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Dramatic Publishing

I JUST STOPPED BY TO SEE THE MAN

By
STEPHEN JEFFREYS



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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For all other inquiries, contact:
Mel Kenyon, Casarotto Ramsay and Associates Limited,
National House, 60-66 Wardour St., London W1V 4ND ENGLAND
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I Just Stopped By to See the Man was first performed at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, Sloane Square, London on November 30, 2000, with the following:

CAST

Karl Ciarán McMenamin
Jesse Tommy Hollis
Della Sophie Okonedo

PRODUCTION STAFF AND CREW

Director Richard Wilson
Designer Julian McGowan
Lighting Designer Johanna Town
Sound Designer Paul Arditti
Assistant Director Dawn Walton
Music Advisor Guy Pratt
Casting Director Lisa Makin
Production Manager Paul Handley
Company Stage Manager Cath Binks
Stage Management . Pea Horsley, Rachael Claire Lovett, Maxine Foo
Costume Supervisor Iona Kenrick, Suzanne Duffy
Company Voice Work Patsy Rodenburg
Dialect Coach Jeannette Nelson
Set Construction Souvenir

The U.S. premiere was given on November 24, 2002 by Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago, Martha Levy, artistic director, Michael Genarro, executive director, in association with Ted Tulchin, Maidstone Productions. The cast: Anthony Chisholm, Yvette Ganier and Jim True-Frost. The production was directed by Randy Arney.

The West Coast premiere was given on September 9, 2003 by the Geffen Playhouse, Los Angeles, with Clarence Williams III, JoNell Kennedy and Donovan Leitch.

I JUST STOPPED BY TO SEE THE MAN

A Play in Two Acts
For 2 men and 1 woman

CHARACTERS

JESSE black, 75
DELLA his daughter, black, 34
KARL white, 31

PLACE: A bare “shotgun” house in a small town in the
Mississippi Delta.

TIME: The summer of 1975.

ACT ONE

Scene One: The early hours of Friday morning.

Scene Two: The early hours of Saturday morning.

ACT TWO

Scene One: Late morning, Saturday.

Scene Two: The early hours of Sunday morning.

Act One

Scene One

Blackout. In the darkness, the applause and whistling of a stadium rock audience fades in. A voice nurtured in the English Home Counties but hi-jacked by the American South takes on the crowd. The voice belongs to KARL.

KARL (v/o). Thank you. Thank you, Memphis. There was a man came from round this way. Man from the Mississippi Delta. *(Some isolated squeals of recognition from the cognoscenti.)* A man they still call The Man. *(More general applause.)* Yeah, right. We're gonna play a coupla things he wrote. In his memory. Or who knows, maybe just in his honour, right? *(Who knows, who knows?)* *(Some yells of approval.)* Yeah, let's leave it at honour. We'll play the blues for The Man.

(And the crowd responds to an Absent Friend, the lead guitar sketches a slow four-bar intro high up on the fretboard and the bass and drums crash in. Sound fades out, lights fade in. A bare shotgun house in the Mississippi Delta. One door leads to a porch, the other to the rest of the house. An old black man sits on a chair. In his hand he holds three quarters. He pitches the coins towards an ancient but lovingly preserved fedora which

is set on a towel on the floor some ten feet away. He sings a hymn in a good baritone. His name is JESSE.)

JESSE. He rose, he rose, he rose from the dead

He rose, he rose, he rose from the dead

He rose—

(He stops singing abruptly. He has run out of coins. He gets up, retrieves the three quarters and returns to his chair. He starts pitching again, resuming singing at the same time.)

He rose, he rose, he rose from the dead

He rose, he rose, he rose from the dead

He rose from the dead—

(Again, he gets up, retrieves the coins and resumes his position.)

He rose, he rose, he rose from the dead

He rose, he rose, he rose from the dead

He rose, he rose, he rose from the dead,

(The third coin hits the hat.)

And my Lord shall bear my Saviour home.

(He's happy. He goes to the hat, flicks dust off it, puts it on his head, pockets the coins and sits in satisfaction. Some moments. He listens. Hears nothing. He takes the hat off. Then he stands and puts it back in its former position on the towel. He thinks for a few moments, then sets the hat two feet further back. He sits down and pitches another coin. It misses.)

He rose, he rose, he rose from the—

(He stops in mid pitch. He listens. He's heard a sound from a long way off. Gradually it gets louder. A car is approaching, a 1959 Rambler. The car stops close by.

