

RIDING A PEACOCK

An original play by: Viney Loretta Moore

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Joyce Withers

Otis Withers

Madelein Jones

Lawrence (Larry) Chambers

Irma Morris

Elijah Chambers

Lena Johnson

Time: The middle 1980's

Place: The New York City suburbs

RIDING A PEACOCK is a play about life as it affects two young successful African/American families. One family rises from the "Ghetto," and the other comes out of the Black elite. The play's focus is upon an aspiring writer named Joyce Withers. As much as it is powerful with interpretations of life, RIDING A PEACOCK is packed with incredibly lively characters and humor. RIDING A PEACOCK is a rich, revelatory, delightful concoction.

ACT ONE

Scene One

(Lights come up)

The lovely suburban home of Joyce and Otis Withers. Some friends and relatives have gathered for a summer barbecue. Joyce and Madelein, her mother, come take a seat on a nice bench in the backyard. They have a plate of food they are enjoying. Quietly, voices of others and some cool-sounding jazz music softly playing can be heard in the background.

MADELEIN

(Eating)

This is some house you and Otis have here, Joyce! Your backyard looks like a small park.

My..my...my!

(Both women chuckle)

You younger Black women have life good! I had to work like a horse when I was your age. No, not like a horse, like a mule. A horse will work just so much and then he'll balk on you. A ole mule will work from sun up 'til you get done with him. Actually, I had to work hard all my life, from the time I was a young girl. And, when I married your father, it didn't get any better; it got worse. I had to work hard as I did 'cause your father needed my help. Our men couldn't make it back then without us. Your father would be proud of where you have come.

(Looking around, smiling proudly)

A big, beautiful home, two wonderful sons, a successful, loving husband, and somebody to come in once a week and clean. And, you a Translator, working at the United Nations.

JOYCE

(Smiling)

We have deer. The boys are all excited about that. About three deer came and stood at our picture window the other day and were staring at us in the family room.

MADELEIN

(Shaking head; looking displeased, then looks around nervously)

Joyce, aren't you all afraid? Y'all be careful. Don't get too close to them. Especially Otis Jr. and Daniel.

JOYCE

(Smilingly)

They run away when you get too close. Deer won't bite.

MADELEIN

(Her opinion's different; and her face demonstrates it)

They got teeth, don't they?

JOYCE

(Laughing as she speaks)

Mother, you're a mess. No, but I do have concerns about ticks. Deer ticks. Otis and the boys and I might want to be cautious for that reason. Don't want to get Lyme Disease.

MADELEIN

(Laughter, music and conversation still going on in background. Madelein is half-serious, half-lighthearted)

You know. It's something how out here, y'all have birds, and chipmunks, and squirrels and deer. Know what I noticed...that you don't see no squirrels in Black neighborhoods,

instead of squirrels, we have Rats. But, now in White neighborhoods in the City, you see squirrels. Now, isn't that something? You young, Black professional women have it made. We worked like Dogs!

JOYCE

(Chuckling)

Mama, you mean, like Mules...remember...like Mules...

(Both laugh heartily. Smiling, Madelein and Joyce rise, someone approaching)

(Lights go off. Curtains open on new scene, lights come up)

Scene Two

The upscale New York City Law office of Otis Withers and Lawrence (Larry) Chambers.

(Sitting at his desk with a worried expression. Larry sitting on the edge of Otis' desk is going through some papers in his hand)

OTIS

Yeah, man. I'm all confused. Joyce wants to leave her great job at the UN and become a writer.

LARRY

(Continues to ruffle through papers)

Don't you have to be at home to do that? And you don't get a paycheck?

OTIS

You right on both issues.

LARRY

I'd be deeply concerned if my wife made the kind of money Joyce makes. But she doesn't, and she's not about to quit being a school teacher. No, man, you know, there's another way to look at this. It's what she wants to do. And let's face it...you can afford a 'Writer' in your household.

OTIS

I guess you're right...on both counts...I won't try to stop her. I just thought I'd run it by you to see what you thought.

