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Dramatic Publishing

TALKING BONES

A Play
by
SHAY YOUNGBLOOD



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(TALKING BONES)

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For Carrie Bessie Ross (1910-1993),
Lillian Kemp and the spirit of the ancestors
who whisper in my ear

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For a place in their hearts and a room of my own; Yaddo, McDowell Colony, and Blue Mountain Center.

Aché

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There are those of us who straddle.
We are born in one place ... sent to
achieve in the larger culture, and in
order to survive we work out a way
to be who we are in both places ...

Bernice Johnson Reagon

... our mouths utter obscure prophecies.
our minds are invaded by images of the future.
we are the strange ones, with half our beings
always in the spirit world ...

Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*

Sometimes I hear a voice in my soul, we are one it says.

He and I

TALKING BONES premiered at the Penumbra Theatre Company, St. Paul, Minnesota, January 26 through February 20, 1994 with the following:

CAST

BAYBAY Laurie Carlos
MR. FINE. Lou Bellamy
OZ Daniel Alexander Jones
RUTH Kathryn Gagnon
EILA Amy Monique Waddell

PRODUCTION STAFF

Directed by Robbie McCauley
Produced by Lou Bellamy
Scenic Designer Seitu K. Jones
Choreographer. Marlies Yearby
Lighting Designer Mike Wangen
Sound Designer. John Sims, Jr.
Composer Olu Dara
Properties Designer. Dean Coke
Stage Manager Scott Peters
Costume Designer. Deidrea Whitlock

TALKING BONES

A Full-length Play
For Three Women and Two Men

CHARACTERS

EILA daughter of Baybay, in her early 20s
BAYBAY daughter of Ruth, early 40s
RUTH mother of Baybay, early 60s
OZ homeless man, mid- to late 20s
MR. FINE a businessman, 40s

TIME: The present. Winter.

PLACE: Ancestor's Books & Breakfast,
a half-empty bookstore in a small southern town.

Playing time: 90 minutes.

Set: Simple, two playing areas.

Note: Additional character notes at end of script.

The Story: Set in the Ancestor's Books & Breakfast, the ancestors play a major role in daily activity. Ruth, Baybay and Eila can hear them through a broken hearing aid, a whisper and in talking bones. The ancestors bring a message about love, faith and family.

TALKING BONES

SCENE ONE

SCENE: Ancestor's Books & Breakfast. Hundred of books are piled on the floor and scattered around the room. Oversized, brightly colored books hang from the ceiling and branches of a large tree growing inside the café and sit on the half-empty bookshelves. A café table for customers hosts brightly decorated chairs. Afrocentric posters of Africa and African-American heroes decorate the walls and hang in the air. Three small altars with flowers, a candle and other objects are placed in separate corners.

AT RISE: MR. FINE is seen through the window giving a bunch of flowers to OZ along with elaborate instructions. Inside the café BAYBAY is wearing a glamorous leopard-print bathrobe. She begins waltzing around the room enraptured in "movie music" (theme music in the genre of epic films). After a few moments, she becomes depressed, leans on the counter in blue light watching a film the audience can't see. The window becomes a movie screen.

BAYBAY. My life until today has been merely an audition for the real thing. (Pause.) When is it gonna be my turn? When do I get to be a diva? (BAYBAY walks around the room talking to herself, but someone is listening. She sips on a diet soda as she occasionally puts books in

empty boxes. She answers unseen voices.) Say what? What's my problem? I'm thirty-five years old... Okay, so I'm forty. How did I get here? Where did I turn left when I should've turned right? I followed every direction in the book, and this is where? This can't be my life! Can't be. My life was supposed to have more meaning, go slower, be...be better than this. *(Angry.)* I've given away almost every one of these damn books. I have poured my last cup of wisdom tea and stirred my last pot of backbone soup. Forty years is a long-ass wait. Do you hear me, whose ever turn it is to listen? It's a long time to wait! *(Pause.)* What I need to stay here for? *(Pause to listen.)* Hush. You hear me? Shhh. Shhh. Shhh. Now you listen to me...

