

**NO PLACE  
TO BE  
SOMEBODY**  
A Black Black Comedy  
in Three Acts  
**BY CHARLES  
GORDONE**

*Introduction by* JOSEPH PAPP, Producer  
New York Shakespeare Festival

The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.  
Indianapolis • New York

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Publishers/Indianapolis • New York

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Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number 76-91390  
Designed by Martin Stephen Moskof  
Manufactured in the United States of America

To the memory of Sidney Bernstein, producer of "The Blacks"

# CAST

**No Place To Be Somebody** was first produced on May 2, 1969, at the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theater, New York City, with the following cast in order of appearance:

Gabe Gabriel, a *young fairskinned Negro* . . . . . Ron O'Neal  
Shanty Mulligan, a *young white man* . . . . . Ronnie Thompson  
Johnny Williams, a *young Negro* . . . . . Nathan George  
Dee Jacobson, a *young white woman* . . . . . Susan G. Pearson  
Evie Ames, a *young Negro woman* . . . . . Lynda Westcott  
Cora Beasely, a *young Negro woman* . . . . . Marge Eliot  
Melvin Smeltz, a *young Negro man* . . . . . Henry Baker  
Mary Lou Bolton, a *white girl* . . . . . Laurie Crews  
Ellen, a *white girl* . . . . . Iris Gemma  
Sweets Crane, an *elderly Negro* . . . . . Walter Jones  
Mike Maffucci, a *young white man* . . . . . Nick Lewis  
Truck Driver, a *young white man* . . . . . Michael Landrum  
Judge Bolton, a *middle aged white man,*  
    *father of Mary Lou* . . . . . Ed Van Nuys  
Machine Dog, a *young Negro (in*  
    *Johnny's imagination)* . . . . . Paul Benjamin  
Sergeant Cappaletti, a *young white man* . . . . . Charles Seals  
Harry, a *Negro detective* . . . . . Malcolm Hurd  
Louie, a *young white man* . . . . . Martin Shakar

The production was directed by Ted Cornell; sets and lighting were designed by Michael Davidson.

# INTRODUCTION

It was with some trepidation that black playwright Charles Gordone handed the manuscript of his play *NO PLACE TO BE SOMEBODY* over to Ted Cornell, the very WASP director of the Public Experimental Theater, of the New York Shakespeare Festival. A more unlikely combination would be hard to find: Gordone, barefoot, bare-chested and pigtailed, looking more Iroquois-Chinese than African; Cornell, a blue-eyed, 24-year-old, shaggy-haired Yale Drama School student. Gordone must have thought, what could Cornell know about the black man's anger and what makes him laugh? And what about this Public Theater? True, it did produce *HAIR* and several other contemporary plays, but its main reputation was grounded in Shakespeare. All this seemed far from Gordone's idea of the right place for *NO PLACE*. But, Mr. Gordone was hungry and desperate, and after three years of trying to place his play, felt he could no longer afford too many quibbles.

A nervous agreement was concluded and the play went into rehearsal at *THE OTHER STAGE*, the experimental arm of the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theater. All that was promised was three weeks of rehearsal and two weekends of performances for admission-free audiences. The playwright received \$100.00. The work was projected as a kind of collaboration, which meant that the playwright would participate in the rehearsal process. It wasn't long before the director picked up the playwright's jargon, ducking and throwing "zingers," expressing approval with "that's out of sight." Gordone's suspicions began to dissolve as his respect for Cornell began to grow. This was

a remarkable development, since the director was a relative newcomer to the theater, handling his first major assignment, while the author, as an experienced actor and director, was an old hand at the game. But they began to carry on a dialogue—direct, intense, often angry, never casual. Nobody was polite. The stage erupted with bursts of verbal violence, ghetto style, reflecting the strong feelings and emotions the play engendered among the black and white members of the cast.