LARRY

(Starts smiling)

Otis, man, did you know that 'smugness' is a form of bigotry, plain, old bigotry? And if we ain't careful, we can fall into it. Look at us. We live in exclusive suburban communities, in big, extravagant houses, our children are in private schools, and we belong to a country club. That's a far cry from where I came. Me, Lawrence Chambers, from the ghettos of Atlanta, GA. See, man you're upper-crust, cultured, a member of the Black elite. If it hadn't been for football and a Georgia Tech scholarship, hey, I don't know where I'd be, my butt could be scrounging around in dumpsters for something to eat.

(Here, he starts to laugh)

Or I could be like my ole man, catchin' a dollar here and there. That might not be so bad, 'cause he be chasin' them 'Hammas'! I found out something, it's amazing the way you have to find your way around in this high-class world. Now, see a lot of that social stuff probably is commonplace to you. Man, I can remember the first time I had exposure to the elite life in a social way, man that stuff can em-barr-rass your behind!

OTIS

(Shaking his head from side to side)

It wasn't anything like you think it was. Indeed, my parents were educators, my father a college president, and my mother a high school principal, but remember, we lived down south, when it was.

(With an approving smile)

But, you go on with your story, and me and my bourgeois self will listen, and I know I'll laugh my butt off...

LARRY

As you well know, before you and I got together in this Law Practice, I was in a white firm...McCormack and Levin. It was the first time I'd gone to such a high-class restaurant. Remember, I didn't know Doodley about the social graces, the proper table settings, and all that kind of thing, but I was determined to act like I did. My co-leagues and I were to meet there an important client. Being a new lawyer, I was nervous about such a big client, so I'd gotten there early, a whole half-hour ahead of time, in fact. While I'm sittin' there waiting, I see that there's tea on the table, and so I decide to have some. I

reached for the tea, one of those round, glass containers. While I'm tryin' to appear all proper, I'm puttin' in about ten teaspoons of sugar, and as I'm doin' this, I'm thinking 'this is one big-ass teacup. I'd drunk half the container of tea when my two co-leagues turned up, and sat down. We exchanged greetings, and then, one reached for the container, saying: "I'll just have a cup of tea, and started to pour into his cup. What about you, Don, and you Larry?" I almost wanted to slide under the table. Uh, no thanks, I told him.

(Both men laugh uproariously)

OTIS

Man, you always come up with these outlandish tales. Where do you get all of this stuff?

(Regains his composure)

But, you know something, I might have thought that little teapot was mine, too. I mean, that little Alabama town I was brought up in was not exactly the center of the universe, even on the White side of town. You know, somebody of the caliber of my father, a college president, still was restricted down south. Jim Crow laws were just as enforceable for him as for the Black man who was the gardener for Mr. Charlie. I can recall our family going north every summer so my parents could pursue graduate degrees when my father wanted to become a college president and my mother wanted to go for a job as a school principal. We would drive up to Philadelphia and stay with my father's sister's family, so that my parents could attend the University of Pennsylvania. Post-graduate courses weren't offered at Black colleges near us, although they were at the White

Alabama colleges or universities but Blacks were not allowed. On those annual trips to Philadelphia, my brother, Daniel and me, and my parents made, my father would tell us “Go pee, and do whatever else you have to do before we leave home, ‘cause once we hit that highway, we’re not doing a whole lot of stopping.” And, he would take off, and drive almost non-stop. Then, to me and my brother, our daddy was our action hero in a race car zooming toward the finish line. I didn’t know that he didn’t want to have to be confronted, and was avoiding white men, at all cost, including putting his family’s life in danger, driving without sleep for eighteen, twenty hours.

(They shake their heads, chuckling)

We were hooked up though, Mama had packed a lunch loaded down with fried chicken, baloney sandwiches, pound cake, sweet potato pie, potato salad, boiled eggs, fruit, cookies, everything, I can even remember taking toilet tissue.