(OZ watches BAYBAY through the window. He drinks in the smell of the flowers, eats a flower petal then enters the shop.)

OZ *(whispering)*. Lady, these flowers...

BAYBAY. You don't have to whisper, she can't hear you.

OZ. Who can't hear me?

BAYBAY *(flips on the lights)*. The old lady. She can't hear you. Her hearing aid is busted. That thing cost me a fortune. The witch probably broke it herself. It's hooked up to her deaf side, you know, but it sends signals to her good ear. It's like a transistor.

OZ. Some old lady's got a radio in her ear?

BAYBAY. What you got there?

OZ. Flowers...

BAYBAY. For the dead! Why you bring me these damn half-dead flowers!

OZ. They taste pretty fresh.

BAYBAY. They'll be dead in a few days and what am I supposed to do with some more half-dead things. And stop whispering, this ain't no funeral home. I told you she can't hear you. Her hearing aid is messed up. What do they call you?

OZ. Osborn, ma'am. My name is Osborn.

BAYBAY. I didn't ask your name. And I ain't no ma'am. I ask what they call you?

OZ. Oz. Home folks call me Oz. Lady, these flowers, where do you want me to put them?

BAYBAY (*dramatic*). Flowers ain't what I need.

OZ. I don't know nothing about what you need, lady. I'm delivering flowers today. Why don't you read the card. There's a card here.

RUTH (*yells from offstage*). Baybay, who the hell is out there?

BAYBAY. Go back to bed.

RUTH. Who's out there, I said? She back yet?

BAYBAY. It's a delivery.

RUTH. What? I say she back yet?

BAYBAY (*shouts*). Delivery.

RUTH. What you doing out there? Who's out there? They told me strangers were coming. People I ain't never seen before. They said it plain. Any strangers out there?

(RUTH enters wheeling herself in her wheelchair. A large white umbrella lies across her lap. She rolls over to OZ, eyeing him, circling him.)

RUTH. You a stranger?

OZ. You ever seen me before?

RUTH. Could be I seen you in a dream... Boy, you got a question?

OZ. In this dream you had, was I delivering flowers? (*Offers flowers to RUTH.*)

RUTH. You better get them things outta my face. I ain't dead yet. Cut flowers make offerings for the ancestors, when you need to ask for things like good health, love or money. Looks like I'm gonna need my umbrella soon but don't be giving me no flowers today.

BAYBAY. You ain't gonna need that umbrella for a long time. (*RUTH throws the bones, listens, then picks them up.*)

OZ. The paper didn't say nothing about rain today. I got the weather report here in my right shoe and I'm reading sunny with a chance of rainbows. Lady, what you doing with them bones? (*RUTH ignores him.*) What kind of bones you got there? Them neck bones? I like neck bones.

EILA'S VOICE. On the continent of Africa, in the days of old, the griots kept our stories in the marrow of their souls. In ancient times the griots were buried in the hollow of the baobab tree. And two thousand seasons passed. And the baobab trees were cut down like angry splinters and the bones of the griots spilled onto the ground. Talking bones, talking bones, talking bones...

OZ. Who said that?

RUTH. The bones say you been dreaming under the moon. Say you hungry. You come to the right place.

BAYBAY. Mama, be nice. Go back to bed.

RUTH (*mocking BAYBAY*). Mama, be nice. Go back to bed. (*Beat.*) I ain't sick, I ain't dead and I ain't your

mama. Mother Dear. Can you do something right just once? I've asked you to call me Mother Dear.

OZ. Lady, where do you want me to put these flowers?

RUTH. That ain't a proper question.

BAYBAY. I don't care where you put them. All these years and here come some flowers gonna be dead in two days. This ain't enough.

RUTH. What do you think you deserve, a medal?

BAYBAY. Don't start with me this evening, Mama.

OZ. The sign outside say you serve books with breakfast. You got food in here?

