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Dramatic Publishing

The Slave Dancer's Choice

A Play for Youth Audiences

by

FRANK HIGGINS



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(THE SLAVE DANCER'S CHOICE)

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THE SLAVE DANCER'S CHOICE opened on March 21, 2002, at the Omaha Theatre for Young People, James Larson, artistic director. The co-directors for the production were Sheila Rocha and Kevin Barratt.

CAST

Danny DANIEL BUTTS
Danny's Mother KHESHA JOHNSON
Captain CARLOS DANIEL TORRES
Ehi, the African Daughter JASMINE CALDWELL
African Mother SHANNA JOHNSON
African Woman PATRICE GILBREATH
2nd African Woman JUANA VELASCO
Bog, the Slave Trader RONNELL TIPLER
Young African Boy SERGIO MONTANEZ
African Griot (Storyteller) AKERA REESE
Silhouette Dancer TASHIA CRUZ

PRODUCTION STAFF

Scenic Designer ERIC VOECKS
Lighting Designer ANNE BAKER
Sound Designer C. COOPER DONHAM
Costume Designer LISA PORT
Properties Master ROGER HINDERS
Production Assistant AMY COTTON

THE SLAVE DANCER'S CHOICE

A Play in One Act
For 3 Men and 2 Women
(plus others as the production permits)

CHARACTERS

DANNY, the Slave Dancer . . . an African-American, 12-14
DANNY'S MOTHER/WOMAN African-American
CAPTAIN REYNOLDS a white sea captain
BOG an African man
GIRL, Ehi (AAA-hee) African-American, 12-14
AFRICAN-AMERICAN SLAVES . . . can be played by the
actors playing Bog and Ehi
WHITE SAILORS can be played by the
African-American actors behind a scrim

SET: A space that can feature scenes around a fire in the
slave quarters of a plantation, a deck of a slave ship and
the captain's cabin.

Author's note on the set: Once the ship has taken slaves
onboard, this can be indicated by projecting the drawing
of the packing of slaves on the British ship "Brookes."
This drawing can be found in most books about the At-
lantic slave trade.

TIME & PLACE: A plantation in the American south and
a slave ship in the early 1800s.

THE SLAVE DANCER'S CHOICE

(A SPOTLIGHT comes up on a fife held out at arms' length. The only thing we see is the fife and the hand.)

DANNY *(in the dark)*. It all started with this. My mother taught me to play, so there could be music when she was resting from picking cotton all day. She never dreamed music would change our lives forever.

(DANNY moves the fife to his lips and begins to PLAY. The LIGHT enlarges and we see DANNY, a barefoot slave in his early teens, playing.)

MOTHER *(in the dark)*. Danny, come play by me.

(The lights come up more and we see Danny's MOTHER, also a slave, sitting by a fire. DANNY plays as he walks to her. She sticks her fingertips almost into the fire so that she flinches.)

DANNY. Mama, why you putting your hands in the fire?

MOTHER. Keep playing.

(DANNY resumes playing, and she puts her fingertips almost into the flames again so that she flinches. She begins to clap and sing.)

MOTHER.

**O DAY
(YONDER COMES DAY)
O DAY**

(Around the edge of the light, several other SLAVES clap their hands in rhythm and sing the chorus. They sing an old slave song titled "YONDER COMES DAY.")

**(YONDER COMES DAY)
O DAY
(YONDER COMES DAY)
DAY DONE BROKE NOW INTO MY SOUL.**

MOTHER.

**(YONDER COMES DAY)
WAS THE JUDGMENT DAY
(YONDER COMES DAY)
WAS THE JUDGMENT DAY
(YONDER COMES DAY)
WAS THE JUDGMENT DAY
(YONDER COMES DAY)
DAY DONE BROKE NOW INTO MY SOUL.**

**O DAY
(YONDER COMES DAY)
O DAY
(YONDER COMES DAY)**

(A WHITE SEA CAPTAIN enters with a cigar; the adults abruptly stop. The chorus exits back into the shadows.)

CAPTAIN. You're Sadie?

MOTHER. Yes, sir.

CAPTAIN. I'm your master's brother. And this is your boy, Danny?

