betty Hollow, Najee Muhammad, Connie Perdreau, Rusty Smith, Lorraine Wochna, the School of Theater at Ohio University, members of the Playwrights Workshop at Ohio University, and my wife, Lisa Quinn, for the generosity of their time, talent and wisdom.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Free Man of Color* is about John Newton Templeton, the first black man to attend Ohio University. The play is set between the years 1824 and 1828, four decades before Abraham Lincoln signed the emancipation proclamation. During that time, proslavery factions argued against emancipation by arguing that blacks were merely children that needed to be cared for. They argued that even blacks who appeared to be self-sufficient, smart and educated were not smart or educated at all. They argued that blacks who appeared to be intelligent were merely imitating whites. This same argument was later used by segregationists to support their continued call for separate schools in this country.

Today, two hundred years later, these inflammatory accusations still abound. However, the source of these accusations today is not proslavery advocates or even staunch segregationists. According to scores of politicians, social commentators and pundits, the source of these demeaning accusations are African- American children themselves. Politicians, social commentators, pundits, and even a few rich black celebrities claim that today's African-American students are hostile toward education. They claim that the few African-American students who excel in scholastic achievement are teased by their peers. They claim that these students are attacked, ridiculed and accused by other African-American students of "acting white."

If this is true, the implications are horrifying. If true, the racists have reached nirvana; they no longer have to spend time devising ways to police Negroes to keep them in their place, the Negro children have been trained to police themselves. But I suspect something else is happening here.

There is a difference between education and indoctrination. Education is teaching a student *how* to think. Indoctrination is teaching a student *what* to think. The premise of education—real education—is that a student should be given the tools and the means by which to conduct his own intellectual inquiry. The conclusion of that inquiry should be the student's and student's alone. When a student develops his or her own ideas, ideas that may be different than those espoused by textbooks, that student should be feted. But far too many times, students today are censured and their ideas depreciated. And our children are smart; they know what's going on. Give them a few rudimentary tools and they develop their own ideas. They know what they think and they know what's in their hearts. They also know what the (usually white) authority figure standing in front of them wants them to say. Some do what is asked of them and mindlessly repeat the party line. Some refuse to parrot the party line, then ridicule those who do. Many of these students are destroyed. Only a few are lucky enough to have experienced teachers who fully support the development of the individual mind and spirit.

In *Free Man of Color*, John Newton Templeton identifies this as a distinction between education and training, something I imagine he struggled with two hundred years ago while attending Ohio University. While it is sad that we continue to struggle with the same issues today, I find solace in the fact that many of us have in the past, and will in the future, successfully circumnavigate the mine field of education to become autonomous, free-thinking individuals. I think John Newton Templeton wouldn't have it any other way.

*Free Man of Color* was originally produced by Victory Gardens Theater, Chicago, Illinois, Dennis Zacek, artistic director. This world premiere production was in association with Ohio University Bicentennial Celebration, Athens, Ohio, 2004. The production was directed by Andrea J. Dymond and the cast was as follows:

Jane Wilson . . . . . Shelley Delaney\*  
John Newton Templeton . . . . . Anthony Fleming III\*  
Robert Wilson . . . . . Gary Houston\*

*\*Denotes a member of Actor's Equity Association, the union of professional stage actors and managers.*

#### PRODUCTION STAFF

Set Design . . . . . Tim Morrison, USA  
Costume Design . . . . . Michelle Tesdall  
Lighting Design . . . . . Mary McDonald Badger, USA  
Sound Design/Original Composition . . . . . Joe Cerqua  
Production Stage Manager . . . . . Rita Vreeland, AEA



# FREE MAN OF COLOR

A Play in Two Acts  
For Two Men and One Woman

## CHARACTERS

JOHN NEWTON TEMPLETON . . . . 20-year-old ex-slave

ROBERT WILSON . . middle-aged white university president

JANE WILSON . . . . . Robert's somewhat younger wife

TIME: 1824 to 1828.

PLACE: Athens, Ohio.