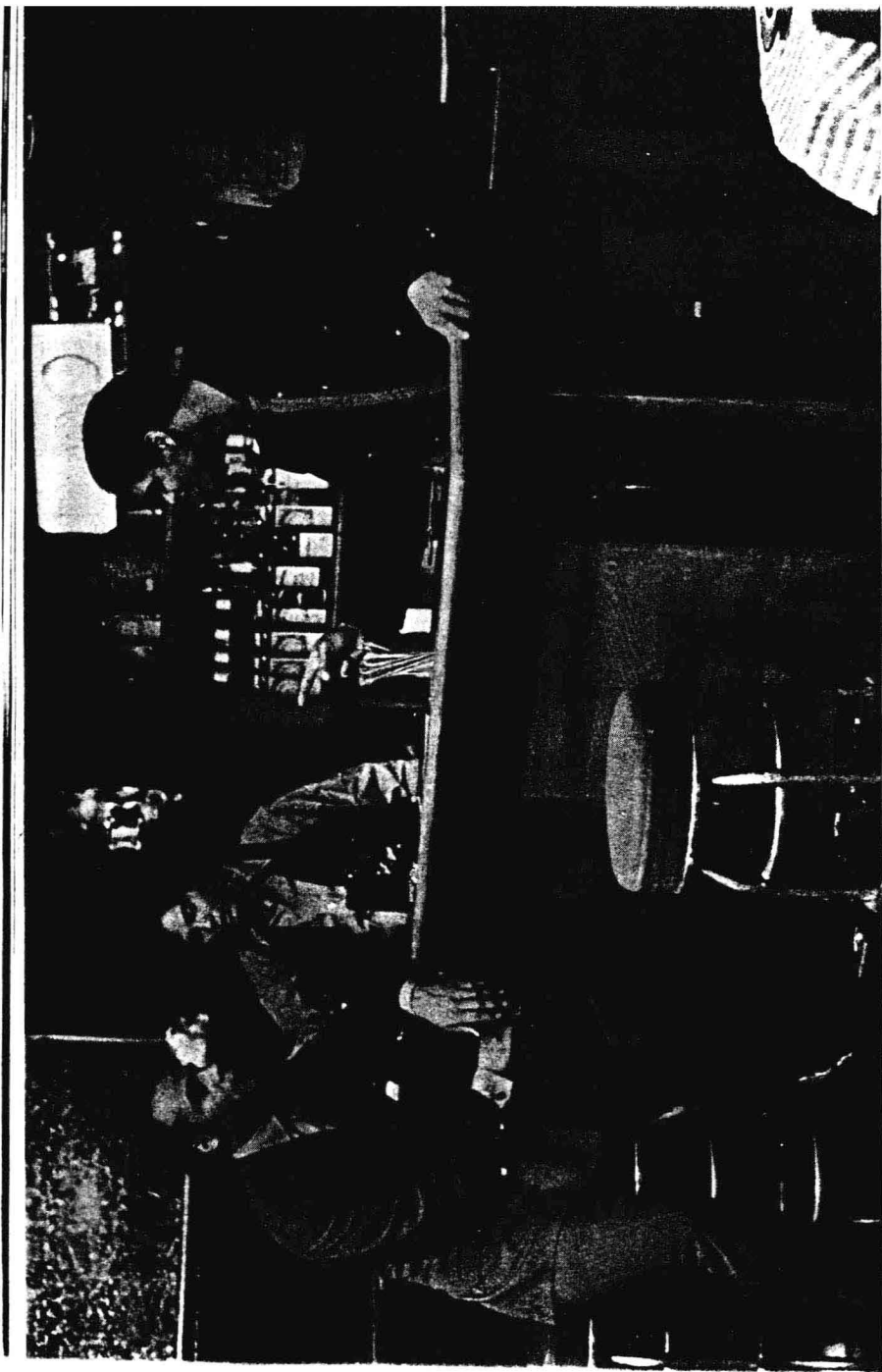
The transition from the text to rehearsal to performance was almost indiscernible. There was a continuous flow of life from the outside that crossed the threshold of the theater with no apparent conflict. Visiting rehearsals, I was hard put to distinguish the play from the heated arguments over its interpretation. Both were a part of the same fantastic reality.