LARRY

(Laughing)

Back in the day, they didn’t want to have to rely on stopping anywhere for anything. You know, Negroes used ta take those trips going north or south and they drove straight through without stopping ta sleep. It was a kind of contest a bragging rights with them, they would brag about how fast they would drive from say, Georgia to New York or Philadelphia. They were always stretchin’ the truth. “Man, we did it in record time.” Or, “Man, we was rollin.” And, of course, they had a good supply of liquor on the trip with them.

OTIS

One time though, I remember that my daddy almost got us all killed. He fell asleep at the wheel, the car was swerving, headed for a ditch, the car swaying woke mama up. She grabbed the water jug and doused daddy good! Saved our lives. Daddy would sometimes point out tracks along the road and tell us that the good ole boys must have been burning rubber the night before. He said that on those ole country back roads they'd get drunk and rev up their trucks, and race their trucks around making the figure eight for fun.

(Falls into a sad state)

When you're young and in your parents' care you don't see all of the risks, and know about all of the disappointments; you're safe and secure.

LARRY

Man, I hear ya, but you didn't have to go through half the disappointments growing up in high society that I did growing up poor!

OTIS

It's not what you think; we were a pretty ordinary family. Just because my father and mother did get the special treatment in the Black community, but my daddy treated my brother and me like any other caring father; we weren't treated like we were special. He'd play ball with us, and carry us to all of the games from the time we were babies. I don't think that our position in the Black community made too big an impact on me, see I always knew that if I stepped out of where I lived, I wasn't going to be treated any different from anybody else who was Black. Knowing that kept me humble.

LARRY

(Smiling)

Man, you could make the choice to be humble. When you 'PO,' you ain't got no choice, 'Humble' is all around you. I was raised in the Atlanta ghetto, a community running over with CHILDREN and 'PO'NESS.' Where I lived, "Porgy and Bess" ain't had nothin' on me. My daddy left the scene when it got to be too many of us. And when he left us and our mother we only got poorer. It was a challenge for my mother, and she did the best she could, working in White folks' houses. We ate so many 'neck-bones' and gravy over rice!

(Stretching his neck like a giraffe, laughing all the while)

Is my neck extra long to you? You don't have to say so, I know it is. It was all Dem 'Neck-Bones' we had growing up. My daddy didn't help out much financially, he had to finance himself and all of his women. You know my father.. .

OTIS

Or, trying to get the money to finance his latest business scheme.

(They break into laughter)

What was his latest one? A goat ranch? Or was it an ostrich farm?

LARRY

My ole man followed me to New York, just so he could pinch off me, he don't know that every bit of this 'Load' he thinks that I have is accounted for down to the last penny.

Anyway, you know that Sharon ain't lettin' me get up off of anything, she wants it all for her and the three kids. Speaking of family. Are you and Joyce sending Daniel and Otis Jr. to summer camp this year? See, that's another thing. With this affluence thing comes decisions. Decisions about the kinds of schools you send your children, and you have to find the best summer camps; they can't just play all summer, like I did when I was growing up. We played in the streets in the hot sun all day long, until summer was over and we went back to school. Decisions! Decisions!

OTIS

(Cajoling Larry; both are chuckling)

Hey, Larry, stop tryin' ta sell Wolf Tickets.' What you make? 300 thou? Un-huh, came here lookin' for a J-O-B. Man you wuz lookin' bad...five years ago, and I hooked you up, took you on as a law partner. See, see I remember. 'Came in here wid' yo' big ole platter-sized Afro. 'Couldn't afford no shampoo, or soap, and it was all seeded, looked like you wuz waitin' for flowers ta grow in it; a piece a turf....

LARRY

(Cracking up)

Here you go, Man, here you go.....

OTIS

'Mouth was white and dry you were so hungry and desperate for a J-O-B. You ain't doin' nothin' but talkin' that talk! You came here, it was wintertime, and your little coat was all

frayed around the collar and weak, thin as Kleenex. Un huh, done got too big ta eat chit'lins, pig feet, po'k chops...yeah...