# ACT ONE

## SCENE ONE

*On stage are two chairs left and right. ROBERT WILSON sits in one of the chairs, JOHN NEWTON TEMPLETON sits in the other. A very rustic rendition of “Amazing Grace” plays in the background. When the music ends, WILSON stands.*

WILSON (*to audience*). Most distinguished assembled guests, trustees, gentlemen, at this point in the program, I present to you John Newton Templeton. The topic on which he will speak to you today is titled “The Claims of Liberia.” Mister Templeton. (*WILSON exits.*)

JOHN (*to audience*). “Non solum verba falsa sunt mala ipsa, sed etiam malo infligunt animam.” For those of you who don’t know, that was not “The Claims of Liberia.” It was Latin. Plato. Roughly translated, it means, “False words are not only evil in themselves, but they inflict the soul with evil.” That’s what I was thinking on that day in 1828 when Reverend Wilson introduced me. I was thinking about my soul. Reverend Wilson was the president of Ohio University and judging by the look on his face, he and the seventy-five other assembled guests had fully expected to hear me speak on “The Claims of Liberia” because at one point in my life, I had been claimed by Liberia. 1828. Thirty-four years before the

end of slavery, I stood with my graduating class and wondered about my soul.

*(WILSON enters. He has been traveling.)*

WILSON. Here we are. I know it's a little different than what you're used to but we consider it to be a good home. Wife? *(He listens. There is no answer.)* I hope she's feeling better. She hasn't been in what you would call the best of health.

JOHN. Sorry to hear that.

WILSON. Have to be careful nowadays. We've had our share of the cholera. Yellow fever. Scarlet fever and smallpox. *(He calls through the window.)* Wife! *(No answer.)* I hope she didn't walk into town again. Woman has a stubborn streak in her. Won't let anybody do anything for her. I usually have a friend check on her while I'm gone. Make sure she's all right, drive her into town if she needs it, but she'd rather walk and it's too far to walk. Town is that way, north, about four miles. We'll go in tomorrow.

JOHN. Tomorrow?

WILSON *(calling)*. Wife?

JOHN. What about my papers?

WILSON. Your papers?

JOHN. I need to get my papers in order.

WILSON. We'll take care of that tomorrow, when we go into town.

JOHN. The law says—

WILSON. I know what the law says. Don't worry about the law. The law is my concern. The only thing I want you to be concerned about is your studies. You will be—

gin your studies with nine other students and you will be treated the exact same as everyone else. Is that clear?

JOHN. Yes sir.

WILSON. You clear on what will be expected of you?

JOHN. Yes sir.

WILSON. Let's go over it again. How do you plan to start each day?

JOHN. With prayers at sunrise.

WILSON. Breakfast?

JOHN. Breakfast by six.

WILSON. Followed by...

JOHN. Morning recitations.

WILSON. Then comes?

JOHN. Morning lecture, then study until noon. Dinner will be from noon to one-thirty after which we begin afternoon recitations followed by afternoon lecture and study until supper. Supper is at five-thirty, followed by a half hour of relaxation and then evening debate.

WILSON. Good, John. Very good. Now, your first year will consist of the study of mathematics, science, and philosophy. Your second year will consist of the study of Latin, Hebrew, and Greek. In your third year, you will be expected to apply for admission into the Athenian Literary Society in addition to continuing your studies in Greek. And in your fourth year, you will prepare for your comprehensive exams.

JOHN. Yes sir.

WILSON. Tell me something, John. Why do you think it's important that you study Greek?

JOHN. Why?

WILSON. That's right. Why? Why Greek?

JOHN. Greek is an important language, sir.

WILSON. Is that your answer? Greek is an important language? That's not an answer, John. That's circular logic based upon the original premise. "Why is the horse white? Because it's a white horse." Does that make sense? No. All you did was chew my question and then feed it back to me in the form of an answer, but that's not an answer. You haven't added anything to it. Nothing but your own saliva and I do not care for the taste of your saliva, John. Now let's try it again. Why is it important that you study Greek?

JOHN. I don't know.

WILSON. Didn't you study Greek at Ripley?

JOHN. Yes sir.

WILSON. Didn't they tell you why you were studying Greek?