The crucial test of any play's validity comes when it confronts its first audience. The Experimental Theater has a seating capacity of 109 and was filled to overflowing when *NO PLACE* opened with an audience mixed almost equally black and white. Although the surface of *NO PLACE TO BE SOMEBODY* suggests black militant melodrama—exciting, funny, violent—its very complexities and ambiguities provided no clear-cut feelings of satisfaction for either black or white members of the audience. What it did achieve was a rich confrontation of the black man and himself, the white man and himself, and then placed those selves face to face with each other.

This exciting fusion which is the magic that makes good theater takes place at every performance of the play. It is testimony to the gifts of an important new playwright, and the talent and energy of the company as a whole. The initial audience reaction brought in the critics. As a result, *NO PLACE TO BE SOMEBODY* is now a hit and has moved to a larger theater within the Public Theater complex. However, its genesis in production in a free experimental theater also says something as to where we may reasonably look for renewal of the theater in America.

Joseph Papp

New York, July 1969



*They ain't no law. They kill you and me in the name of the law!*



**NO PLACE  
TO BE  
SOMEBODY  
ACT ONE**



# SCENE ONE

*Time: The past fifteen years*

*Place: New York City*

*Setting: Johnny's Bar*

*At rise: GABE sits near jukebox, typing. Rips page from typewriter. Balls it up, flings it angrily at audience.*

## Gabe

Excuse me. Forgot you were out there. My name is Gabe. Gabe Gabriel, to be exact. I'm a writer. Didn't mean to lose my temper. Something I've been working on all my life. Not losing my temper.

*Takes out marijuana cigarette. Lights it. Inhales it. Holds smoke in.*

Right now I'm working on a play. They say if you wanna be a writer you gotta go out an' live. I don't believe that no more. Take my play for instance. Might not believe it but I'm gonna make it all up in my head as I go along. Before I prove it to you, wanna warn you not to be thinkin' I'm tellin' you a bunch'a barefaced lies. An' no matter how far out I git, don't want you goin' out'a here with the idea what you see happenin' is all a figment of my grassy imagination. 'Cause it ain't!

*He picks up Bible from table. Raises it above his head. Without looking turns pages.*

"And I heard a Voice between the banks of the U'Lai. And it called, Gabriel! Gabriel! Make this man understand the vision! So He came near where I stood! And when He came, I was frightened and fell upon my face!"

*He closes Bible. As he exits, lights dim out, then come up on SHANTY, at jukebox. Jazz is playing. SHANTY takes out his drumsticks. Begins to rap on bar. JOHNNY enters. Hangs up raincoat and umbrella.*

**Johnny**

Cool it, Shanty.

**Shanty**

Man, I'm practicing.

**Johnny**

Damned if that bar's anyplace for it. Git on that floor there.

**Shanty**

*Puts drumsticks away. Takes broom.*

Ever tell you 'bout the time I went to this jam session? Max Roach was there. Lemme sit in for him.

**Johnny**

Said you played jus' like a spade.

**Shanty**

What's wrong with that? Ol' Red Taylor said wasn't nobody could hold a beat an' steady cook it like me. Said I had "the thing"! Member one time we played "Saints." For three hours, we played it.

**Johnny**

Had to git a bucket'a col' water an' throw it on you to git you to quit, huh?

**Shanty**

One these days I'm gonna have me a boss set'a skins for my comeback. Me an' Cora was diggin' a set up on "Four-Six Street." Sump'm else ag'in. Bass drum, dis'pearin' spurs, snares, tom-toms. . . .

**Johnny**

Gon' steal 'em?

**Shanty**

I been savin' up. Gonna git me them drums. Know what I'm gonna do then? I'm gonna quit you flat. Go for that. Sheee! I ain't no lifetime apron. That's for damned sure.

**Johnny**

Yeah, well meantime how 'bout finishin' up on that floor? Time to open the store.

*DEE and EVIE enter. Hang coats up.*

You broads let them two ripe apples git away from you, huh?

**Dee**

Don't look at me.

**Evie**

Aw, later for you an' your rich Texas trade.

**Dee**

Just gettin' too damned sensitive.

**Evie**

Sensitive my black behin'! Excuse me, I mean black ass.

*Goes to jukebox. Punches up number.*

**Dee**

Last night we bring those two Johns up to her pad. An' like, Jack? One with the cowboy hat? Stoned? Like out of his skull. And like out of nowhere he starts cryin'.

