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## **Family Plays**

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# **THE FREEWAY**

**Drama by  
O.B. ROZELL**



# THE FREEWAY

"One of the best items that I have found in over 27 years of high-school theater. It fills a void ... It offers excellent roles for both Black and White, has a marvelous message, and is never preachy." (Jerry E. Miller, Chatham High School, Va.)

"We live in a multicultural society, and *The Freeway* is an attempt at revealing as many modes of living as there are characters in the play." (author, O. B. Rozell)

**Drama. By O.B. Rozell. Cast: 3m., 6w. (3 black women, 1 black man, 2 white women, 1 white man; 1 man, 1 woman of either ethnicity.)** Two families have lived side by side for years in a rural area. Now the husbands are dead, the children have moved to the city, and Lena and Maude are left alone. Are they lonely? Not at all. They enjoy peace and independence after years of hard work raising families. It so happens that Lena is African-American and Maude is white, but this has never affected their friendship. Suddenly, the state decides to build a freeway through their small parcels of land and they will have to move. Their children from the city come to help—or should we say interfere? Here is a play with wonderful humor and great pathos as we ask once again: "What is 'progress' doing to our wonderful world?" The play is full of symbolism. Lena and Maude's friendship, common pleasures and problems have erased any ethnic conflict which may have once been present. Both women show pride in their heritage and in their way of doing things. Lena has the speech of an old-time southern black; Maude uses the pronunciation and syntax of her pioneer Anglo-Saxon ancestors. The rapid cultural changes that have characterized the 20th century are shown in the speech of the children who show the same symbolic shift from the simple rural life to the complex, money-dominated city-world. **Simple ext. set. Simple costumes. Approximate running time: 35 minutes. Code: FD9.**

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The Freeway

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(THE FREEWAY)

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# The Freeway

## Cast

**Lena Johnson**, *65-year-old black woman*

**Maude Peterson**, *75-year-old white woman*

**Postman**, *traditional character*

**Ludie Mae Johnson**, *Lena's daughter*

**Frank Earl Peterson**, *Maude's son*

**Charles Ray Washington**, *Lena's son*

**Sarah Bess Washington**, *Charles's wife*

**Melba Jean Jordon**, *Maude's daughter*

**Lucinda Redding**, *supervisor of a rest home*

**Setting:** The front porches of Lena Johnson and Maude Peterson

**Place:** The fringe of a large city

**Time:** Today



This play was first presented by Madison High School in the District 18-AAAA U. I. L. One-Act Play Contest in 1976 at Lamar High School in Houston, with the following cast:

|                                  |                   |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Lena Johnson . . . . .           | La Verne Jones    |
| Maude Peterson . . . . .         | Debbie Blaker     |
| Postman . . . . .                | Dennis Thomas     |
| Ludie Mae Johnson . . . . .      | Jeannette Sanford |
| Frank Peterson . . . . .         | Ames Arlan        |
| Charles Ray Washington . . . . . | Greg Caldwell     |
| Sarah Bess Washington . . . . .  | Elkadon Thomas    |
| Melba Jean Jordon . . . . .      | Mary Adkins       |
| Lucinda Redding . . . . .        | Grace Berkley     |



## NOTES ON THE PLAY

Lena and Maude are lifelong friends and neighbors. Their lives have been simple. Their only luxuries have been the tiny cottages in which they live – and the good earth outside. Now with their children (and their husbands) gone, they are enjoying their golden years – putting in a full day

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on the front porch rocker, finding fun and laughter in their tiny world. And then the highway department routes a freeway through their homes.

The play is full of symbolism. Lena is black and Maude is white. But their friendship and common pleasures and problems have erased any ethnic conflict which may have once been present. Both old women show pride in their heritage and in their way of doing things. Lena has the speech of an old-time Southern Negro; Maude uses the pronunciation and syntax of her pioneer Anglo-Saxon ancestors. The rapid cultural changes which have characterized the twentieth century are shown in the speech of the children. Ludie Mae, a rebel against parental guidance, has traded most of her family dialect for the language of the night-life culture which she has adopted. Charles Ray and Sarah Bess are the upper middle class black couple who have shed the old customs and language; they speak very properly (but not affectedly) — but with their sophistication has come a harsh materialism. Maude's children show the same symbolic shift from the simple rural life to the complex money-dominated city-world.

