

SpellSong

a contemporary tragi-parody

of Romantic love, Genesis,

and the Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead

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(new draft, 2004)

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CHARACTERS:

MESSENGER, based on the African griot, a storyteller, musician, trickster, poet; the 'author' of this play
VOICE FROM ABOVE (MESSENGER, in voice-over)

ASHER, son of Jacob and Zilpah, one of the twelve sons of Israel
NIKAULE, daughter of Pharaoh, a black Egyptian princess

JACOB, patriarch of Israel
PHARAOH, patriarch of Egypt

REUBEN, eldest son of Jacob and Leah
SIMEON, second son of Jacob and Leah
LEVI, third son of Jacob and Leah
GAD, second son of Jacob and Zilpah
JOSEPH, first son of Jacob and Rachael

MRS. TALBOT, based on D. Amaury Talbot, wife of the early 20th century British anthropologist. She travels from young adulthood to old age as the play progresses.

TWO YOUNG STUDENTS, 10 years old, 1950s, a boarding school
TWO GUARDS, at PHARAOH'S palace, dressed as New York waiters

Time & Place: Today, a New York City street
Also Israel and Egypt, 1,000 b.c.e.
Also England, early 20th century, then getting later
Also a boarding school, 1950s

Note:

This is a home-made play — found and written and conjured from bits of Genesis, The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead, Song of Songs, The New York Times, Collins Millenium Edition English Dictionary, and D. Amaury Talbot's Women's Mysteries of a Primitive People, an anthropological study written in 1915 of the Ibibio tribe in Southern Nigeria. One of my first thoughts about the play's style was that the scenes should be jagged, like ancient, broken tablets — the ruins of a story. MESSENGER, based on the West African griot, functions as "author" of a tale that runs away from him, with all its borrowings, time traveling juxtapositions, and points of view. Griots belong to a special caste whose primary function is to link the past, present, and future by the safeguarding of genealogies through story and song. MESSENGER is a contemporary New York City version of this important figure who joins the living and the dead — knowing that all time is one.

PROLOGUE

Scene: A New York City street, pounding with rain. Lightning and thunder.

At rise: MESSENGER, atop his pedestal, observing the whole cast en route, under umbrellas. A big, messy dance. He descends and releases a long, blood curdling wail.

(Blackout.)

Scene: Empty black stage. The sound of cicadas. Then, slowly, the sound of beating drums blends in.

At rise: MESSENGER walks across the stage into a spotlight, stops, crouches down, places the tip of his elbow on the ground with forearm raised allowing the drums to “pass through” him, and says the following:

MESSENGER

Hold firm the reins of my tongue, Oh ancestors;
guide my words as they come forth,
that they may follow and respect their natural order.

(He stands up and addresses the audience.)

And, if I am wrong, do not forget that, like you,
I live on a handful of millet, a mouthful of water,
and fresh air.

(He turns to exit, then turns back.)

Oh. Also.
There are many persons in the person of every person.

(Lights fade to black with a few lingering drum beats and cicadas.)

Scene: Outside. Egypt. Day. The sound of birds.

At rise: **NIKAULE** and **ASHER** lie on the ground, chins in hands, facing each other, as **MESSENGER** looks on, conducting their dialogue from atop a pedestal.

NIKAULE

I love you love you love you love you love you.

ASHER

I love you love you love you love you love you.

NIKAULE

You more.

ASHER

No, you.

NIKAULE

You you you you you.

ASHER

You and me.

NIKAULE

You and me.

ASHER

You and me.

NIKAULE

Look, Asher.
The sky is moving fast. The clouds are racing.
It's going to happen tonight, isn't it?

ASHER

What?

(They freeze.)

VOICE FROM ABOVE

Nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in diverse places.

MESSENGER

All these are the beginning of sorrows.

NIKAULE

We're going to sleep in each other's arms.

(They freeze again. **MESSENGER** jumps down from his pedestal.)

MESSENGER

(counting on his fingers)

Leaf.

Palm.

Cloud.

How it was then.

(counting on his fingers)

Blue sky.

Sun.

The sound of birds.

Asher, bastard son of Jacob.

Nikaule, princess daughter of Pharaoh.

Egypt. The open air.

A long, long time ago.

(Blackout.)

Scene: **ASHER** and four of his eleven brothers make preparations to leave Egypt for Israel.

At rise: **MRS. TALBOT**, dressed in the British fashion of 1915, walks across the stage with a glass of wine, as **MESSENGER** sits atop his pedestal.

MRS. TALBOT

I must admit that the thrill of penetrating to places as yet unvisited by any European is still a matter of unmixed joy.

(**MRS. TALBOT** sits down at a white wrought iron Victorian style table.)

MESSENGER

(singing)

À ko n nàkun yé sigili yé
À ko n nàkun yé sigili yé
À ko n nàkun yé sigili yé

REUBEN

We are nothing but the unloved sons
of the unloved wives of our father.

He only cares for Benjamin.
Why are we bringing him food at all?

