

(1997, March). Black Actor Ignores Threats, Plays Jesus. Newark, NJ.

OVERVIEW

There were some serious reactions to Desi Arnaz Giles, a black actor, playing the part of Jesus in a passion play this year at the [Park Theater Performing Arts Center](#). Passion plays center on the last days in the life of Jesus Christ.

According to artistic director Eric Hafen, who cast Giles:

The first call I got, the woman asked me, 'When is the white actor playing because I don't want to see the black thing.'

Two groups canceled their reservations and rescheduled for a day when the alternate, white actor would be playing the part. There were even threats on Giles's life:

I have led a complete life. Should somebody clip me during a performance, don't cry for me, just rejoice because I am ready to go home.

Giles is also playing the devil in a Plainfield, New Jersey musical. About this irony, the actor quipped:

We'll see how many people object to a black man playing him.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- If racism can be divided into individual prejudice (overt and covert) and institutional discrimination (overt and covert), what kind of racism is this?
- Would you expect racism to be decreasing or increasing at the end of the 20th century? Which do you think is happening? Why is there disagreement about this?
- If racism is only a matter of ignorance, how do you explain the holocaust in one of the most educated countries in the world and the above reactions from people who cherish the "high arts?"
- How would you respond to someone who objected to a black Jesus?
- Comment or discuss W.E.B. Du Bois's opening lines in [The Souls of](#)

[Black Folks](#) where he asserts that the color line is the issue of the American 20th century.

- Do you think this brief article is worthy of a place in the [YouthWorkers' Encyclopedia](#)? What should be done with this and other articles on this topic?

IMPLICATIONS

- Racism is a nagging problem and a continuing weakness in American society.
- Adult examples and teaching have a great deal to do with our possibilities of a "color-blind" society in the twenty-first century.
- Children and young people have a powerful opportunity to model for adults reconciliation and unity in their diversity.

Dean Borgman cCYS