MOTHER. Yes, sir. *My boy.*

CAPTAIN. You play well, Danny. I'm impressed.

MOTHER. Say thank you.

DANNY. Thank you, sir.

CAPTAIN. Sadie, I'm not like my brother; I don't own a plantation. I don't own slaves. I'm the captain of a ship. Do you understand what that means?

MOTHER. Yes, sir.

CAPTAIN. I beat my brother at poker tonight. He's not sure how to pay me. But I heard your son playing. Your son plays well enough, I can do your son a favor and give him a job on my ship.

MOTHER. My boy don't know nothin' 'bout no boats.

CAPTAIN. Maybe he'd like to. What do you say, Danny? Would you like to go to sea?

MOTHER. My boy's never been off the plantation. Don't want him to neither.

(The CAPTAIN takes out a NECKLACE that has a whale on it.)

CAPTAIN. Do you know what this is? A good-luck necklace; and this is a whale. The whale is the biggest animal in the world. Would you like to see a whale, Danny?

DANNY. A whale is bigger than a bear?

MOTHER. Quiet.

CAPTAIN. *Much* bigger than a bear. But I still caught him. And I carved this necklace out of his jawbone. Here, look at it.

MOTHER. Don't touch it.

CAPTAIN. It's just a necklace, Sadie. It won't bite.

MOTHER. I've taught him never to touch things that belong to somebody else.

CAPTAIN. You're a good mother, Sadie. But look at your hands. Is that what you want for your son? To end up with his fingers so cut up by cotton thorns, he can't play music anymore?

MOTHER. No, sir.

CAPTAIN. Well that's what's going to happen to him if he stays a slave. He'll be a slave his whole life, just like you. Is that what you want?

MOTHER. I want my son to be with me. My husband and sister already been sold off.

CAPTAIN. Those things can always happen. My brother likes to play cards. But he's not good. What if he'd lost at cards tonight to somebody who lived far away? You'd have lost Danny anyway. So here's a way to keep from losing your boy.

MOTHER. For me to keep from losin' my boy, you want to *take* my boy?

CAPTAIN. I'll bring him back. And I'll do more for you. When we come back, I'll buy you and Danny *both* from my brother. And I'll set you both free.

MOTHER. Free?

CAPTAIN. You've heard of *freedom*? The two of you can live in the North where I live. And Danny will never have to pick cotton, or be a slave again. Would you like that?

MOTHER. ...No. (*The MOTHER wraps her arms around DANNY.*)

CAPTAIN. Danny, your mother wants to take care of you. But this is your chance to take care of her. See her fingers? She sticks her fingers in the fire to toughen the skin...so she won't get cut as much. But if she keeps picking cotton, her fingers will get worse. And so will her back. See how all the older slaves here have backs that are *stooped*? You can *save* your mother from having a stooped back. And your mother will live longer.

DANNY. Yes sir.

MOTHER. Quiet.

CAPTAIN. We'll go to sea. You'll see things you never dreamed of.

DANNY. Whales?

MOTHER. Quiet.

CAPTAIN. You'll see whales. And when we get back you and your mother will never have to pick cotton again.

DANNY. I want to help my mother.

MOTHER. I told you hush!

CAPTAIN. So if you want to help your mother, then you decide. Come with me, and when we get back you and your mother will be free. Or, you and your mother can stay slaves for the rest of your lives. Which would you like?

MOTHER (*to DANNY*). Don't open your mouth.

CAPTAIN. Tell you what. I'm not leaving here till tomorrow morning. Think about it. And Danny, you hold onto this for me overnight. (*The CAPTAIN hands him the necklace.*) See you in the morning.

(The CAPTAIN exits. The MOTHER takes the necklace and throws it down.)

MOTHER. You don't touch that.

DANNY. But I've never seen a whale.

MOTHER. And he knows that. He wants that necklace to make you do something crazy.

DANNY. But he'll set us free.

MOTHER. Listen to your mother. What have I taught you?

Repeat for me the story of the boy and the rattlesnake.

DANNY. But, Mother—

MOTHER. Do it. Tell me the story back, the way I told it to you.