ASHER

Be grateful, Reuben. Gad and I were born of rape.
At least Jacob married your mother. Besides, he does love us.
Has he not fed and clothed us all of our lives?

SIMEON

Listen to the happy one,
the gazelle on the mountains,
the lover in love.

REUBEN

Oh yes, it's love.

LEVI

It must be love. How his heart does tickle,
even for our dear, undeserving, wicked father
whose name alone makes me thirsty for blood.

(A bell rings; the brothers freeze.)

(Enter **TWO YOUNG STUDENTS** running across the stage in 1950s English school uniforms, slinging book bags. They rehearse the following lines for an exam.)

FIRST YOUNG STUDENT

Jacob: 1. Old Testament.

SECOND YOUNG STUDENT

The son of Isaac, brother of Esau.

FIRST YOUNG STUDENT

Father of the twelve patriarchs of Israel.

(Exit **TWO YOUNG STUDENTS**. Brothers resume.)

GAD

Asher has changed, unlike you brutes.
Learn from him, and you will be saved.

REUBEN

You're telling us how to be saved?
Be careful, Gad.

LEVI

Son of the slave-girl. The two of them,
sons of a low-down, dirty slave.

SIMEON

Yeah, Zilpah's puny little bastards.
We should have drowned them when we had the chance.

MESSENGER

(reading the newspaper from atop his pedestal)
No End to Violence in Fallujah.

ASHER

Stop it, Simeon.

LEVI

Poor little bastard.
You hurt his feelings.

ASHER

Stop it, Levi. Shut up, or —

REUBEN

(interrupting, to **ASHER** and **GAD**)
You're lucky we haven't yet sold you both.

LEVI

Let's do it. Father would never notice them missing.

GAD

(in a sudden burst of courage)
Happy is the man who releases his bitterness.

SIMEON

Happy is the man who kills all the half-wits.

(**SIMEON** and **LEVI** pounce on **GAD** and begin pummeling.)

MESSENGER

Each Side Now Kills its Own.

(**MESSENGER** tears off the page and throws it on the ground.)

Two sons born of love;
the others of deceit, trickery, and loathing.

REUBEN

(snapping his finger)
Enough.

(**SIMEON** and **LEVI** relent.)

What are we going to tell the old man?
What are we going to tell him?

ASHER

The truth. We have to tell him the truth.

REUBEN

Great idea. We tell him his beloved Joseph's alive in Egypt working for Pharaoh. Did you forget that we're the ones who tried to kill him? That first we threw the nasty little dreamer in a well, then sold him to some Ishmaelites for 20 shekels of silver? That'll go over big.

LEVI

The little bastard recognized us too.
Don't you think?

MESSENGER

(while reading the newspaper)
If your mouth turns into a knife, it will cut off your lips.

SIMEON

He's playing us like fools.

GAD

We can't tell.
We just can't.

ASHER

What choice do we have?
We bring Benjamin back to Egypt or we starve.
We have to tell Father something.

SIMEON

Then, you tell him.

LEVI

Yes, you tell him.

REUBEN

Right, you tell him.

GAD

I guess you'll tell him?

(Blackout.)

Scene: NIKAULE stands alone, the scrim behind her acting as a wall.

NIKAULE

My love is mine and I am his.
He feeds his sheep among the lilies.
In my bed at night I look for him.

His left hand under my head.
His right hand caressing my body.
Gently, up and down.
And from side to side.

(Spotlight on **MRS. TALBOT** at her table. **TWO GUARDS** enter, one from each side of the stage, and stand at attention.)

MRS. TALBOT

You see, in Africa, surely, if anywhere, there is a chance to study primitive woman living today in all essentials as she lived, moved, and had her being while Greece —

(Bell rings. Enter **TWO YOUNG STUDENTS**. They stand together upstage right, and face the audience.)

TWO YOUNG STUDENTS

Greece.
(together, they spell it)
G R E E C E
Greece.

MRS. TALBOT

and Rome —

TWO YOUNG STUDENTS

Rome.
(together, they spell it)
R O M E
Rome.

MRS. TALBOT

lay in the womb of Time.

(Exit **TWO YOUNG STUDENTS**.)

NIKAULE

(startled at first, then pleading flirtatiously)
Oh guards of the night
please-pretty-please
swear by the gazelles
and the deer of the hills
not to wake us
until we have merged in love.

(**GUARDS** cock their rifles.)

(Spotlight on **MESSENGER** atop his pedestal.)

MESSENGER

Nikaule.
There is no lady like her in Egypt.
Nor in Senegal, nor Gambia, nor Futa.
She is the full moon without a blemish.
(grudgingly)
Asher is the sea.

NIKAULE

Shhh. Listen.
My love's voice is coming.

NIKAULE cont'd.

Hear him. Oh hear him.
There he is standing behind our wall.

ASHER

(from behind the wall, **MESSENGER** mouthing the words with him)
You are beauty, my love.
You are the beautiful.

(Enter **ASHER**. **MESSENGER** huffs, and disappears in blackness.)

ASHER

(accompanied by the sound of running water)
A fountain of gardens.
A stream of waters.
Bubbling springs.