The ages of the various characters are somewhat flexible. Lena and Maude are old. Ludie Mae can be any age from the early 20's to the early 30's. Charles Ray and Sarah Bess would probably be in the early to late 30's; Frank and Melba Jean, the early 40's to early 50's.

**SETTING.** The play takes place on the front porches and the lawns in front of the small rural cottages of Maude and Lena. The only scenery necessary is two platforms to represent the two porches, with steps leading up to them. Additional scenery is optional: a low vine-covered fence or a hedge might divide the two properties; a tree stump or two can be placed on one of the lawns. The only essential set props are a rocking chair on each porch. A rustic bench or porch swing, a three-legged stool, flower pots and flower boxes, and so on may be added.

The Southern dialect and a few words such as "bayou" indicate that the play takes place in the South; however, with just a few changes in the script, it could be laid in any region of the U. S.

**COSTUMING** is suggested by the characterizations. Lena and Maude wear simple, old-fashioned dresses — perhaps with aprons and bonnets, or some characteristic accessory of the region. To emphasize the symbolism, the two old women should be as much alike as possible; the only real difference is their complexions. Ludie Mae should be over-dressed and gaudy. The other children would be well-dressed in business clothes.

All other aspects of staging should emphasize the symbolic clash of the old ways with the new and the desire of each human to live his own life. "We live in a multi-cultural society and 'The Freeway' is an attempt at revealing as many modes of living as there are characters in the play," said the author.

"The Freeway" is a powerful play for contests, workshops, and programs of one-act plays.

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*[The scene opens with LENA sitting on her porch at Stage Right, thumbing through the morning newspaper. MAUDE is standing on her porch at Stage Left sealing an envelope.]*

LENA. *[She speaks with the Old South Negro dialect, which in later scenes should contrast strikingly with the more cultivated speech of her children.]* Mornin', Maude . . . another letter to Frank Earl?

MAUDE. *[She, too, speaks in the rural dialect of her region — the region in which the performance is presented — in contrast to the "citified" speech of her children.]* Yeah . . . not that it'll do any good. I been askin' him to bring his wife and kids out visitin' all summer but you know how busy young folks can get. *[She moves down the steps.]*

LENA. Yeh, jes like my Ludie Mae. She jes calls ever onct in awhile to see if'n I'z still kickin' an' fussin' 'bout her so-called career. *[She holds the newspaper up.]* Here's another pitcher of her in de entertainment section ob de paper. *[She rises and moves down the steps toward Maude.]* Girl, jes look at dis. *[She meets Maude center stage and shows her the picture.]* "Flo' show . . . featurin' Miss Angel — Topless Dynamite." Lawd, fergive 'at chil'.

MAUDE. You reckon she really stands up an' dances in front of folks with nothin' on up there?

LENA. I ain't neber saw no one do it but I hears dey's doin' it all ovuh de city. I tell you one thing . . . if'n I eber did cetch her like 'at I'd snatch her off'n 'at stage by de hair on her head. *[MAUDE chuckles.]* Dey's nothin' funny 'bout 'at. I'z serus.



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MAUDE. I wasn't laughin' 'bout her. *[Chuckles again]* I was just thinkin' . . . what if we was topless dancers? *[They both look down at their chests and burst into uproarious laughter. This business should be played to the fullest extent with the two old women making feeble attempts at dancing, laughing hysterically all the while. The POSTMAN enters from stage right.]*

POSTMAN. Mornin', ladies.

LENA. Mornin', Marvin . . . *[Still giggling]*

POSTMAN. You ladies sound mighty happy this mornin'.

