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Dramatic Publishing



Black Nativity

*A Gospel Song Play
By
Langston Hughes*

Black Nativity

The Christmas story in dialogue, narrative, pantomime, gospel song and folk spirituals—the unique creation of the poet and playwright Langston Hughes.

Cast: variable. “His tone has that intimate, elusive, near-tragic, near-comic sound of the Negro blues, and is equally defiant of analysis” is how a critic described this work by Langston Hughes, who mentions Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman as his main literary influences. As a young man, Hughes participated enthusiastically in the activities of the Karamu Players in Cleveland, and later he was to found Negro theater in Harlem, Los Angeles and Chicago. He wrote a number of plays and musicals and then came to his own special creation which he calls “the Gospel Song-Play”... which is *Black Nativity*. First performed at the York Theatre and then at President Kennedy’s International Jazz Festival, it went on to cause a sensation at the Festival of Two Worlds at Spoleto, Italy. A *New York Times* critic reporting from Spoleto wrote, “Sophisticated Italian audiences greeted *Black Nativity* with enthusiasm, taking part in the singer and handclapping and insisting on curtain call after curtain call.” The staid Rome newspaper *Il Tempo* wrote, “The elegant festival public appeared to have forgotten itself, lost in this rhythmic wave that overwhelmed it, an integral part itself that bound stage and auditorium in a mystical fusion.” In London, Oslo, Brussels, Copenhagen and Rotterdam, *Black Nativity* triumphed before its return to New York and the then-new Lincoln Center. *Black Nativity* is designed for you to add the music of your choice (from spirituals to traditional carols or your original compositions) and dance. This thrilling holiday piece will have your audiences on their feet! *Simple set.*

10 ISBN: 0-87129-192-4

13 ISBN: 978-0-87129-192-9



9 780871 129192 9 0 1992

www.dramaticpublishing.com

CODE B-72



printed on recycled paper

Black Nativity

by
LANGSTON HUGHES



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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(BLACK NATIVITY)

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Cover design by Susan Carle

ISBN 0-87129-192-4

BLACK NATIVITY

A Gospel Song-Play
For a variable cast

CHARACTERS
(In order of appearance)

WOMAN

MAN

SINGERS (Townsfolk)

NARRATOR

OLD WOMAN

FOUR SHEPHERDS (Ned, Zed, Ted, Jed)

ELDER

Non-speaking roles:

JOSEPH

MARY

THREE WISE MEN (Balthazar, Melchior, Caspar)

TIME: When Christ was born.

SETS: None—only a platform of various levels and a star,
a single glowing star high over a place that might
be a manger.

MOODS: Reverence, awe, joy and jubilation.

SONGS

Act One: The Child Is Born

Joy To The World	5
My Way Is Cloudy	7
No Room At The Inn	7
Most Done Travelling	8
Oh, Jerusalem In The Morning	9
Poor Little Jesus	10
What You Gonna Name Your Baby?	10
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Christ Is Born	13
No-Good Shepherd Boy	14
Go Tell It On The Mountain	22
Rise Up, Shepherd, And Follow!	24
What Month Was Jesus Born In?	26
Sweet Little Jesus Boy	26
Oh, Come All Ye Faithful	28

Act Two: The Word Is Spread

Meetin' Here Tonight	29
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Get Away Jordan	38
Packin' Up	39
God Be With You	39

ACT ONE

(Prelude: Organ Music. Voices are heard offstage as MAN and WOMAN enter.)

(SONG: "JOY TO THE WORLD")

WOMAN.

**JOY TO THE WORLD!
THE LORD HAS COME—
LET EARTH RECEIVE HER KING.
LET EVERY HEART PREPARE HIS ROOM.**

MAN.

LET HEAVEN AND NATURE SING.

(PILGRIMS enter down aisles to join WOMAN and MAN on stage.)

SINGERS.

**JOY TO THE WORLD!
THE LORD HAS COME—
LET EARTH RECEIVE HER KING...**

(Light spots NARRATOR at side of stage.)

NARRATOR. IT CAME TO PASS IN THOSE DAYS, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made

when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city.

(The sunset lights left stage as MARY and JOSEPH enter.)

And Joseph also went up from Galilee to be taxed—out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, unto the city of David which is called Bethlehem—with his wife, Mary, being great with child...“I think—oh, Joseph—I think my time’s most come.”

(SONG: “MY WAY’S CLOUDY”)

SINGERS.

**OH BRETHREN, MY WAY’S CLOUDY
SEND ONE ANGEL DOWN!**

WOMAN.

**THERE’S FIRE IN THE EAST,
THERE’S FIRE IN THE WEST,
THERE’S FIRE AMONG
THE METHODISTS.
SATAN’S MAD AND I’M SO GLAD
HE MISSED THE SOUL HE THOUGHT HE HAD
THIS IS THE YEAR OF JUBILEE,
THE LORD HATH COME TO SET US FREE.**

SINGERS.