(**NIKAULE** giggles.)

What, you don't like my poetry?
I worked on it all day.

NIKAULE

Your touch is poetry.
Come to me, Asher.

ASHER

I came just to tell you I can't.

NIKAULE

Tonight was the night.
Why not tonight?

ASHER

We have to go back to Israel. Assistant to Pharaoh won't sell us the grain until he sees my little brother. He wants us to prove that we are who we are.

NIKAULE

(pouting)
So, it's only food that you came for.
You don't care about me.
What a fool I am.

ASHER

Nikaule, my people are starving.

NIKAULE

Are you sure you can't leave in the morning?

ASHER

If you don't know the answer, go and follow the flocks by the shepherd's tents.

NIKAULE

(downright bratty)
Why should I wander veiled
among the flocks of your companions?

ASHER

(pleading)
So that you can see their desperation.

NIKAULE

I don't want to see.
I am in love.
(whining)
They are unpleasant to look at.

(Silence.)

Asher?

ASHER

(finally, annoyed)
Yes, and the stench of death offends you. Sometimes --

NIKAULE

(interrupting)
Asher?

(He doesn't respond.)

Asher? (beat) Forgive me?

ASHER

I must go.

(Exit **ASHER**.)

NIKAULE

Asher?

(**NIKAULE** cries.)

(to the **GUARDS**)
I only wanted him to stay with me tonight.

TWO GUARDS

He'll be back.

NIKAULE

How do you know?

GUARD (1)

He is in love.

NIKAULE

(calling out to **ASHER**)

Hurry, my darling, and be like a gazelle. Or a young stag.

(a last lingering call)

Whichever you prefer. . .

(Spotlight on **MRS. TALBOT** crossing the stage with a plate of hors d'oeuvres.)

MRS. TALBOT

Before our arrival in the Eket District, we had been informed, on all hands, that the natives of this region were of the lowest possible type, entirely devoid of ethnological interest, and indeed, to quote the expression of our informant, mere mud-fish.

(Enter **PHARAOH**. Throughout the following dialogue, **MESSENGER** follows **PHARAOH**, mocking every gesture.)

PHARAOH

To whom were you speaking, my darling?

NIKAULE

Oh. Father.

(bowing)

Hello. No one said --

(Enter **TWO YOUNG STUDENTS**, upstage right.)

FIRST YOUNG STUDENT

Mudfish:

SECOND YOUNG STUDENT

Any of various fishes, such as the bowfin and cichlids, that live at or frequent the muddy bottoms of rivers, lakes, ex-setera.

(Exit **TWO YOUNG STUDENTS**.)

PHARAOH

(interrupting)
Am I not allowed to visit my own daughter?

NIKAULE

Yes. No. Please.
How are you, father?

PHARAOH

I have the happiest news.

NIKAULE

That's lovely.
A good outcome at war?

PHARAOH

No, no, no. This concerns you.
And it's cause for great celebration.

NIKAULE

Father, what is it?

PHARAOH

The date for your wedding is set.

NIKAULE

Oh Father, you were teasing me. You know everything.
Thank you Thank you Thank you Thank you Thank you, Father.

PHARAOH

All the arrangements are made.
You only have to be there.

NIKAULE

When, Father?

PHARAOH

Seven days from today.

MESSENGER

(with **NIKAULE** mouthing along)

Tell me how it happened.

(**MESSENGER** mouths all of the following with **NIKAULE** for moral support.)

NIKAULE

Tell me everything.

He came to you.

He begged you to let him marry me.

He told you he's madly in love with me.

That I'm beautiful and lovely and the only one in the whole world he could ever look at again.

Right, Father? Isn't that what he said?

PHARAOH

He said he will make sure you have everything you need.

NIKAULE

But he wants me to be his only wife, right?

PHARAOH

That was not part of our agreement.

I left that to his discretion.

NIKAULE

He didn't promise to love only me?

Me for the rest of his life?

PHARAOH

We didn't talk about it.

(**MESSENGER** appears atop his pedestal. He mouths the following with **NIKAULE** again.)

NIKAULE

Fine, then. It's off. The wedding is off.
You tell him I will go to his bed as a corpse.

PHARAOH

You will do as you're told.

MESSENGER

(looking up from newspaper)
Nikaule never does as she is told.

NIKAULE

I hate him.
I hate him and I hate you.

MESSENGER

(reading the newspaper)
2,731 people estimated dead.

NIKAULE

I hope the earth caves in.

MESSENGER

(as he throws the page on the ground)
corpses shifted rubble bulldozers

(Blackout.)

Scene: JACOB and the sons.
Israel.

At rise: JACOB in bed.

ASHER

Father, I am in love.

REUBEN

That's great, Asher.
Can't you see father is tired?

SIMEON

How have you been, father?

LEVI

So pleased to see you , father.

GAD

You would have been proud, father.
We made you proud.

JACOB

Father father father father father.
A man can't take it after awhile.
Where is my Benjamin?
The only one left who brings me pleasure.