**Evie**

All weekend it was "Nigger this an' Nigger that."

**Dee**

Never bothered you before. I didn't like it when he started sayin' things like "The black sons a'bitches are gettin' to be untouchables! Takin' over the country!"

**Evie**

Bet he'll think twice before he says sump'm like that ag'in.

**Dee**

That lamp I gave her? One the senator brought me back from Russia? Evie goes an' breaks it over his head.

**Johnny**

What the hell'd you do that for?

**Evie**

Sure hated to lose that lamp.

**Johnny**

Wouldn't care if they b'longed to the Ku Klux Klan long's they gimme the bread.

*He goes into DEE's purse.*

**Shanty**

Sure had plenty of it too! When they was in here, they kept buyin' me drinks. Thought I was the boss.

**Johnny**

Crackers cain't 'magine Niggers runnin' nothin' but elevators an' toilets.

**Dee**

Leave me somethin', please.

**Evie**

5 Ain't gon' do nothin' with it nohow.

**Johnny**

*Finds pair of baby shoes in DEE's purse.*

Thought I tole you to git rid'a these?

**Dee**

I forgot.

**Johnny**

Save you the trouble.

*He starts to throw them away.*

**Dee**

Don't you do that, you black bastard. So help me, Johnny.

**Evie**

Aw, let 'er have them things, Nigger! Wha's the big deal?

**Johnny**

'Tend to your own business, bitch. Ain't a minute off your ass for messin' it up las' night.

**Evie**

Excuse me. Didn't know you was starvin' to death.

**Johnny**

*Goes for EVIE but quickly checks himself when she reaches for her purse. He turns back to DEE.*

Look'a here, girl. I ain't gon' have no harness bulls knockin' down yo' door.

**Dee**

All of a sudden you worried about me.

**Johnny**

Jus' git rid'a that crap. Worrin' over sump'm pass, over an' done with.

*CORA enters. A wet newspaper covers her head.*

**Cora**

Lawd'a mercy! Now I gotta do this un'form all over ag'in. Bad as I hate to iron.

**Johnny**

Ironin' for them crackers. Cain't see why you cain't iron for yourself.

**Cora**

This ain't no maid's un'form as any fool kin see. I makes my livin' as a pract'cal nurse. I ain't nobody's maid.

**Johnny**

Somebody tole me they seen you wheelin' a snotty nose, blue-eyed baby th'ough Washin'ton Square the other day.

**Cora**

They was a Wash'ton Square lie. Onlies' baby I wheel aroun' gon' be my own.

**Johnny**

Hell! By the time you an' Shanty git aroun' to somethin' like that . . . you ain't gon' wheel nothin' roun' but a tray'a black-ass coffee.

*DEE and EVIE laugh.*

**Cora**

You cheap husslers don't hit the street, you gon' be sellin' yo' wares in'a home for the cripple an' infirm.

**Evie**

Gon' have to bring ass to git ass.

*CORA comes off her stool. Jerks off shoe. EVIE comes up with a switchblade.*

**Johnny**

Hey! Hey! Git under the bed with that shit!

*He races around bar. Comes between them.*

What the hell's the matter with you, Cora? Cain't you take a little joke?

**Cora**

Don't know why every time I come in here, I gotta be insulted by you an' these here Harlows.

*EVIE still has her knife out.*

**Evie**

Bet if that heifer messes with me, I'll carve her up like'a fat piece'a barbecue.

**Johnny**

Naw you won't neither. Not in here, you won't. Put it away! I said put it away.

*EVIE reluctantly puts knife away.*

**Dee**

Let's get out of here, Evie. She's always pickin' her nose about somethin'.

**Evie**

She don't scare me none. Jus' smells bad, tha's all.

**Dee**

*Looks at her watch.*

Well, I gotta date, and you gotta see your headshrinker, don't you?

**Johnny**

Headshrinker? Damned if Evie ain't gone an' got herself a pimp.

**Evie**

He don't come as expensive as some pimps I know.

**Dee**

*Goes for the coats.*

7 Now, don't you two start up again.