**OH BRETHREN, MY WAY’S CLOUDY,
SEND ONE ANGEL DOWN!**

(Almost, but not quite beneath the star, JOSEPH knocks repeatedly at the door. MARY, too tired to stand any

longer, sinks to the roadway. An irate INNKEEPER's words are heard.)

NARRATOR. "I have no room! Didn't I tell you *no*, before? Why do you come back? What do you keep knocking for? My inn's full. I've got no room for you and that woman there. This is no hospital. I keep no midwives about. I'm sorry, but there's no place here. No room! No, I say, no!"

SINGERS.

**OH BRETHREN, MY WAY'S CLOUDY.
SEND ONE ANGEL DOWN!**

NARRATOR. No room! No room at the inn! No room at the rich fine hotel. No room!

(JOSEPH lifts MARY to her feet. They struggle on, wandering through street after street searching for a place to stay.)

OLD WOMAN. Did you hear about it—a woman named Mary, they won't let her in the hotel?

WOMAN. Ain't that a shame?

OLD WOMAN. Did you hear about it? Big, rich, fine place—and no room for a poor woman to have her child! Did you-all hear?

WOMAN. Ain't it a shame!

(SONG: "NO ROOM AT THE INN")

WOMAN.

**IT WAS ACCORDING TO THE WORD,
THERE WAS A VIRGIN GIRL.**

**YOU KNOW THE MOTHER OF JESUS,
SHE WAS WANDERING AROUND AT NIGHT.
SHE WAS TRYING TO FIND A HOME
FOR THE SAVIOUR TO BE BORN,
BUT THERE WAS NO ROOM AT THE HOTEL.**

SINGERS.

**NO ROOM, THERE WAS NO ROOM
AT THE HOTEL! NO ROOM!
OH, LORD, NO ROOM!
IT WAS THE TIME FOR THE SAVIOUR TO BE
BORN
BUT THERE WAS NO ROOM AT THE HOTEL.**

NARRATOR. No room. No room for Mary anywhere! No room for Joseph. No room. In all the great city of Bethlehem, no room. The night is late. The air is cold. The doors are locked. The lights are out. Good folks have gone to bed. The streets are deserted. "I can't! Oh, Joseph, I can't go on."

(SONG: "MOST DONE TRAVELLING")

SINGERS.

**POOR MARY'S ON THE ROAD—
MOST DONE TRAVELLING!
I'M BOUND TO CARRY
MY SOUL TO THE LORD!**

NARRATOR. They are strangers here. Her time has almost come. Joseph does not know what to do, and in this place he has no friends. "Joseph! Joseph, I must lie down now. I

must! Oh, I...Oh, no! I can't go farther! No! No...I can't."
Joseph begs, "Wait! Wait here, I'll find a place."

SINGERS.

**POOR JOSEPH'S ON THE ROAD—
MOST DONE TRAVELLING!
I'M BOUND TO CARRY
MY SOUL TO THE LORD!**

(MARY sits alone on the curb as the song dies and a new song begins.)

(SONG: OH, JERUSALEM IN THE MORNING™)

SINGERS.

**MARY, MARY, WHAT IS THE MATTER?
OH, JERUSALEM IN THE MORNING!
OH, POOR JOSEPH, WHAT IS THE MATTER?
OH, JERUSALEM IN THE MORNING!
NIGHT IS CHILLY, WHAT IS THE MATTER?
OH, JERUSALEM IN THE MORNING!
OH, POOR MARY, WHAT IS THE MATTER?
OH, JERUSALEM IN THE MORNING!
COWS A-LOWING, WHAT IS THE MATTER?
OH, JERUSALEM IN THE MORNING!
SHEEP A-BAAING! WHAT IS THE MATTER?
OH, JERUSALEM IN THE MORNING!
OXEN A-BAWLING! WHAT IS THE MATTER?
OH, JERUSALEM IN THE MORNING!**

**OH, POOR MARY, WHAT IS THE MATTER?
OH, JERUSALEM IN THE MORNING!**

NARRATOR. And so it was that her days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first born son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger—for there was no room for them in the inn.

(The WOMEN among the SINGERS appear in the shadows lamenting.)

(SONG: "POOR LITTLE JESUS")

WOMEN.

POOR LITTLE JESUS,
BORN ON CHRISTMAS
AND LAID IN A MANGER
WASN'T THAT A PITY AND A SHAME?
POOR LITTLE JESUS, SON OF MARY,
DIDN'T HAVE NO CRADLE.
WASN'T THAT A PITY AND A SHAME?
LORD, WASN'T THAT A PITY AND A SHAME?

NARRATOR. For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given and the government shall be upon His shoulders, and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, All Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

(SONG: "WHAT YOU GONNA NAME YOUR BABY?")

WOMAN.

MARY, MARY WHAT YOU GONNA NAME
THAT PRETTY LITTLE BABY?
GLORY BE TO THE NEW BORN KING!

NARRATOR. Some call Him one thing—she's gonna call Him Jesus.

WOMAN.

**SOME CALL HIM ONE THING.
SHE'S GONNA CALL HIM JESUS.**

SINGERS.

GLORY BE TO THE NEW BORN KING!