(The two best friends are laughing uproariously as scene ends)

Scene Four

Curtains are closed and stage is dark. Joyce and Madelein come out going to the left and right standing in front of closed curtain. Spotlight disperses the darkness, and shines on them.

JOYCE

(Pacing or walking slowly across stage as she speaks. She stops at the middle.

Madelein stands still as a manikin)

My old neighborhood was rough, even back when I was growing up there. Nevertheless, it had some wholesome qualities; and many good, decent people.

(Chuckles)

Some interesting people...we even had a chemist. Well, not a real chemist, but we had Mr. Walker. He and his wife lived next door. Mr. Walker made hair pomade for women. He made it down in his basement, cellar as we used to call it. The hair grease was supposed to make your hair grow. He sold it to the women in the community...those who would trust it enough to buy it. My mother bought it and began using it on me and my

sister Noonie, until she heard Mrs. Walker say she would never put that stuff on her head that her husband made.

MADELEIN

(From where she is on the side)

It wasn't easy for my girls, growing up in that neighborhood. The children they grew up around could be rough sometimes. My girls weren't the rough, tough type. It was times I had to defend Joyce and Noonie myself. I'd go out there and tell those children something. The children who tormented my girls probably did it out of jealousy; and couldn't help it. It was because of all of the poverty going on around them, some of those children came from big families, and their parents just didn't earn enough to half take care of them. See, my husband Charles and me just had the two girls. But, basically, as I see it, poor folks used ta make the most of what they had.

(Shaking her head and beginning to chuckle)

My brother, Wilson, who's not around anymore, was so funny. He was always observing folks. He used ta say that he used ta wonder how in the world poor Negroes, as he called them then, could find so much to laugh about. It didn't matter how tough life was, you could go into their communities, and the houses could be crumbling down all around them, but it would be a group of men, some didn't have any jobs, standing around on the corner, passin' 'round a bottle... and just fallin' down laughing! I guess he was right about that. I'm one of those people. People say I always got my mouth wide open laughing. I can usually find somethin' ta laugh about. If I hadn't na laughed, I would have been one cryin' somebody. Believe me, life didn't always embrace me, I have seen

some dim times. I lost my husband soon after Joyce and Noonie were grown and gone, and before he and I could enjoy the little savings we had managed to accumulate after working so long and hard, just when we might have been able to start enjoyin' ourselves, just the two of us. But, who ever said that life was fair!

JOYCE

(Slowly leaves middle of stage to return to her side of stage)

When I was growing up, I saw my parents struggle to raise my sister Noonie and me. I'll never forget how hard they both worked all of the time. Mama used to assemble parts for machines, and my father was a welder at a machine manufacturing plant. They considered themselves blessed to have those jobs, even though the work was hard and the hours long. Noonie and I were little, and Mama came home every day tired, and had to take care of all of the things you do to care for a family. Back then we didn't have a washing machine so Mama would have to wash clothes in the bathtub and use a rub board or scrub board. I've seen her put a load in the bathtub to soak all day, and in the evening, wash and sometimes after our baths, she would let a load soak over night, and get up extra early to wash and hang the clothes out on the line. Those were the times when women starched and ironed. Remember when starch meant a box of Argo or Niagra that you had to boil and then pour into the washtub, dip the clothes in, hang the clothes to dry and then you would sprinkle and iron. Mama used to nibble on starch. She told Noonie and me that when she was pregnant with us, she used to crave starch. It's something southern Black women have been known to do, eating starch, especially when they're expecting. Along those lines, Mama calls disposable diapers 'paper diapers,'

she's not up with this modern generation. Mama could mean that it's so much going on in society that she doesn't understand, or she could be referring to the bad state of the world with her remark, "It's so much out there today." This is just an aside, but 'was I in for a rude awakening' when I went away to school. I was fortunate enough to attend Radcliffe College, in Cambridge, Massachusetts; it's the partner school for Harvard, a women's college, that so extraordinary and illustrious that it's one of the highest-ranking colleges in America. Boy, was I out of my league. These girls were from rich families, they drove around campus in their luxury cars, had had nannies, servants, gone to Europe, Asia and even some had been to Africa. They had homes all over the world, vacationed in Vail or Aspen. I learned so much, I guess you could say that it was almost as if I'd gone to another planet. I found out that there were a lot of cultural differences out there. My ideas about a lot of things changed.

