

# Crumb from the Table of Joy

LYNN NOTTAGE

## The Title

Lynn Nottage adapted the title of her play from the first two lines of Langston Hughes's poem, "Luck," which reads:

*Sometimes a crumb falls  
From the table of joy,  
Sometimes a bone  
Is flung.*

*To some people  
Love is given  
To others  
Only Heaven.*

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## Place and Time

*Crumbs from the Table of Joy* is the story of the Crumps, an African-American family, during their first year in Brooklyn, New York, where they had moved from rural Florida. The action runs from the fall of 1950 to the summer of 1951. Most of the play takes place in the living room of the Crumps' basement apartment. The Crumps are the only colored family living on their block.

## Who's Who

**Godfrey Crump**, 35, grew up a country boy near Pensacola, Florida. He married, and he and his wife Sandra had two girls, Ernestine and Ermina, who are now teenagers. Within the last year, Sandra has died, leaving Godfrey overwhelmed with grief and bearing sole responsibility for the two girls. Never before religious, he has found strength and solace in the Peace Mission Movement, headed by the charismatic religious leader Father Divine. To be close to Father Divine, whom he mistakenly believed lived in New York, he moved with his two daughters to Brooklyn, where he found work as a baker.

**Ernestine Crump**, 17, is Godfrey's older daughter. A senior in high school and a good student, she looks forward to graduation. Movies are her favorite escape, and she dreams of becoming a movie actress. Ernestine also acts as the narrator for the play, shifting back and forth between that role and her role in the story.

**Ermina Crump**, 15, is direct, rebellious, earthy, and very interested in boys. When she first arrives in Brooklyn from the

South, Ermina's new classmates laugh at her homemade country clothes. Ermina fights them "like a wild animal" and wins. But she soon transforms herself from a country to a city girl, picking up city ways and the newest street slang.

**Lily Ann Green**, 35, is Godfrey's sister-in-law, sister of his deceased wife, Sandra. She is Godfrey's polar opposite: outspoken, rebellious, rash, uninhibited and militantly black. She is charismatic and highly intelligent. Like Godfrey and the others, she grew up in the rural south. She left for New York City after scandalizing her small town, blacks as well as whites, by calling on the blacks to take political action against racial injustice. Lily is involved with the Communist Party in Harlem.

**Gerte Schulte**, 30, a former singer and showgirl from Germany, has fled the deprivations of post-war Europe in pursuit of a dream. In her youth, she had become entranced by African-American jazz. "It was freeing to know that someone so far away could give a musical shape to my feelings. I wanted to visit America, to see the people who created this music."

## Red Scare

The years in which the play is set, 1950-1951, were troubled years for the United States. The euphoria that had followed the Allied victory in World War II, and the hopes for a just and peaceful postwar world that had accompanied it, had vanished before the hard realities of the Cold War. The years since 1945 had seen the breakdown of cooperation between the USSR and the other Allies, the Communist takeover of Eastern Europe, the blockade of Berlin by the Soviets and the Allied airlift that responded to it, and, in 1949, the Communist revolution in China and the explosion of the first Soviet atomic bomb. Then in 1950, the North Koreans invaded South Korea, and the United States found itself in another war.

Domestically, cases of espionage were uncovered in which American Communists were implicated and in which military secrets, including information on atomic weapons, had been passed to the Soviet Union. These discoveries, against the background of the threatening international situation, led to an exaggerated fear of domestic Communist subversion, often called the Red Scare. The situation provided a fertile ground for unscrupulous politicians, the most notorious of whom was Senator Joseph McCarthy. From 1950 to 1954, his accusations of disloyalty and espionage defamed many innocent persons and created a poisonous political climate of enforced conformity and distrust. Any person or organization seeking to change the status quo was in danger of being smeared and discredited as "unAmerican."

## Race

For black families like the Crumps, there were additional worries closer to home. The traditional patterns of race prejudice and discrimination were still in place in the early 1950s, although black activism, the policies of the New Deal and the great economic opportunities provided in World War II had begun to weaken them. There had been some signs of change. In 1947, Jackie Robinson was hired by the Brooklyn Dodgers, the first black man to enter the Major Leagues. In 1948, President Truman signed an Executive Order which was to lead to the desegregation of the U.S. armed forces. A series of Supreme Court decisions in cases brought by the NAACP were chipping away at the legal foundations of segregation. But most of the great advances were still in the future. It would be four more years before the Supreme Court in

*Brown v. Board of Education* declared segregation in public education unconstitutional; five years before the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama first brought Martin Luther King, Jr. to prominence; ten years before the sit-in movement to desegregate public facilities in the South began (1960); and a decade and a half before Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 1950, the characters in the play were confronting traditional racism on a daily basis; race is a constant preoccupation in their lives and conversation.

### Father Divine

Father Divine, Godfrey's spiritual "sweet father," does not appear in the play but we hear about him. His Peace Mission Movement attracted many followers, especially during the Depression years of the 1930s.