MAUDE. *[Chuckles as LENA laughs aloud]* Just a private joke, Marvin, a private joke. *[She and LENA glance at each other and burst into laughter again as MAUDE hands her letter to the Postman. He hands her a letter.]*

POSTMAN. It's mighty good to see folks smilin' an' laughin' an' havin' such a good time. *[He moves Left past Maude.]*

LENA. *[Waving]* Have a good day, Marvin.

MAUDE. Yeah, good day to you, Marvin. *[They move to their respective porches as the POSTMAN exits Left. MAUDE stops at her steps and they glance at each other again and repeat the giggling. MAUDE opens her letter and reads.]*

MAUDE. Well, the very devil! ! ! ! Lena, I got somethin' here to show you. *[She hurriedly moves to Lena's porch.]*

LENA. Mus' be somethin' awful important to get you to move 'at fas'.

MAUDE. This here letter is from the State Highway Department and it says I gotta move.

LENA. *[Sits forward in her rocking chair]* Say what?

MAUDE. Says they're buildin' some kind of freeway and it's goin' right through my property . . . slap through my house.

LENA. Why, I'z got a letter from the same folks . . . *[rips the letter open.]*

MAUDE. *[Sitting on the bench]* No need readin' it, Lena . . . mos' likely says the same thing as mine.

LENA. *[Reads]* Oh, dear Malster, it do . . . it say de same thing.

MAUDE. Says here they'll be here to let me sign the papers . . . an' here's somethin' about money.

LENA. [*Wadding the letter up*] Ain't nobody buyin' my property or my house. I done raised all my chiren an' buried two no-count mens right chere an' dis house is all I'z got to show fer all 'at misery, an' dere ain't nobody fin' to take it, fer no 'mounta money.

MAUDE. But this letter says they have the right to take our land by somethin' called a court order . . . by havin' it condemned . . . so they're offerin' us a good price they say.

LENA. I see's dat! But, dey don't know how much dis house mean to me. Oh, Lawd, Maude, I'z scared. Fer de firs' time in a long time ol' Lena's gittin' scared.

MAUDE. [*Stands and touches Lena's shoulder*] It is mighty scarey . . . 'specially when I stand here an' look over 'cross there at my house and think about leavin' it. [*Peers off Left, as though she is looking down the road*] I wonder if they're planning on takin' over Mary's house, too?

LENA. I reckon so. They says in dis letter, [*unwads the letter*] all de property is bein' bought and all the houses tow down . . . all de way from Parker's ranch on a-past Old Man Fuller's dairy.

MAUDE. I'm gonna go over to Mary's an' see if she got one of these blamed letters. [*Starts down the steps*] We gotta get everone together and decide what we can do to put a stop to this foolishness.

LENA. [*As MAUDE moves downstage and starts off Left*] One thing fer sho . . . [*rises*] dey's gonna know dey's got one tiger by de tail.

MAUDE. [*Turns and waves*] Make that two! ! ! ! ! [*She exits Left and LENA moves from her porch to the fence and sings a spiritual as she investigates the vines on the fence. LUDIE MAE enters from Right.*]

LUDIE. Mama? Hey, is that you? [*LENA turns.*]

LENA. Who else you spec' to find here? The Sue-preems? [*They meet and embrace.*]

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LUDIE. Why, Mama, you haven't changed a bit. Still as sassy as ever.

LENA. Let me look atcha. What brings you way out chere? You lost or somethin'? Last time you'uz out chere lightenin' struck my hackberry tree and lopped it half into. I hope you ain't brought no mo' disasters wi'chu.

LUDIE. I came to see you, Mama. What's wrong with wantin' to see a body's own Mother?

LENA. Yehhhhh . . . [*inspecting Ludie Mae's costume*] specially when so much of that body's showin'. [*LUDIE moves as if modeling.*]

LUDIE. Now, Mama, this is the way everyone dresses in the city. Besides, you know how I always liked pretty things.

LENA. Yeh, I 'member you an' yo purtty things. Well, come on an' set down on de po'ch. No need standin' roun' out chere in de hot sun. Some of 'at goop on yo eyes might jes melt and run down onto yo . . . hum . . . chest and you might jes fall off'n 'em shoes.