JOHN. They said it was important.

WILSON. Of course it's important, John. I want you to tell me why it's important.

JOHN. It's important for us to understand our language?

WILSON. Not unless you consider language to be the end and language is not the end, it's merely a means to the end. Think about the white horse. Can you ride the words "white horse"? Will those words carry you to the store? Do you have to feed those words? No, those words are merely a representation of the thing itself. Those words do not have a heartbeat, those words will not leave filth in the middle of the road. Our goal is not to understand the words, John. Our goal is to understand all of the things the words represent. Have you ever studied the Bible?

JOHN. Of course I have.

WILSON. In what language did you study the Bible?

JOHN. English.

WILSON. Are you suggesting to me that Matthew, Mark, Timothy and Samuel wrote their testaments in English?

JOHN. No sir.

WILSON. In what language did they write?

JOHN. They wrote in Hebrew, sir. And Greek.

WILSON. That's right. And unless you are studying the Bible in Hebrew and Greek, you're not studying the Bible. You're studying what somebody else has said the Bible says, and while King James may have been a very honest man, I'd rather not stake my soul and the souls of all men on his judgment. That's the reason the study of Greek is so important, John, that's why the study of Hebrew and Latin is important, so that we may study the actual word of God in its original form. Remember, only by studying the origins of a thing, can one discern that thing's true meaning.

JOHN. Only by studying the origin of a thing—

*(JANE enters. She stops and surveys the situation.)*

JANE. What's this?

WILSON. This is John Templeton. I'm sorry, John *Newton* Templeton. John, this is Missus Wilson.

JOHN. Pleased to meet you, ma'am.

JANE. You promised we were not going to do this.

WILSON. Do what, dear?

JANE. Take in runaways.

WILSON. He's not a runaway. He's a free man.

JANE. Legal free or liberated free?

WILSON. Legal free and he's here to go to school.

JANE. School?

WILSON. John, why don't you go out and get the rest of our things.

JOHN. Yes sir. (*JOHN exits.*)

JANE. Robert, what're you doing?

WILSON. Reverend Hopkins come by while I was gone?

JANE. 'Course he came by, every day he came by. Can't get rid of the man.

WILSON. I asked him to check on you while I was gone.

JANE. And I told you that I don't need anybody to check on me. Now I would like to know what that boy is doing here.

WILSON. He was at Ripley with Reverend Williamson. The boy is smart, Jane. He knows philosophy, mathematics, basic Greek and Latin. And the boy is strong. He had never ridden a horse before in his life, not until he got on one to come here. But after the first day, he was riding like a professional.

JANE. You taught him how to ride?

WILSON. First thirty miles to Hillsboro were kind of hard on him. But after I showed him a few things he got the hang of it. By the time we could see the first of the seven hills of Athens, he was riding like he had been born in the saddle.

JANE. What is he doing here, Robert?

WILSON. I told you. He's here to go to school.

JANE. You going up against the law for him?

WILSON. Nothing in the law that says that he can't be here.

JANE. And that's the reason you're doing it? Because nothing says you can't?

WILSON. We minister to everyone else in this world.

JANE. We minister to colored.

WILSON. Never with substance. We preach to them, sure, we offer them the word of God, but never has anyone offered them the means by which they can obtain that word on their own.

JANE. Where's he supposed to live while he's here?

WILSON. I thought he could stay here with us for a while.

JANE. Where here?

WILSON. Spare room.

JANE. We don't have a spare room.

WILSON. The room isn't being used, Jane. He can sleep there. Won't be for long. Only a month or so.

JANE. A month?

WILSON. After folks get used to the idea of him being around, we can move him into the edifice with the other students if you like.

JANE. With the gentleman from Virginia? The two gentlemen from Kentucky? You think that these men are going to sleep in the same room as a black?

WILSON. Won't be the same room.

JANE. Under the same roof. You expect these men to share a roof with a black who is not washing their clothes and serving them dinner? Is that what you're asking me to believe?

WILSON. If it doesn't work out, we can find him a room in town someplace, I don't know. The where of the matter is not important at this point.