Born George Baker in Rockville, Maryland, about 1880, the son of former slaves, he grew up in poverty. As a young man, he moved to Baltimore, where he preached in storefront churches. Later he traveled in the South as an itinerant evangelist. His religious belief combined elements from African-American folk religion, various Christian denominations, and New Thought, a religious belief which emphasized the power of positive thinking. His most striking tenet was his claim to be God, an assertion enthusiastically embraced by his followers. He changed his name to Divine and told his followers that by channeling his spirit, they could achieve health, prosperity and salvation. He was a charismatic leader, an inspirational preacher, a shrewd businessman, and he was endowed with extraordinary energy, optimism and self-confidence.

Divine established communal living quarters for his disciples, which he called "heavens." The residents pooled their earnings, which provided funding for Divine's Movement. Disciples lived under strict moral rules: no sexual relations, no alcohol, no tobacco or drugs, no buying on credit, strict honesty, hard work. They often cut family ties and assumed new names. The one religious ritual of the Movement consisted in huge banquets, called Holy Communion, which included sermons by Father Divine and spontaneous songs and testimonials by the assembled disciples.

Unlike many black religious leaders of the time, Divine coupled his spiritual message with political and economic activism.

During the Depression, he provided shelters for the homeless, ran an employment agency, and encouraged job training and education. His followers established many cooperative businesses, which thrived. They actively supported civil rights, in particular federal anti-lynching legislation. He was strongly integrationist: although the majority of his followers were black, he always had a significant number of white adherents.

In spite of his prohibition on sexual relations, Divine was twice married. His first wife was a black disciple who died in 1943. He married his second wife, a 21-year-old white Canadian woman, when he was in his sixties. Both marriages were claimed to be wholly chaste and unconsummated. Each wife was active in the Movement and the second wife took over the leadership on Divine's death in 1965.

The Peace Mission Movement reached its peak in the late 1930s. From 1940 on, the Movement declined both in membership and vitality, although it survived Divine's death in 1965 and still persists, in greatly diminished form, in the Philadelphia area.

### Lynn Nottage

Lynn Nottage was born and brought up in Brooklyn, New York. She received her B.A. with honors from Brown University in 1986, where she majored in American Literature and Creative Writing, and earned her MFA in playwrighting from the Yale School of Drama in 1989.

In addition to *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* (1995), Ms. Nottage's other plays include:

*Poof!* (1993). An abusive husband spontaneously combusts and his wife wonders what would be an appropriate disposition of his ashes. Heideman Award winner in 1992.

*Por'knockers* (1995). A muddled group of American urban terrorists, four blacks and one Jew, burn down an empty Federal office building, intending a dramatic gesture against governmental oppression; by a miscalculation, the fire kills several black neighborhood children. Thrown into disarray, the terrorists debate what to do from their conflicting perspectives.

*Las Meninas* (1996). Based on an actual historical episode: an affair between Marie-Thérèse, wife of Louis XIV of France, and a black man, a dwarf, who was her servant.

*Mud, River, Stone* (1997). Six oddly assorted guests at a rundown hotel in Africa are taken hostage by the hotel's bellboy.

Ms. Nottage's plays have been produced

off-Broadway in New York City and at a number of regional theatres in the United States. She also writes for film, television and radio. With her husband, Tony Gerber, she co-authored the script for the film *Side Streets* which he directed. The film was an official selection at the Venice Film Festival in 1998 and made its North American debut at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival. At present, she is working on a script for Oprah Winfrey's Harpo films.

Ms. Nottage has received a number of commissions, grants and fellowships for her work. She currently has an NEA grant for a year's residency at Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia. She and her husband live in Brooklyn with their two-year-old daughter.

—Robin Foster

### Interview with Lynn Nottage

*How did you come to write Crumbs from the Table of Joy?*

I was originally given a commission to write a play for a multi-generational audience by Second Stage Theatre in New York City. I became fascinated with this period, the 1950s. I was born a decade later, and for me it seemed very far away and very remote, but an extremely important decade in terms of shaping who I am.

*What especially drew you about the period around 1950?*

It was one of the most volatile periods in the United States' history, at the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement. It was an era that's not often dealt with in theatre and in cinema, particularly when we're examining the African-American experience. I wanted a greater understanding of what happened. What was the climate that pushed this nation to the next stage. In 1950, when the play takes place, it was before the Civil Rights Movement. It was before the Women's Rights Movement. The Army was on the verge of desegregating.

*How about the Red Scare and the fear of Communism which are so significant in the play?*

Well, I think that that was one more element that threatened the stability of this African-American family. In the play there is a quote in which the charismatic aunt says, "Red Scare, should be called Black Scare." I think that Communism during that period was often used as a catch-phrase to squelch any sort of African-American movement that threatened the status quo.

*I was interested in your use of Father Divine and the Peace Mission Movement in connection with Godfrey.*

I had a great aunt who was a devout follower of Father Divine. She died when I was still very young; she was 105. But she never married and she had an undivided devotion to this man. I was curious what kind of person would blindly follow a leader. Godfrey is at a point in his life when his wife has died and he's inherited his two teenage daughters. He really doesn't know what to do with his life. Father Divine was a very charismatic leader who came to prominence during the Depression. His Peace Mission still exists today. In fact, in Philadelphia, where I have a theatre residency, there's a big hotel on Broad Street that says "Peace and Blessings" right above the doorway. But he was a very flamboyant and self-aggrandizing evangelist who was also a social activist and used racial tolerance as a cornerstone in his ministry.