NARRATOR. Some call Him Jesus—she's gonna call Him Emanuel.

WOMAN.

**SOME CALL HIM JESUS.
SHE'S GONNA CALL HIM EMANUEL.**

SINGERS.

GLORY BE TO THE NEW BORN KING.

NARRATOR. Some call Him Emanuel—she's gonna call Him Wonderful.

WOMAN.

**SOME CALL HIM EMANUEL.
SHE'S GONNA CALL HIM WONDERFUL.**

SINGERS.

GLORY BE TO THE NEW BORN KING!

NARRATOR. Some call Him Wonderful—she's gonna call Him the Prince of Peace.

WOMAN.

SOME CALL HIM WONDERFUL.
SHE'S GONNA CALL HIM PRINCE OF PEACE.

SINGERS.

GLORY BE TO THE NEW BORN KING!

NARRATOR. Some call Him Prince of Peace—she's gonna call Him Jesus.

WOMAN.

SOME CALL HIM PRINCE OF PEACE.
SHE'S GONNA CALL HIM JESUS.

SINGERS.

GLORY BE TO THE NEW BORN KING!

NARRATOR. And his name shall be called Jesus.

(Enter a group of PILGRIMS.)

(SONG: "WASN'T THAT A MIGHTY DAY!")

SINGERS.

WASN'T THAT A MIGHTY DAY,
WHEN JESUS CHRIST WAS BORN!
STAR SHONE IN THE EAST,
WHEN JESUS CHRIST WAS BORN!
THE ANGEL CAME FROM ABOVE,
WHEN JESUS CHRIST WAS BORN.

NARRATOR. Yes, His name shall be called Jesus.

(SONG: "JOY TO THE WORLD" REPRISE)

SINGERS.

JOY TO THE WORLD,
SO GLAD THE LORD IS COME!
LET EARTH RECEIVE HER KING.
LET EVERY HEART PREPARE HIS ROOM,
AND HEAVEN AND NATURE SING.
JOY TO THE WORLD,
HALLELUJAH, THE SAVIOUR REIGNS!
LET WE THEIR SONGS EMPLOY,
WHILE FIELDS AND FLOODS,
ROCKS, HILLS, AND PLAINS,
REPEAT THE SOUNDING JOY.
JOY TO THE WORLD,
THE LORD IS COME.

NARRATOR. Rejoice! Rejoice, for the Lord is come!

(SONG: "CHRIST IS BORN")

SINGERS.

CHRIST IS BORN IN THE LAND OF JUDEA
CHRIST IS BORN! CHRIST IS BORN!
BORN OF THE HOLY VIRGIN MARY!
CHRIST IS BORN! CHRIST IS BORN!
PRETTY LITTLE HOLY BABY!
CHRIST IS BORN! CHRIST IS BORN!
WHY DON'T YOU COME ON TO THE MANGER?
COME AND ADORE THE LITTLE STRANGER
BABY WHO NEVER HAD NO CRADLE,
AND HIS ONLY BED A MANGER
SEE THE WISE MEN FROM AFAR,

**ALL WERE GUIDED BY A STAR.
HERALD ANGELS LEFT FROM GLORY
AND CAME TO EARTH TO TELL THE STORY.
TELL THE STORY OF HIS GLORY—
CHRIST IS BORN! CHRIST IS BORN!**

(A roadside leading to the pastures. Four SHEPHERDS enter, their talk leads into song.)

NED. My wife wonders why I have to tend sheep at night.

JED. So does mine. The old shepherds always get the best shifts—the day shift.

ZED. It's cold, dag-nab it! And I've got no coat.

JED. You're ragged as a goat herd without a goat.

(Song-speech into song.)

NED. I've got a coat—

(SONG: "NO-GOOD SHEPHERD BOY!")

NED.

**BUT YOU WON'T GET MINE—
WASTING ALL YOUR MONEY
ON WOMEN AND WINE.
NO-GOOD SHEPHERD!**

JED.

NO-GOOD SHEPHERD!

TRIO.

NO-GOOD SHEPHERD BOY!

ZED. Aw, get off of it! Are you not your brother's keeper?

NED. No, not when my brother—
AIN'T NOTHING BUT A SLEEPER
YOU RUN AROUND ALL DAY,
SLEEP ON YOUR JOB ALL NIGHT.

JED.
IF YOU GONNA BE A SHEPHERD,
BE A SHEPHERD RIGHT.

TED. I hear tell you lost a ewe and a lamb?

ZED.
I LOST MORE THAN THAT—
I LOST A RAM.

TED. What you gonna do when Master counts his sheep?

ZED.
JUST GET UNDER A TREE
AND GO TO SLEEP.

TED.
WHAT GOOD IS A SHEPHERD
THAT GOES TO SLEEP?
SUPPOSE A WOLF WOULD COME,
AND STEAL YOUR LAMBS AWAY,
WHAT YOU GONNA TELL
YOUR MASTER NEXT DAY?

NED.
IF YOU TELL A LIE
YOUR TONGUE MIGHT SLIP.