BAYBAY (*preachy, quoting*). "Knowledge is the cornerstone of life. They said serve them and you also will be served." We serve exclusively books by and about African-Americans and other cultures of color for the nourishment of the mind, body and spirit. (*BAYBAY picks up a book at random and begins reading from it.*) "Africans did not suffer cultural amnesia when they stepped off the slave ships... Southern planters selected Africans for importation to North America based on their skills in agriculture, medicine, carpentry, and so on... The Africans' unpaid labor made slavery efficient and economical... Although white slavers are long dead, their children and the U.S. economy continue to benefit from the interest on the profits of slavery through institutional racism..." (*She stops reading.*) ... And collective amnesia about that forty acres and a mule. What am I supposed to do with all this information? Call 411 and give it to them? I want to star in my own movie.

RUTH. You learned everything them books could teach you and you still don't have no common sense. (*RUTH cocks her head and taps on her ear to better hear the*

ancestors.) Now what you want? No, I don't know who he is. Boy, what they call you?

OZ. Oz. Home folks call me Oz.

RUTH. He say home folks, whoever they is, call him Oz. Huh? (*Pauses to listen.*) Boy, you must be one of the strangers.

OZ. If anybody will take them, I'm delivering these flowers. If you don't want them, I'll eat them.

RUTH. Say he deliver flowers. He gonna eat them. (*Listening.*) If you can hear him answer, why in the devil don't you ask him yourself and leave me alone.

BAYBAY. You listening to them voices again, Mama? Why don't you listen to me anymore?

RUTH. You know just as well as I do, they in this hearing aid. You ain't talking about nothing. They the ones want to know about this boy. I ain't interested. (*Pause.*) Where them flowers come from? Ain't nobody dead yet.

OZ. Lady, I have to go.

RUTH. They say they want to talk to him.

BAYBAY. Mama! (*BAYBAY, resigned to obeying her mother, goes to stand by the door. She picks up a book and points it at OZ.*)

OZ. Look, lady, I ain't had a meal in two days. All I want is something good to eat. Tell me what you need, I'll go get it for you. (*His feet become frozen to the spot where he stands.*)

BAYBAY. Now what you want me to do with him? They tell you that?

RUTH. Be quiet so I can hear. (*Listening.*)

OZ (*tries desperately to move, but his feet are heavy to the floor*). If I don't get back soon I'll lose my spot at the bus station. It starts getting crowded around this time.

BAYBAY. You gonna lose your life if you don't shut up.
(*BAYBAY whispers to the ancestors.*) Shhh. Shhh. Shhh.
Talk to Mama, I ain't listening. (*To OZ.*) Be still, you making me nervous.

RUTH. What's your favorite color, boy?

OZ. Kiwi.

BAYBAY. What kind of color is that?

OZ. It's a fruit, the inside of a fruit. The seeds are black.

RUTH. What size shoe you wear?

OZ. Twelve and a half double D.

BAYBAY. Your mama must've had a seizure when them boats sailed out.

RUTH. Baybay, if I have to tell you to shut up one more time I'm gonna open this umbrella and take you with me. (*RUTH shakes her umbrella menacingly at BAYBAY.*) Boy, what is your mother's maiden name?

OZ. Leveaux. Mama was a mojo scientist. What's that got to do with...

RUTH. Boy, don't play with me! You ever had a sex disease? (*Pause.*) Well, answer me.

OZ (*embarrassed*). No!

RUTH. No, what?

OZ. No, ma'am. I've had a lot of things but I ain't never had a sex disease. (*RUTH throws the bones, listens. OZ's feet are freed.*)

RUTH. What you plan on doing with your life?

OZ. I used to be a poet. This was my signature poem. (*Recites with movement.*) "I lived in a house with a window. The house burned down to the ground but the window waits. Where there is a window, there is still hope."

RUTH. So you're a messenger.

BAYBAY. That ain't no job.