*In Crumbs from the Table of Joy and in your other plays, you often deal with the difficulties of race relations in a multicultural society. Would you talk about this a bit?*

I think that one of the common themes throughout all of my plays is the sense of a character feeling alienated from the environment. I think that all of my characters in the play, to a certain extent, feel alienated because of who they are.

*Do you see yourself as an African-American playwright or as a playwright who happens to be African-American?*

I guess that identity is dynamic and changes according to where you are standing. In this society I see myself as an African-American female playwright. Perhaps in the Caribbean I would see myself as an American playwright. If I were in Africa I would see myself as an African playwright. I think that identity changes. But here I see myself as an African-American female playwright.

*What audience do you write for?*

I think I'm writing for myself. I'm answering the questions that I, as an audience member, would ask.

*Your plays deal with a wide variety of settings and time periods and issues and sorts of people. Does this reflect a wide range of interests on your part?*

I grew up in a household that was filled with a great deal of art. And my parents, from the time I was very young, introduced me to many disciplines and many areas of interest. They love theatre, they love music. They love the visual arts and they wanted me to see the world, so travel was very important. Not just travel within the United States. They wanted me to see

the Caribbean and Latin America and Europe. And I think all of those things shaped my particular sensibilities.

*How did you get interested in playwrighting?*

I've always been interested in the theatre, and playwrighting grew out of the fact that I was never quite a very good actor. I didn't have the discipline to be a director and I've always been a fairly good storyteller. So playwrighting was a natural fit for my personality.

*When did you actually start writing plays?*

I wrote my very first play when I was in high school. And then I went to Brown University where I was majoring in science. I was pre-med. And while I was there I began writing plays as an extra-curricular activity. And then, when I couldn't pass organic chemistry, I had to find another major. I discovered that I had taken a lot of theatre courses and I had taken a lot of writing courses, and I sort of slipped into playwrighting.

*Were there any particular teachers who were important in your development there?*

I had two very important teachers. One was George Bass, who's now deceased, who was extremely supportive and nurturing. And Paula Vogel was the first person whom I'd encountered who planted the seed that you could have a fulfilling life in theatre if you were willing to be in it for the duration. It doesn't happen immediately. It takes years and years to break into the marketplace.

*You've done some writing for films and television as well as writing plays. How do you find films and TV compare with plays as ways to tell your stories and express your vision?*

I think that it was Eisenstein who said, "Why use a plow when you can use the tractor?" when he was comparing theatre to film. I thoroughly agree with that, because I think there are certain types of stories that are best told in a theatre when you can communicate directly to an audience and you can hear their response. And the story can grow and evolve and change night after night.

I write film and television basically to make a living, not because it's something I'm particularly drawn to, even though I have enjoyed some of the experiences that I had. I wrote a film with my husband called *Side Streets* which was at the Venice Film Festival and Sundance, and that was a pretty amazing and terrifying experience.

*What are you currently working on?*

I just recently got an NEA grant to be in residence at the Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia. It's an African-American theatre and I'm developing a piece for their theatre school to be presented for a multi-generational audi-

ence. I'm going to be exploring some of the Anansi spider folk tales from Ghana.

*Were there surprises for you in writing Crumbs from the Table of Joy? What did you discover? Did you have the entire play in mind or did it take its own direction as it developed?*

The play took on a life of its own and I followed the characters. One of the discoveries that I made as a playwright, as I was writing it was that my allegiances shifted. Sometimes I was very sympathetic to Godfrey. Sometimes I was very sympathetic to Gerte. Other times I was extremely sympathetic to Lily and Ernestine. So as a result each character is infused with the same amount of love and respect. Hopefully, I don't sit in judgment on any of these characters because the experiences that they bring to the table are all so different.

*In coming north, what did the Crump family members leave behind and what did they bring with them?*

What they left behind is their mother, the woman who bound them together. What they discover is that they're still a family.

*How involved was Lily in the Harlem activities of the time? Had you decided for yourself her degree of real activity in the Movement?*

It shifted in the process of writing as I discovered who she really was. When I began I really idealized this woman. I imagined her to be at the center of the struggle. And then, I realized that she was more of an Everywoman. She wasn't quite as essential as she imagined herself to be, but was essential in that she lived her life according to what she believed.

*And the obstacles were...?*

Who she was: a very outspoken, liberal minded woman in an age before the Civil Rights Movement, before the Women's Rights Movement. I always imagined that she was a woman out of her time. If she had been born twenty years later she would have been someone great. But because she was trapped within her circumstance she met an unhappy fate.

*Though she did pass some embers along, at least to Ernestine.*

All of the characters do. That's what ultimately is the most important journey that Ernestine makes through the play—she has taken little bits, crumbs, from each person she encounters and she is who she is not simply because of Lily, but because of Godfrey and Gerte and Ermina. She's learned valuable lessons from them all.

—Robin Foster and Colleen Curran

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