DANNY. The Boy and the Rattlesnake. There once was a boy who was very softhearted. One day as he was walking along he saw a rattlesnake. It had been cold the night before and the snake was stiff. The boy stopped to look at it, and felt sorry for the snake. —But Mother—

MOTHER. Keep going.

DANNY. The snake opened his eyes and spoke. "Help me," the rattlesnake said. "Pick me up, and warm me or I will die." "But if you pick me up, you will bite me." "No," said the snake, "I will not bite you. Pick me up and hold me or I will die." So the boy took pity on the snake. He picked it up. He warmed the snake against his body. The snake grew warm, and then suddenly it twisted in the boy's hands and bit the boy on his arm. The boy dropped the snake and grasped his arm. "Why did you bite me?" the boy said, "You said you would not bite me if I picked you up." "That is true," said the snake, "but when you picked me up, you knew I was a rattlesnake."

MOTHER. And what did I teach you from that story?

DANNY. A snake is always a snake.

MOTHER. You remember that boy and that snake. That man looks like a sea captain, but he is a snake. Now go to bed.

(When the MOTHER turns, DANNY secretly picks up the necklace.)

DANNY *(to the audience)*. There wasn't any harm in touching it, was there? None of my friends had ever seen a whale, or even *heard* of a whale. But now I had a whale's jawbone in my hand. I went to bed thinking about what it would be like to hunt something bigger than a bear. I imagined I was at sea, and the ship I was on was attacked by a huge whale, and I had to save everyone's life.

(An ACTOR PLAYING A WHALE enters. DANNY gets into a fistfight with the whale, and then jumps on his back and rides the bucking whale. DANNY tears off the jawbone, jumps off and the whale exits.)

The whale ran away, but I'd took his jawbone and made it into jewelry, and everybody called me a hero! ...But then I started thinking about a saying that I had learned in church. "When I was a child, I thought as a child. But as I got older, I put away my childhood things." I must think like a man. I could set my mother free. What would she be like if she were free?

(The MOTHER enters wearing a lady's gloves in DANNY's fantasy.)

MOTHER.

**GLORY, GLORY, HALLELUJAH
SINCE I LAID MY BURDEN DOWN.
GLORY, GLORY, HALLELUJAH
SINCE I LAID MY BURDEN DOWN.**

DANNY. Mother, you're free.

MOTHER. Thanks to you, yes.

DANNY. Your back is not stooped. And here, I bought you something. *(DANNY hands her a wrapped GIFT.)*

MOTHER. How could you *buy* something?

DANNY. I bought it with my pay as a *sailor*.

MOTHER. Oh what could this be? Gloves! *(She puts them on.)*

DANNY. Gloves that are just as good as any gloves the white woman wore who owned us. Wear them in church and it won't hurt anymore when you clap your hands in church.

MOTHER. Oh Danny, I was wrong to not want you to go to sea. *(Clapping her hands as she exits.)*

**GLORY, GLORY, HALLELUJAH
SINCE I LAID MY BURDEN DOWN.**

(The MOTHER exits.)

DANNY *(to audience)*. It was tempting. And the snake in the story didn't offer to do anything for the boy. This sea captain could set my mother free. So the morning came.

(The CAPTAIN enters.)

CAPTAIN. Danny, did you think about going to sea?

(The MOTHER enters quickly.)

MOTHER. No he didn't think about it.

CAPTAIN. Well can I have my necklace back?

(DANNY takes it out.)

MOTHER. I told you not to touch that.

DANNY. I'm old enough to make up my own mind. And I want to set you free.

MOTHER. No you won't! *(She grabs him and holds on;*

DANNY pries her fingers off him.) Danny, don't!

(DANNY gets away from her.) Danny, come here!

CAPTAIN. You're a good *man*, Danny. Come with me now.

MOTHER. No!!!

(The MOTHER tries to grab DANNY again but the CAPTAIN prevents it.)

DANNY. I'll save you, Mama!

MOTHER. Danny!

DANNY. I'll save you!

MOTHER. Wait! Please!

(The other SLAVES reach out and hold the MOTHER back.)