A COMPANION GUIDE TO PLAY AND PRODUCTION
BY LUCAS H. REILLY

STICK FLY
by Lydia R. Diamond

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The Play in 100 Words

The wealthy LeVay family is spending the weekend at their house on Martha’s Vineyard. Sons Kent and Flip have brought their significant others along: Taylor is a Black academic who came up in meager circumstances, while Kimber, though white, fits more smoothly in the world of affluence and upper-crust culture. As patriarch Joe and daughter of the family’s housekeeper, Cheryl, complicate the dynamics between the couples, tensions between race, wealth, and class intensify and relationships are pushed to their breaking point.

Happy Couple in Oak Bluffs, Martha’s Vineyard, Circa 1950

Definitions

**Wampanoag**: One grouping of Peoples indigenous to Massachusetts and Rhode Island. A loose confederation of over 60 tribes in the 17th century, they once encompassed all of what is now Western Massachusetts and Eastern Rhode Island.

**Noepe**: From the language of the Wampanoag, this is the name (loosely meaning Dry Land) for the land designated today as Martha’s Vineyard, a large island south of Cape Cod.

**Summer Colony**: A summer retreat for the wealthy—destinations along the beaches of New England became popular excursions, vacation spots, and second homes for the elite of the rising cities of the Northeast. Martha’s Vineyard was and arguably is still one prominent Summer Colony.

**Economic Inequality**: Disparities of income and wealth between different members/strata of a particular society.

**Racial Inequality**: a disparity in opportunity and treatment that occurs as a result of someone’s race.

**Intersectionality**: the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.
Lydia R. Diamond: Her Life and Work So Far

Born in Detroit in 1969, Lydia R. Diamond is a decorated and internationally renowned playwright whose work spans from a stage adaptation of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* to a keen style of contemporary realism (as in *Stick Fly*) that cuts through the noise and explores the tension between who we are on the outside and our true selves. An exciting voice in the American Theatre, Diamond’s voice is dynamic and nuanced.

There is racial economic inequality... All you can do is point it out. When you’ve been doing that for so long, you can see people roll their eyes. ‘Oh, there she goes again.’ But maybe it’s not my turn anymore to scream about it into the wind. It’s now for somebody younger to do that. - Lydia R Diamond

Educated at Northwestern, she has gone on to teach Playwrighting at some of the most prestigious schools in the US, including DePaul University, Boston University, and Columbia College Chicago. Following somewhat in the footsteps of her mother, she has found a home in the academic world, not entirely unlike Taylor in *Stick Fly*. Her work has been produced off and on-Broadway, at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, and *Smart People* (along with *Stick Fly*) have seen successful runs on the regional theatre circuit across the United States.

Her work often lives in the murky water of identity, particularly where social truths like race and class intersect with the universality of love, feeling, family, and instinct. As you watch the play, consider how the playwright chooses to draw the lines between characters’ identities, and where those lines end.

Lydia is courageous to write about class and race in such a broad and complicated way. It’s not about assigning blame. It’s about the universality of family and identity. - Theatre Director Kenny Leon

An Interview with Director, Jada Suzanne Dixon

Denver-raised Director, Actor, Playwright, and Teaching Artist Jada Suzanne Dixon directs this production of *Stick Fly*. One of Denver’s leading theatre artists, she is a company member at Curious Theatre Company, as well as an Associate Artist with Local Lab Theatre. You also may have seen her as Julia in the virtual play *The Family Tree* produced by the Arvada Center last season. The following interview is a firsthand look into her vision for this play, production, and how it fits into today’s world.

What do you admire most about *Stick Fly* and Lydia R. Diamond’s work in general?

In reading the play, it felt authentic, which means relatable, which draws us in because we can see ourselves, beliefs, ideals, arguments reflected back at us. Her work is also funny. Her writing is smart. It makes you feel. Although the story of *Stick Fly* is centered around an affluent African American family, there are universal themes that anyone of any race or ethnicity can relate to because it speaks to the human experience. It is about family and family secrets. It is about wanting to be seen, wanting to belong. It is about love.

What is universal about this story?

At the heart of Lydia’s play is a family, unlike any family we’ve seen on the American stage before. They are Black, they are affluent, they love one another but they aren’t perfect. This play has universal themes that go beyond race and class, family relationships, sibling rivalry, love. Family secrets get revealed and those secrets create new roads to navigate for understanding and hopefully, maybe, healing.

One critic wrote in praise of *Stick Fly*, “One of the most exciting things that a playwright can do is to show you an unfamiliar way of life” Do you agree with this assessment of the play as one that shows us an unfamiliar way of life?

