

The Bluest Eye

Audition Packet

Hello. This packet is full of everything you need in order to audition for ETHS' production of *The Bluest Eye* that performs in May. Here, you can find:

- 1) Information about the play
- 2) Information about our production
- 3) The rehearsal calendar
- 4) Character descriptions
- 5) Audition pieces

First, though, you should know that the auditions will be held the 20th and 21st of this month. Because the play is so small (12-13 actors), I cannot imagine the audition process taking much longer, maybe a day or two of callbacks. If you're new to auditioning at ETHS, the process works like this: you choose a piece from part five. You don't have to memorize it, although that helps. Your emotional connection to the material is the most important part. You should be extremely familiar with your audition piece.

If you choose to audition, you can sign up for a five-minute slot here at the ethstheatre.com site. That five-minute slot is a chance to read your audition piece (again, available in part five of this packet). Then, I'll post a callback list here on the evening of the 21st. Perhaps I'll want to hear you read for a totally different part, or just have you read with someone else I'm considering for a role opposite you. Anyway, I would like to cast it before spring break.

So this means we can head into part one:

The Play

The Bluest Eye is a lot of things, but first it is the tragic story of Pecola Breedlove. This play is based on the novel by Toni Morrison, as it was adapted for Chicago's own Steppenwolf Theatre Company by Lydia Diamond.

Pecola Breedlove is eleven years old at the beginning of the play, and she is pregnant. Pretty much immediately the audience learns that her own father, Cholly Breedlove, has impregnated Pecola. Pecola is seen in the play through the eyes of two sisters who live nearby, Frieda and Claudia. Claudia is the narrator of the story, both in the novel and the play. Once you know the truth of Pecola's pregnancy, Claudia tells the audience that, "There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how."

So the play deals with the how, the circumstances leading up to Pecola's destruction. It is a classic tragedy, like the ones in Shakespeare, but in this case it is not about a European prince, but about a poor black girl in 1940s Ohio who has been taught to hate herself.

The title is about how Pecola wants blue eyes. She has been taught, through movies and culture, that beauty is somehow equivalent to whiteness. She idolizes the white girls in the movies and envies their eyes, thinking that if she had those eyes, she would be loved. (Morrison writes in her introduction, “The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her.”)

But Pecola’s sometime friends, Frieda and Claudia, are fully realized here too, and the play compares the two families. Frieda and Claudia are treasured and supported by their parents (Claudia begins the story being lovingly cared for while sick with the flu), while Pecola’s family destroys her.

Ultimately, the story interrogates Pecola’s parents, Cholly and Pauline. Cholly struggles with his own lack of parental love, and horrifying racist abuse. Pauline is a more loving mother to a white girl in her care than her own daughter.

The play is very gentle with the difficult parts of the story. The incestuous rape that is the graphic climax to the novel is very subtle, and virtually unseen in the play. The play also eliminates many of the supporting characters from the novel. For example, Pecola no longer has a brother. The play has humor and love and poetry. To be sure, though, the story is deeply sad.

Part Two: The Production

Some facts:

This play is for an all-Black cast. There are no white characters in it, or, more accurately, the three white characters are voiced by Black members of the ensemble. If I can’t cast all the roles, we can’t do the show. It’s that simple.

Our production, for now, will only have two performances, at the end of May, Thursday and Friday, May 24th and 25th. We have no Saturday night show because of prom. If there is another time the cast and crew can schedule a performance, I am 100% on board.

This is a play that is all about language and style. The style means here that characters jump in and out of talking realistically with each other, and then commenting on those conversations and events with the audience.

There is no set. The stage is bare, with functional furniture. The costumes and props will be visible onstage throughout the performance. The stage lighting and the sound design will be complicated and beautiful, but beyond that the play will be simply performed and directed, with the intention of getting further into the minds of the main characters, Pecola and Frieda and Claudia and Cholly and Pauline and Soaphead Church.

The Rehearsal Calendar

Compared to every other play we do here, this is incredibly short. This means that actors cast in the show need to come in with the material memorized for the first day of rehearsal.

Beyond that, your rehearsal schedule depends on the size of your part. If you play Claudia or Pecola, you can expect to be called most days from 4-6:30. Daddy (Claudia’s father) would be called much less.