(Chuckling)

Taking a shower was not something we did, we took baths at my house. We didn't have one, and didn't take them. I saw these girls go into this booth called a shower, and turn on the water, I wondered how I was going to fit in that small rectangle, and how I was going to stop the water from going down the drain. The first time I ever took a shower, I was so nervous and cautious when I turned on the water, and stepped you would have thought that I had to part the Red Sea or swim across the English Channel or the Atlantic Ocean. A real startling thing was when I discovered that these girls did this, took a shower every day, regardless! Now, this is a bit embarrassing to admit, but Mama would have never agreed with that. Her belief was that you don't get all of that water on you at that time of the month. Another surprise was realizing that the wealthy co-eds at that

prestigious college went to spas, and had professionals to taking care of everything for them. I had never even had a professional manicure, and certainly had not heard of having your body 'hot waxed.' If you want to call her one, Mama was our manicurist. She would cut our toenails and fingernails with a single edged razor blade, and I just thought that was the way everybody did it. In some ways I agree with her, and I miss the softness that I used to feel curl around my life as a child. I don't part with the past easily either. I miss my old neighborhood church. Temple Baptist wasn't in some big, magnificent building and didn't cater to the elite, but it was CHURCH! From the minister to the smallest child, everybody who came there experienced something unshakable and real; the Holy Spirit was in Temple Baptist! I can just hear that good old gospel choir singing now: (She looks wistful and as though moved by the spirit) At Temple Baptist we had Real Christians. St. Mark United Methodist, the church my family and I go, looks like a cathedral.

(Scrunches up her mouth and face into an expression of snobbery)

We're all so sophisticated, so refined, so elite; and so busy tryin' to out-dress, out-profession , out-class, out-perform, out-money everybody else. It's a proving ground with everybody trying to grab the attention of the Pastor and others, a place where the congregation is made up of peacocks always preening. And believe me, none of us 'PEACOCKS' can stand one another.

(Lights go down. Stage is dark)

Scene Five

(Lights come up)

The office of Otis Withers and Larry Chambers: Attorneys at Law. The two are discussing a big corporate takeover they are handling.

LARRY

(Sitting on the edge of Larry's desk, in his hands is a pile of papers he is going through. Larry is hanging up the telephone)
Corporate takeovers happenin' all over the place. Ever since Reagan's been in office..

OTIS

Hey, Larry, as I see it, Talley and Levin should have no trouble with the takeover.

(Just then, in walk Elijah Chambers and Lena, his twenty-nine-year-old girlfriend. He's holding her hand; he's in a hurry, and is almost pulling her. Larry and Otis, who are especially busy, look up with expressions of disappointment at seeing them and being interrupted)

ELIJAH

(Pulling a handful of papers out of his jacket pocket, and then taking a handkerchief from his pant pocket, wiping his forehead. Lena stands next to him with a dense look on her pretty face. He's breathless with excitement)

Son, I got a good, good one this time.

LARRY

(His face shows plenty of irritation, but he uses a controlled voice)

Dad, Otis and me are real, real busy! This might be one of the biggest cases we'll ever handle...we're talkin' Billions, as in B...So could you and your little lady friend come back say, two weeks from today..

OTIS

Yes, Mr. Chambers, Larry and I have some big, big business going on here.

EILJAH

(Looks disappointed)

But I have somethin' big to tell you. It could mean that you and me could end up millionaires. I'm not talkin' about somebody else's money I'm talkin' about the kind of money We could end up with.

LENA

(Cuddles up to Elijah)

Don't forget about ME, your fiance, as a part of the deal, Liii-gy Sweety!

(Then turns her attention to Larry, and is nasty)

Mr.Larry Chambers, my name is Lena. Did you forget my name again? Afterall, I am your father's fiance.