Yes. And no. What Lydia Diamond has given us in *Stick Fly* are witty, intelligent, and cultured African American characters living in a world of affluence. So yes, that world may be a very different portrayal of African Americans for many white people. In a Los Angeles Times article by Reed Johnson, playwright Lydia Diamond said she believes that “America has a real comfort zone with seeing African Americans in certain ways.”

And no because that world is not new. There is a rich history of the Black elite that emerged after reconstruction including the Vineyard as a destination for vacation and residency. *Stick Fly* introduces many to a way of life for African Americans that we do not often see on stage.
Noepe, Martha’s Vineyard, and American Wealth

This play is set in what has become known as one of America’s most storied summer-colony islands; this large island south of Cape Cod has been a playground for America’s rich for centuries. By one account, the eighth oldest European place name in the US, Martha’s Vineyard was probably eponymous to the mother-in-law or daughter of the first European to visit Cape Cod and its surrounding islands. However, before colonizers landed and seized what is now Massachusetts, this land was stewarded by the Wampanoag, and they called this island Noepe (dry land). The Wampanoag were a diverse group of over 67 different peoples. Today, only six visible tribal communities remain. Mashpee and Aquinnah have maintained physical and cultural presence on their ancestral homelands. At the time of European arrival, there were over 3,000 people living on Noepe, a land that is said was formed by a supernatural, benevolent being named Moshup.

One day, Moshup was making his way across the mainland to the headlands of the Aquinnah Cliffs. Weary from his journey, Moshup dragged his foot heavily, leaving a deep track in the mud. At first, only a silver thread of water trickled in the track. But gradually, the ocean’s force of wind and tides broadened and deepened the opening, creating an island named Noepe. The Wampanoag were the first people of Noepe. - Wampanoag History, wampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/

For the purposes of this guide, we have neither the time nor space to flesh out the full history of the Wampanoag, nor the history of European Colonization in North America. See the further reading section of this guide for a deeper look into the history, particularly of the Mashpee Wampanoag, as well as the Wampanoag Tribe of Aquinnah. As you view the play and consider the land you are on, consider the following statement.

Contact between Native and non-Native people is often seen as a singular event at a particular point in time. Contact is in fact an ever-occurring experience between those surviving indigenous peoples in a place and those who continue to arrive and settle within and around indigenous communities. -Mashpee Wampanoag Timeline, mashpeewampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/

As European settlers took control of the land that is now called Martha’s Vineyard, the island was home to slave trade, where both Black and Indigenous people were bought, sold, and worked without pay on the island. Though associated with the Union in the next century, New England was not free from slave trade and slavery in the 1600s and 1700s, and enslaved people were a part of the culture and are a part of the history of this island. Through the 1800s, people of the Aquinnah tribe were instrumental in securing the freedom of escaped, enslaved people, and The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom has included several places along the African American Heritage Trail of Martha’s Vineyard as officially sanctioned sites.
In the decades after the Civil War, this region flourished and became famous due to the prolific whaling industry activities that took place in the waters off Nantucket, Cape Cod, and Martha's Vineyard. After the collapse of the whaling industry (petroleum burns better than blubber), the island began to cement itself as a haven for the wealthy in the summers, and a luxurious vacation destination for those lucky enough to strike success in the booming cities of the Northeast. In this period, the Vineyard, along with other similar and nearby locales (Provincetown, Nantucket, etc.) became fashionable places to spend the summer, and many of the political, artistic, and economic elite became property owners in the 20th century. To this day, property is owned on Martha's Vineyard by the likes of Larry David, James Taylor, Spike Lee, Diane Sawyer, and President and First Lady Barack and Michelle Obama. Perhaps most famously, Jackie Kennedy Onassis purchased over 300 acres of land, including over a mile of oceanfront property in 1979. The property sold in 2019 to a group of land preservation nonprofits for over $27 million.

There is a rich history of the Black elite that emerged after reconstruction including the Vineyard as a destination for vacation and residency. *Stick Fly* introduces many to a way of life for African Americans that we do not often see on stage.