Schedule:

Monday, April 30: 2:30-6:30

Tuesday, May 1: 4-6:30

Wednesday, May 2: 4-6:30

Thursday, May 3 4-6:30

Friday, May 4: 4-6:30

Saturday, May 5: 10-4

Monday, May 7: 2:30-6:30

Tuesday, May 8: 4-6:30

Wednesday, May 9: 4-6:30

Thursday, May 10: 4-6:30

(Friday and Saturday are off for YAMO auditions)

Pretech. Rehearsals get a little longer.

Monday, May 14: 2:30-8

Tuesday, May 15: 4-8

Wednesday, May 16: 4-8

Thursday, May 17: 4-8

Friday, May 18: 4-8

Tech Week begins Saturday, May 19: 9-6

Tech week:

Monday, May 21: 2:30-10

Tuesday, May 22: DRESS REHEARSAL 4-10

Wednesday, May 23: FINAL DRESS REHEARSAL 4-10

Performance: May 24—6:00 Call

Performance: May 25—6:00 Call

Character Descriptions

Pecola Breedlove: The tragic heroine of the piece. Her story ends in madness. Completely innocent. The audience must love her and want to take care of her, but not pity her. She has a certain quiet pride. She is called ugly until she believes it. She is still a child, though, one who plays and laughs and doesn't understand that she is doomed. She is eleven.

Claudia McTeer: It is her voice we hear describing the events of the story. She speaks from adulthood. She is trying to figure out how this could have happened in a universe in which she is loved and cared for by her parents and her sister. But again, she is young, younger than Pecola. She must be able to move gracefully between the innocence of youth and the wisdom of the narrator who has lived through it all.

Frieda McTeer: Frieda is Claudia's smart, funny, observant older sister. She watches Pecola with her sister, but is a little saltier, more practical, a little more judgmental.

She is the narrator of the play as well, and she and Claudia must have an intimate connection—they tease each other, support each other, affirm each other's interpretation of events.

Pauline Breedlove: Pecola's mother. Pecola has to call her, "Mrs. Breedlove." She has an intense, violent relationship with Cholly. Painfully shy and insecure. She has pretty much emotionally deserted her family in exchange for the white family that employs her. Her life is ruined by a bad tooth.

Cholly Breedlove: Pecola's father. He suffers a terrible trauma in his youth, and thereafter his hatred is directed towards the women in his family. He is an abusive drunk, but we see him before, as a young man, with potential to love. So the actor must be able to play both the person he was, and the broken, cruel man he becomes. Diamond describes him as the shell of a man who may have been physically impressive at one time.

Mama: Frieda and Claudia's mother, she can be tough but is a loving parent.

Daddy: Funny, sweet and endlessly capable, this is Frieda and Claudia's father, who again is a supportive and instructive parent, standing opposite the Breedloves.

Maureen Peal: Maureen is eleven as well, a young woman who is a little closer than any of the others to Pecola's standard of beauty. Lighter-skinned and higher class, Maureen is almost a figure of awe to Pecola. This actor also plays the voice of the doll (the white child for whom Mrs. Breedlove cares).

Soaphead Church: A mysterious man who is another monster. Soaphead works doing psychic readings and casting spells. At the end of the story, Pecola comes to him while pregnant to ask for the eyes she so passionately desires. Soaphead exacts a cruel price, and promises her the eyes, something he cannot deliver. Soaphead is more educated than the other men in the story, and his voice reflects that education, but he is a cruel villain.

Beyond that, there are scenes with the women of the town, a group of three-five, who comment on the action, or gossip about the characters, depending on your perspective. I don't have pieces here for Daddy, as his speeches are all quite short. There is also Darlene, a young woman from Cholly's youth seen in flashback.

Audition Pieces

FRIEDA/CLAUDIA

They switch off as speakers, but this is the narration that opens the play.

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. Not even the gardens fronting the lake show 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. The seeds shriveled and died; Pecola's baby too. There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how. Pecola came to us in autumn.

MAMA

This is Mama caring for her children. Her love should come through, regardless of the sternness of the words.

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, stuff and 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. 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

This is Claudia reflecting on her parents, and their love.

Mama's hands are large and rough. She wraps the flannel around my neck and chest and covers me up with heave quilts. Mama meant well. In our household there was love. Love from Mama and Daddy, thick and dark. 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. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die.