JESSE picks up the hat, hangs it on a hook on the wall, folds the towel away in a drawer, sits in the chair and waits, staring ahead. The front door opens. DELLA, a handsome black woman in her early thirties, comes in. She carries a shoulder bag and a brown paper bag full of shopping. Immediately she locks the door and secures it with two large bolts.)

DELLA. So I get this customer. There have to be eighty covers in the diner. He's just arrived, two minutes tops, I'm passing his table, carrying in my head five different requests from the assembled infants, excuse me, customers, a clean fork, a second bottle of Coors—

JESSE. This is tonight?

(DELLA unpacks her shopping into the fridge. Then she fixes a wholesome-looking fruit and yogurt snack in a bowl.)

DELLA. This is tonight, two raisin and nut pancakes, a bottle of undrinkable house red and an offer of marriage from the stinkiest raincoat I ever smelt, which somewhere in its depths hides a life-form, something way low down in the food chain—a motor insurance clerk or similar, and this guy—

JESSE. The insurance guy?

DELLA. No, the new guy, the one I'm passing, he goes: "Excuse me, miss, am I invisible?" And I think maybe it's one of those games where people pretend to be goblins and he has, perhaps, had the gift of invisibility conferred on him by some internal wizard and he is seeking my confirmation—like: "What, oh my God, who said

that, did the ketchup speak to me?” And then I realise, no this is humour, this is acerbic humour with a purpose. “Am I invisible?” means, I have been sitting in a crowded restaurant for ninety seconds and no one has yet rushed up to check my diaper.

JESSE. “Am I invisible?”

DELLA. I go: “Excuse me?” He says: ‘Can you see me? Can you see me or not? If you can see me, bring me a menu.’ ”

JESSE. This is what, young guy, old guy—

(DELLA comes to the table and eats.)

DELLA. White guy. And I think, OK, since we are playing out this exchange at advanced level, I reply: “No, no that’s not the question, the question is “Can *you* see *me*?” The brow furrows—

JESSE. The troubled brow, yes indeed, the mark on the forehead—

DELLA. You could sow corn in those furrows—

JESSE. “Though you make them blossom in the morning that you sow; yet the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain.”

DELLA. “Can you see me? Can you see me as anything but a pair of black hands, a pair of black feet to bring you a menu. When I’m not wearing this uniform, can you even see me at all? If I were bleeding in a gutter would you even turn your face towards me—

JESSE. “And he laid him down upon his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no bread.”

DELLA. And then I think, no, I just overdid that. The scoop I am laying this on with is a couple of sizes too

large and I will get it back with interest and sure enough he goes: “Bring me the goddamn menu and quit your sass.” And I go: “Oh why, sir, there you are. I can see you now, you were really there all the time.”

JESSE. “You were there all the time.” That’s good enough. I’d score that a win to you on points.

DELLA. A knockout.

JESSE. I make it points.

DELLA. Thursdays I hate. Assholes winding up their nuts for the weekend. Traffic. And the Thursday special.

JESSE. Lotta traffic Thursdays, Memphis? *(Pause. Perhaps they’ve stumbled upon a conversational avenue which both would prefer to avoid.)*

DELLA. Maybe just tonight.

JESSE. I ain’t been Memphis a dozen year or more. Nineteen sixty-two, sixty-three.

DELLA. I told you there’d be traffic tonight.

JESSE *(beat)*. Oh sure. Well I had myself kind of a curious conversation too.

DELLA. You go to church?

JESSE. Yes I did, I took a walk up by the church.

DELLA. That’s not takin’ a walk, Pop. You could hit the church from that chair with a biscuit.

JESSE. I done took a walk by the church, and I went in and I prayed and when I come out, I’m feeling good and there’s Alice Walcott, she’s on her way in to pray and she sees me comin’ out *from* prayin’ and you know what she says?

DELLA. She’s gonna put in a personal word for you with the Lord.

JESSE. No such thing. She says, you know something.

When your daughter come back to live with you last year, we all wasn't so sure at first—

DELLA. We all?

JESSE. All her gossip women. With the big eyeglasses.

They all got eyeglasses like goldfish bowls. She says we all ain't so sure. We don't know if this is your daughter, or you done took yourself a new wife. How do you like that? Seventy-five years old, she thinks I took me a new wife.

DELLA. I've seen it done.

JESSE. I tell her, shoot, that dog's hunting days is long gone.