LARRY

Well now, Lena, I wish to apologize. It's just that my father had another young lady here just last week, and she looked powerfully like you...young, pretty and uh, pretty stupid!

(She starts for him but Elijah pulls her back)

ELIJAH

Look here now, we ain't got no time to be fightin' and carryin' on with all of this money to be made...

OTIS

(His head in his hands, he looks thoroughly disgusted and impatient)

You got that right, Mr. Chambers. We got a lot of money to make, and Larry and me ain't makin' no head-way with you and your girl, I mean fiance are keeping us from doin' just that.

ELIJAH

(Handing the papers in his hand to his son, excitedly, and with pleading look)

Son, I want to go into the FRIED TURKEY business. What do you think about it?

LARRY

(Reluctantly accepts papers)

Fried turkey! Dad, for about five years you been comin' in here askin' for money to invest in your hair-brain schemes. And, I been turnin' you down. Lately, you're comin' up with ALL these ANIMAL Notions: ostriches, llamas, and now this is just another one, only this one is worse. ..turkeys, Next it'll be peacocks, I imagine!

EILJAH

(Looks desperate as he tries to plead his case. Gets closer to his son; sits on the opposite side of Otis on the desk)

Son, not just turkeys... Fried Turkeys. And, you right, some of that stuff I came to you with, like those other animals didn't make no sense. I don't care a damn about no ranchin' and farmin.' When I was a boy of thirteen and left those Georgia cotton fields, let me tell you somethin,' I never looked back. You know those signs ya see on lawns of private and gov'ment buildings and sech, that say, "Grassy Areas, Keep Off." Well, they don't have to tell that to me, 'cause I ain't even ever stepped foot on the GRASS in Central Park. And where yall live, I don't want to live in the suburbs, too much grass and trees for me! I ain't talkin' 'bout raisin' turkeys, the turkeys I'm talkin' 'bout already raised up, they feathers plucked, clean and everything. I want ta fry those buzzards and sell the Hell out of 'em. That's how you get FRIED TURKEYS.

LENA

(Looking and sounding all-knowing, without deserving to)

Down in Atlanta, FRIED TURKEY is BIG! People are buying 'em up. Ain't they, Liii-gy, Sweetie?

OTIS

The word is out. I've heard that it's BIG down in Atlanta. But do you think the Fried Turkey business will fly in New York City?

LARRY

They have so many food industries going on in New York, I doubt that one more eating establishment would stand a chance, especially one selling Fried Turkey.

ELIJAH

(Leans over nearer to his son, he's desperate to get his idea across)

The truth of the matter is, people are falling all over one another getting' into it. Some restaurants are doin' it down south. They's some that's cookin' in they houses and sellin' to friends and by word of mouth. What I plan to do event''sly is 'franchise' this thing. Get it goin,' and then put it out there like The Colonel did, and Mr. McDonald, and Mr. Wendy, and all the rest did.

(Larry and Otis eye each other, and begin nodding as if the idea is not unreasonable. Elijah's eyes widen with optimism. With her hand on her hip, Lena is staring at them with a flirtatious smile, thinking that she swayed them with her sexiness. The four positioned this way for a minute or so, when Larry lowers his head and begins reading the material handed to him by his father. After a second, he looks up at his co-league nodding his approval. Elijah's face lights up as Larry hands the paperwork to Otis, who quickly reads over it, and nods his approval. He hands it back to Larry)

LARRY

(Pointing to a place on the paper)

Dad, here, read this last section, here, sign it, and then I'll put my signature on it for a loan big enough for you to lease a small storefront in Queens, and that will cover the equipment and product you will need.

(Elijah takes the paper, tries to read it but can't. He looks toward Lena. She immediately goes into her pocketbook and instead of a magnifying glass, takes out a small bottle of liquor. She shows great embarrassment, and quickly puts it back, but not without Larry and Otis seeing it. They're laughing, and so is Elijah. She gets the magnifying glass and hands it to Elijah. Laughter continues as the lights go out and curtains come down)