JANE. The where of the matter is the most important. Everything in this world revolves around the where.

WILSON. If you don't want him here and if he has a problem in the edifice, we'll find a room for him in town.

*(JOHN enters with saddlebags.)*



JANE. Is he registered?

WILSON. We'll take care of that tomorrow.

JANE. Does he have money to register?

WILSON. The university is sovereign. As long as he's in our charge, he's not subject to local ordinances.

JANE. Nobody in town is going to put him up unless he's registered.

WILSON. Why must you see darkness wherever you look?

JANE. Because my life has been shrouded in darkness. I've lived in darkness for so long, it's become a friend of mine, the only companion I have.

JOHN. Pardon me, sir, but if you would tell me where to unhitch and water the horses, I'll take care of it.

WILSON. I'll take care of it, John. You get yourself cleaned up, get yourself something to eat.

JANE. Folks in town are not going to want him here unless he's registered, Robert.

WILSON. Folks in town don't have a say in the matter.

JANE. You can't continue to ignore who these people are and what they believe in.

WILSON. I don't care what they believe in. John will be here whether they like it or not. My charge doesn't come from the folks in town. I receive my charge from the trustees and the state legislature. I answer to them and after them, I answer only to God. I do not have to answer to a bunch of provincial merchants, landowners and pig farmers.

JANE. You may not have to answer to them. But we do have to live with them.

WILSON. I think we've been very charitable neighbors.

JANE. When it benefits you. You won't consider anything that doesn't benefit you or the university.

WILSON. I've considered many proposals.

JANE. What about the tent?

WILSON. I have no objections to that tent.

JANE. Within the square?

WILSON. Anyplace outside the gates.

JANE. Outside the gates.

WILSON. It's for the amusement and entertainment of the locals. If they want to be amused and entertained by abominations, they can erect as many circus tents as they please. Anyplace outside of the square.

JANE. There's nothing evil about the circus, Robert. They come in, they set up their tents, they tell stories. You go there and listen to stories about people and places far away from here. That's all it is. It's a diversion. It might be nice to have a bit of diversion around here.

WILSON. My students do not need diversion. My students need earnest uninterrupted study.

JANE. There are people here other than your students.

WILSON. What people. Who?

JANE. People.

WILSON. I want you to tell me whose need for entertainment and diversion you think is more important than the education of my students.

JANE. Nobody's. I'm sorry I brought it up.

WILSON. Draw some water for the boy so he can get cleaned up. And he needs something different to wear. Look around and see if we've got some clothes that'll fit him. Shirt, pants, maybe a hat.

JANE. There's nothing here that will fit him.

WILSON. Why don't you look see?

JANE. I don't have to look see. I know. There is nothing here that will fit him.

WILSON. Draw him some water so he can get cleaned up.

I'll be back in a bit. (*WILSON exits.*)

JOHN. If it's all the same to you, ma'am, I can draw my own water.

JANE. Of course you can. You can and you will. I will not draw water for you while you're in this house.

JOHN. No, ma'am.

JANE. Washbasin is in there under the table.

JOHN. Yes, ma'am. (*He moves to exit. He stops.*) I didn't come here to cause trouble, ma'am. Reverend Wilson asked me if I wanted to come here and go to school. He said he was looking for young men of high moral content; young men who would eventually serve in honor of the public good. I believe I am such a man. Reverend Wilson also believes that I am such a man, and I am grateful that he's given me the chance to prove it.

JANE. So...you want to serve the public good.

JOHN. Yes, ma'am.

JANE. And just how do you plan to do that...what's your name again?

JOHN. John, ma'am.

JANE. John what?

JOHN. John Newton Templeton.

JANE. Just how do you plan to serve the public good, Mister John Newton Templeton?

JOHN. I'm not quite sure, ma'am. I thought that maybe I'd become a preacher like the Reverend. Spread the word of God. Maybe one day, even open my own school. School for colored. That's what I'd like to do.

JANE. That's very sweet of you. Tell me something, Mister John Newton Templeton, you born free? Or is liberation a relatively new experience for you?