DELLA. Gone, maybe. Long gone I say no.

JESSE. She goes: "We done thought that old dog had caught a new rabbit. Maybe bit off more than it could chew."

DELLA. She said that.

JESSE. Yes she did.

DELLA. Shame on her.

JESSE. I said I was too old to get caught that way. No devil woman gonna jump me. I told her: "That's why I took a house at the crossroad, so you can spot trouble comin' in all directions."

DELLA. Pretty free with their mouths, those old Bible beaters.

JESSE. All four directions. That was my day.

DELLA. Busy, busy. *(Pause.)*

JESSE. Your guy, you know, he's got a point. I hate that, you go someplace to eat they don't acknowledge your presence.

DELLA. That's different, you're talking about black guy in a white place, no one takes notice, he's talking white guy in a mixed place.

JESSE. I been black guy, black place—still happens. I want people to see me.

DELLA. You want what?

JESSE. I'm talkin' 'bout the days when I would go into a diner. Days when I would go anyplace. I wish you would quit pullin' me up on that. When I talk about what I do, what I want, what I think, I'm talkin' 'bout what I used to do, used to want, used to think. I know I don't do nothin' no more. I know I just walk to the church and back. Just humour the way a person talks and don't give me none of that "You want what?"—

DELLA. I'm saying nothing.

JESSE. There's things what's past. And things what's now. I know the difference. And I am content.

DELLA. Well if that's fine by you.

JESSE. I am content.

DELLA. Then that's fine by you. (*DELLA clears up her bowl, rinses it under the tap and places it on the side.*)

JESSE. You know I heard something on the radio today.

DELLA. You don't listen to the radio.

JESSE. I listened today. They played a tune by Blind Lemon Jefferson.

DELLA. Why were you listening to the radio?

JESSE. They played "See that my grave is kept clean." Must be fifty years back he laid that thing down. And here I am sittin' in this chair listenin' to him singin' it today.

DELLA. That's how it works.

JESSE. Been *in* his grave forty-five years or more. Heard that and had him on my mind all day.

DELLA. That's good for you, Pop. I wasn't saying anything different.

JESSE. Did I tell you, I worked with him when I was seventeen, leading him around?

DELLA. Yeah, I heard that.

JESSE. You know, Blind Lemon, he always carried a gun.

DELLA (*beat*). Yeah?

JESSE. Had a pearl handle.

DELLA. Blind Lemon carried a gun?

JESSE. Can make an individual nervous, you understand. You got a blind man on a leash, and he's packing a forty-five, keeps you pretty ginger. He used to say "Hey, boy, it's quiet, where you takin' me?" I said "I'm goin' some place there's no one for you to shoot at." He goes: "Hell, you won't be no safer, I'm just as like to shoot at nothin'." That was not what you call a steady job, three months was about my fill of that class of behaviour. (*Pause.*) He got rich, bought two cars, to be driven around in. I caught up with him one time, Chicago, just when I was gettin' known. I says to him: "Hey, Blind Lemon, what's with you having two cars?" He says: "Jesse, I don't like my other chauffeur." (*Pause.*) And he was right, 'cuz Blind Lemon died in his other car, had a heart attack one Chicago winter, and the body was discovered all alone. That chauffeur had walked. Left him to freeze, freeze like a big iceberg till the cops found him. Blind Lemon Jefferson.

DELLA. That's history for you.

JESSE. What you sayin'?

DELLA. History always blames the chauffeur. He could have been walking to get help, lost his way in a blizzard. Could have been Blind Lemon fired him first, then had the heart attack, fit of remorse.

JESSE. I set eyes on that chauffeur, Della. He was a man of bad character. He was a man sent from the devil.

DELLA. Blues singer with two chauffeurs deserves what he gets. *(Pause.)*

JESSE. “Am I invisible?” You say your diner man is wrong to ask that question. But I wonder, Della. I do wonder that myself sometimes.

DELLA. Pop, you made yourself invisible. What do you expect.

JESSE. There were circumstances.

DELLA. You let the world believe you were dead, you can’t expect to be visible after that.

JESSE. I read my obituary. Chicago Tribune. I liked it. I thought, hell, I can’t do no better than that, I’ll go with the Trib, quit while I’m ahead.

DELLA. You did not think that.

JESSE. I wouldn’t swear now to know what I thought and what I did not.

DELLA. You walked away.