- Director Jada Suzanne Dixon

At the end of the 19th century and into the early 1900s, the town of Oak Bluffs was emerging as a Methodist and liberal stronghold, and was the first town that allowed African American vacationers on Martha’s Vineyard, in the tradition of those that had cemented the island as a safe haven on the difficult path of the Underground Railroad. In 1912, Charles Shearer renovated a cottage in Oak Bluffs and opened the first inn for African-Americans on Martha’s Vineyard. Through the 20s, 30s, and through the rest of the 20th century, this section of the island became a hub for successful Black families and was particularly a haven for some of the leading Black artistic voices of the 20th century, playing an important role in the rich history of Black art, music, literature, and culture. Maya Angelou, Dorothy West (*Living is Easy*), Paul Robeson, and Henry Louis (Skip) Gates (to name just a few) have vacationed, written about, and/or owned property on the island, the north portion of the island and the town of Oak Bluffs were where affluent African-Americans would stay, and for decades the island was segregated along these lines. It is interesting to note that in *Stick Fly*, Lydia R. Diamond sets the LeVay family estate in Edgartown, a municipality that didn’t allow Black guests in hotels as recently as the 1960s. However, the island has historically provided for affluent African-Americans what a good vacation spot always should deliver—a refuge from the struggles of everyday life and routine—normalcy. Author of *Whaling Captains of Color - America’s First Meritocracy* (remember what Kent says Great-Great-Great Grandfather Whitcomb did for a living?), Skip Finley, whose family has vacationed on Martha’s Vineyard for five generations remarks on the transformative nature of this place.

“On Martha’s Vineyard I can be who I want, when I want. Which is not necessarily true of the rest of the country. When we get on a boat or plane to leave here, we call it ‘going to America.’” - Skip Finley

As you enjoy the play, consider the history of Noepe, Martha’s Vineyard, and how the history of this place informs the story’s relationship to class, wealth, race, and family.
Thematic Overview of Stick Fly

This play dives into what happens to a family when the intersection of Blackness, whiteness, and wealth are brought to the surface amidst the flames of personal betrayal, dishonesty, and manipulation. From the universal dynamics of family and romance, to specific iterations of Blackness, whiteness, and wealth, this play presents a vivid slice of life. This section will detail some of these theme subjects and how the play speaks to them.

Family and Legacy

The depth of conflict in this play is sourced from perhaps the deepest well in literature and life: family. From the history of the family’s purchase of land on Martha’s Vineyard, through the conversation of the continuing legacy of the family through Kent and Flip’s choices in love and life, the inner workings of these dynamics are core drivers of action in the play. As you view the play, consider your own family, the legacy you’ve inherited, and the legacy you hope you will pass along in your life and through your children.

Romance and Love

Some of the primary plot developments in Stick Fly center around romantic love and the consequences of taking action in the name of romance and love, both within and without marriage. The choice in lover/partner of Kent and Flip, and respectively Taylor and Kimber help set discord and discomfort in motion. Relationships of a romantic nature are challenged, speculated on, hidden, and revealed. As you see the love-relationships develop, consider how romantic love motivates the characters and where (if at all) it stops.

Deceit

Mistruths and secrets play a role in the rising action of the story, and as lies are spotted and new information is disclosed, the full picture of each character is revealed. As you track the play, notice which moments surprise you, or which moments or characters you were skeptical of that turned out to be telling the truth.

Wealth and Race

As the dramatic action intensifies, the intersections between characters’ economic status and their Blackness or whiteness are brought to the surface and serve to further complicate relationships. As the primary relationships and tensions develop in the play, note how wealth and race inform the feelings and actions of the characters, and where the exclusivity of both class identity and racial identity stop.
Prompts for Further Discussion

1. With which character do you most closely associate?
2. Do you see any of your own family in the LeVays?
3. Which secret that is revealed over the course of the play was the most surprising to you?
4. What was your knowledge of Martha’s Vineyard before you saw the play? After enjoying the performance, has your perspective on the place changed? How so?
5. Did the play remind you of any others you’ve ever seen?
6. Were any of your expectations of characters upended over the course of the action of the play? Why do you think you guessed wrong?
7. Do any lines stick in your head after seeing the play? Which ones do you find yourself repeating?
8. Is it possible to achieve utopia?
9. What is universal about the play?

Further Reading

Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe Official Website
https://mashpeewampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/

Aquinnah Wampanoag Tribe Official Website - History
https://wampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/wampanoag-history

Article in the Martha’s Vineyard Times on the Aquinnah site being included in the Underground Railroad National Freedom Network

Martha’s Vineyard African-American Heritage Trail Official Website
https://mvafricanamericanheritagetrail.org/

Brookings publication, Examining the Black/White Wealth Gap -McIntosh, Moss, Nunn, Shambaugh
https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/

Vox Article,
How Martha’s Vineyard Became a Black Summertime Sanctuary -Lavanya Ramanathan

Patrick Pacheco interview with Lydia R. Diamond for the LA Times

County Median Home Prices and Monthly Mortgage Payment
Interactive Map, National Association of Realtors