PECOLA:

This is her first extended speech in the show, and the entire character is in it.

Please, God. Make me invisible...Please. Amen. 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. 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. 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.

MRS. BREEDLOVE:

This is the speech in which she goes to the movies and goes from pride in her appearance to being convinced she is ugly.

Anyway I was just sitting there, all in the picture, thinking I looked cute, when I bit down on a piece of candy and my front tooth comes clean out its socket. I could of cried. There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and my front tooth's gone. Didn't care no more after that. I just settled down to being ugly, and goin' to them pictures just made me more ugly. Then Cholly starting into makin' fun of the way I looked and that hurt me somethin' terrible. So, me and Cholly was fighting even more. I swear I tried to kill him, but he didn't hit me too hard, I guess 'cause I was pregnant. He used to make me madder than anything I knowed. I 'spect I made him mad too, and so that was just what our life looked like from then on.

MAUREEN:

Maureen is very knowledgeable and also a little full of herself, but she means well. She is talking to Pecola, Claudia and Frieda.

My name is Maureen Peal. We just moved here. Your name is Pecola? Wasn't that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*? The picture show, you know. Where this mulatto girl hates her mother 'cause she's black and ugly, but then she cries at the funeral. It was real sad. Everybody cries in it. Anyway, when it comes back I'm going to see it again. My mother has seen it four times. My mother told me that a girl where we used to live went to the beauty parlor and asked the lady to fix her hair like Hedy Lamarr's and the lady said, "Yeah, when you grow some hair like Hedy Lamarr's!"

PECOLA:

I take the same sidewalk, past the same crack. Past the same dandelions. Come to think of it, maybe they are weeds. Yes, they are ugly. Ugly weeds. Nobody would think a weed is pretty. You would have to be stupid to think a weed is pretty. (She stomps on the dandelion.) I sit on the edge of the empty playground. I like the playground when it is empty. It is safe and quiet. Before I eat my Mary Janes, I look at each one. Each pretty little girl. Each girl's name is Mary Jane and she has blonde curls and big blue eyes. And she looks at me with those pretty eyes and she is my friend. I eat the candy, and it is almost like I am Mary Jane. Lovely, lovely Mary Jane. Beautiful, happy Mary Jane.

CHOLLY:

Cholly here is discussing his childhood and his parentage.

'Bout all Aunt Jimmy would tell me 'bout my daddy was he didn't stay around long enough to see Mama's stomach get big with me. Hard to say how my life with Aunt Jimmy was. Seems like you just take life as it comes when you're up in the middle of it. I do recollect sometimes when I be watching Aunt Jimmy cross the table, eating collard greens with her fingers or sucking on her gold teeth, I would wonder if it might have been just as well if I died there on that junk heap where my mama left me.

CHOLLY:

This is Cholly narrating the climax of the play, when he attacks Pecola. He is speaking and using his name in the third-person.

Cholly say her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt. He became aware that he was uncomfortable; but then, like so many times before, his uncomfortableness started to feel like pleasure. Then guilt. Then pity. Then love. She was just a child, why wasn't she happy? He wanted to break her neck. Why did she have to look so whipped? What could he do for her—ever? What could he give to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year old daughter? If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes.

SOAPHEAD CHURCH:

Soaphead meets Pecola and, in exchange for murdering his neighbor's dog, agrees to cast a spell to give Pecola her blue eyes. Here, he writes to God.

Dear God: The purpose of this letter is to familiarize you with facts which have either escape your notice, or which you have chosen to ignore. A little black girl came to me. Do you know what she came for? She came for blue eyes. New blue eyes, she said. Like she was buying shoes. "I'd like a pair of new blue eyes." She must have asked you for them for a very long time, and you haven't replied. She came to me. Did you forget about the children? Yes. You forgot. You let them go wanting, crying next to their dead mothers. You forgot, Lord. You forgot how and when to be God.

SOAPHEAD CHURCH:

Here, Soaphead gives his sales pitch.

Elihue Micah Whitcomb, aka Soaphead Church. Spiritualist. Psychic Reader and Interpreter of Dreams. If you are unhappy, discouraged, or in distress, I can help you. Does bad luck seem to follow you? Has the one you loved changed? I can help. Questions of truth, honesty, faith and deceit—I will reveal the truth. I will tell you who your enemies and friends are, and if the one you love is true or false.