JESSE. Only thing I do say is this. I hear ’bout your invisible man tonight and I’m thinking. Hell, that’s not such a dumb question, that ain’t even a discourteous question.

DELLA. Leave it, Pop.

JESSE. You look at yourself and ask the question over. “Am I invisible?” ’Cuz why else, when you got college degrees all up your arm are you servin’ a person like that in a Memphis diner? Who’s the dumb one here? Who’s harder to see of the two of you?

DELLA. Pop, you're sitting here in a bare-wall shotgun shack, five dollars in your pocket and that English faggot band is up the road in Memphis playing your songs to that big, big crowd.

JESSE. Are they faggots?

DELLA. I don't know.

JESSE. That's just being English.

DELLA. Maybe so.

JESSE. I heard them on that radio today too. You know, I was surprised, 'cuz they play pretty good.

DELLA. They sell a million records of a song you wrote back in 1931. You got fifteen dollars for it. What have they got?

JESSE. Dead man can't re-negotiate his contracts. That I do know. *(Pause.)*

DELLA. Maybe we'd best just not talk when I come back.

JESSE. Della, I like to talk with you.

DELLA. Well, all we did is talk about what happened today—

JESSE. OK. I won't talk about you waitin' table if you don't talk to me 'bout bein' dead.

DELLA. Doesn't leave a lot—

JESSE. No, but we'll find some way—

DELLA. —some way of scratching each other's faces.

JESSE. Scratchin' ain't bad. You just gotta stop—

DELLA. Before the blood flows.

JESSE. No, *when* the blood flows. You scratch, you draw blood, you quit.

DELLA. Family life.

JESSE. Successful family life.

DELLA. Like we'd know. *(Pause.)*

JESSE. Yeah. Well, I'll go to bed. Maybe I'll sleep.

DELLA. Try to sleep, Pop. *(He kisses her head.)*

JESSE. Always try. But it ain't a tryin' type of activity.

Good night.

DELLA. Good night.

JESSE. Maybe I'll just hear that old Blind Lemon in my head.

(He goes out through the connecting door. DELLA is alone. She sits for a moment. She walks over to her shoulder bag and brings it back to the armchair. She looks inside. She brings out a thick black notebook and a pack of cigarettes. She lights a cigarette. She opens the notebook and starts to write in it. She writes feverishly for a few moments. Then stops. She stares ahead. She begins to cry. Some moments. She gets a grip on herself. She stands, walks up and down, smoking. A knock at the door. DELLA reacts with disproportionate fear. She backs away, hanging on to the fridge, staring at the door. More knocking, louder. DELLA is immobilised with dread. Silence. Perhaps the visitor has gone. She treads warily into the centre of the room. A scraping at the window. Someone is trying to break in. DELLA can't decide what to do. A hand taps at the pane with a stone. DELLA stares, unable to move. The hand taps harder. The pane breaks. A hand curls round, unlocks the window and lifts it. KARL appears. He is white, just over thirty, chicken-bone thin, long dark hair, unnaturally pale face. He wears a long batik scarf round his neck and carries a leather saddlebag. He has style. Even when the fashions are bad he will look good. He is clearly out of his head on something. He straddles the sill and climbs into the room making an awkward land-

ing. He stands, his hands over his eyes looking dazed. DELLA stares at him. She smiles slightly. Whatever she was afraid of, it is not this.)

KARL. Man, I got spots in front of my eyes.

DELLA. You got what?

KARL. I did something to my eyes, man.

DELLA. Do I care? You've broken my window.

KARL. Must have jarred something, climbing in.

DELLA. You have an optic nerve in your ankle?

KARL. That's my life. Things get misplaced.

DELLA. What are you on?

KARL. Am I in the right place?

DELLA. I would say not.

KARL (*looks at her for the first time*). My name is Karl—

DELLA. I know who you are. How was Memphis?

KARL. Sorry?

DELLA. Your gig. How did it go?

KARL. Oh right. Who are you?

DELLA. How was the gig?

KARL. Cool.

DELLA. Are you faggots, just English or both?

KARL. Depends what town we're in.

DELLA. Where are you tomorrow?

KARL. Baton Rouge.

DELLA. Then I'd be careful.

KARL. Thanks for the tip.

DELLA. I'm Della and you've just broken into my house.

KARL. It wasn't personal.

DELLA. It was criminal.

KARL. Slightly criminal. It came to me, up on stage—

DELLA. You smashed my window.