RUTH. Let me do this. (*OZ's music. Hip-hop style. OZ raps in lighting effect.*)

OZ. I want to be a engineer, a architect, a writer, a fighter, a wrong to righter. A rapper, a tapper, a two-fisted zipper. Put out the fire, wake up the man. My mama said I could go far. I could dance, all the way to France. One foot forward, two steps back, step on the line, break your daddy's back. Through my feet the sages speak. Through my feet the sages speak. (*OZ does a variety of hip-hop and African dance steps wildly around the room. At the end of the music he is exhausted.*)

BAYBAY. So they speak through your big old feet. (*OZ's feet are frozen in place again.*)

RUTH. Baybay, I said hush. I can't hardly hear for your mouth. They asking about your life, boy. What you gonna do with it?

OZ. There's a lot of things I want to do. I got cravings.

BAYBAY. You pregnant, flower boy?

RUTH. Hush! I got a granddaughter I need to get settled before they come get me. They said strangers were coming. (*RUTH points her umbrella skyward.*)

BAYBAY. They not coming to get you tomorrow, Mama! This boy still guessing about his future and you trying to give my baby to him. He can't even dance.

RUTH. Eila's coming back because it's the right thing to do. She never should have left here. You the one pushed her out there like you know so much. When you mess with fire you liable to get barbecued.

BAYBAY. I went to the city and I didn't fall through the cracks.

RUTH. Then why you come back?

BAYBAY. You know good and well why, to take care of you.

RUTH. You just as tied to this place as I am, and so is Eila. She's just like you and me, she needs the power in this place.

BAYBAY. I'm plugging up my ears and putting on my traveling shoes.

RUTH. Give me another good reason to snatch that hair off your head and crack you like a coconut. We're special. We can hear them ...

OZ. You hear music too?

RUTH. The music is there if you'd just listen. You want to dance, you got to listen to the beat. Listen! (*OZ listens intently. Pause. There is a loud knocking at the front door. EILA's music: Jazz/Mellow Rhythm and Blues.*) You hear that?

EILA (*offstage*). Mama? Grammie? You in there?

RUTH. Now who else gonna be in here?

BAYBAY. Eila? Is that you, baby?

EILA (*offstage*). Yeah, Ma. Open up.

(BAYBAY opens the door. EILA enters wearing green with black sequins. She carries an open, yellow umbrella. EILA listens to the music, trying to figure out where it's coming from. OZ stares at EILA in amazement, as if he sees a beautiful apparition.)

EILA. Nice rhythms.

RUTH. Don't bring that open umbrella in here.

BAYBAY. Sugar, I'm glad you're back. Did you miss me, honey? (*EILA looks at BAYBAY but does not respond.*)

RUTH. She sure didn't come back here for the pleasure of your company. I can see it in her eyes. She can see things, feel them, too, can't you, Granddaughter?

EILA. In my bones. I got scratches on my bones.

BAYBAY. Didn't you have a good time? I told you to go to botanical gardens and dance halls and sidewalk cafés.

EILA. I was looking for something. (*EILA makes eye contact with OZ.*)

OZ. You're wearing kiwi.

EILA. Searching for somebody.

OZ. It looks good on you.

EILA. To walk with me, listening to the wind.

OZ. Wind.

EILA. I lived inside my head, between the pages of books.

OZ. "Ah, that I were dark and nightly! How I would suck at the breasts of light."

EILA. "Oh, but I am a forest, and a night of dark trees: but he who is not afraid of my darkness, will find banks full of roses under my cypresses."*

EILA & OZ. Nietzsche.

OZ. I dreamed about you.

BAYBAY. Keep your empty mind off my daughter.

RUTH. Them New York City sidewalks ain't as exciting as you thought? Too many cracks to slip through. Don't think you gonna come back here and worry me. I was just getting used to you being gone.

EILA. It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be out there. They called me home. (*EILA kisses a reluctant RUTH. To OZ.*) Who are you?

OZ. I've been trying to deliver these flowers ...

* Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm (1844-1900) was a German philosopher.