LUDIE. [*As LENA moves up the steps*] Now, Mama, this is the latest style. [*She follows LENA onto the porch. LENA sits in her rocking chair as LUDIE looks around.*] The house is just like I remember it. And that old rocking chair? How long you had that old thing, anyway? [*She sits and wipes her brow with a kleenex.*]

LENA. I reckon dis here rockin' chair is older'n you is. Least ways I 'member spendin' many a hour rockin' you right out chere on de po'ch where it'uz nice an' cool.

LUDIE. Cool? It sure isn't cool out here now. I don't know why you don't have some air-conditioning put in your house, Mama. You wouldn't have to spend all your time out here just to get a breath of air. I don't think I could stand not having it in my apartment. Why, it's so nice and cool all the time.

LENA. It ain't healthy! ! ! ! God meant fer us to breathe His air . . . not somethin' what's done been froze and blowed thu some durty ol' pipes. Naw, suh, it jes' ain't healthy.

LUDIE. I been breathin' it for the past fifteen years. Don't I look healthy enough?

LENA. I cain't rightly tell . . . I find it difficult seein' thu all 'at paint you got all ovuh yo face. You looks like one ob dem loose women from cross de tracks.

LUDIE. I am one of those loose women from across the tracks. *[LENA gasps.]* That's what you want to hear, ain't it? Don't you want me to say that I do all kinds of terrible things? *[Rises]* That I drink whiskey and sell dope? *[Shakes her hips]* That I'm evil? ? ? ? ?

LENA. Girl? What chu think de Lawd feels 'bout that? Where you gonna be when He calls His chiren home?

LUDIE. Havin' myself some fun, Mama. *[LENA rises.]* I'm gonna be havin' myself a good time. *[She turns to meet her mother, who slaps her directly in the face. Her natural reaction is to return the slap. LENA grasps her wrist.]*

LENA. Don't chu evuh talk to yo Mama like 'at agin . . . I don't care how old you is. You'z headed fer de devil, Miss Angel, and I don't wants to hear no mo' 'bout it. *[She releases Ludie's wrist with a shove. LUDIE turns and moves Right. She is half-crying but still angry. LENA sits grumbling about the evils of her daughter.]*

LUDIE. Look, I didn't come here to talk about me and what I do. I came here to talk about you . . . about you and the old folk's home your sweet Charles Ray and his darlin' Sarah Bess mean to have you locked up in. *[She whirls around and goes to the bench and gets her purse as she sits.]*

LENA. What'chu mean, old folk's home?

LUDIE. Just what I said. Charles Ray is on his way out here now to talk you into sellin' your house and property to those freeway people and if you refuse, you can bet your cor-set he'll have you put away so fast it'll give you swimmin' in the head . . . in a rest home, as they call it, whether you like it or not.

LENA. *[As LUDIE sits]* He'll play the devil doin' either. I been livin' here ovuh 52 years an' dere ain't nobody fin' to

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make me move nowheres. And, as you young folks say, dere ain't no way yo Mama'll eber be locked up in no res' home.

LUDIE. Mama, I just came to warn you that they can make you move. Those freeway people don't care a flip about runnin' folks like you out of your homes. It don't matter if you done lived here 52 years or five minutes as long as they can get their hands on your property and other folks can get their hands on some money and I'm talkin' now about your dear Charles Ray. Your pride and joy . . .

LENA. He wouldn't do anythin' . . .

LUDIE. Oh, yeh, just wait and see, Mama. Oh, he'll be nice an' sweet about it at first but you just wait til you refuse to sell.

LENA. What's wrong wi'chu, girl? You jes sayin' 'at cause you ain't never cared nothin' 'bout Charles Ray — cause his Daddy wudn't yo Daddy.

LUDIE. Yeh, you right. I ain't never cared nothin' about Charles Ray cause he ain't never been worth carin' about. Yeh, he just like his Daddy . . . except his Daddy did do one good thing for this old world . . . HE DIED! ! !

LENA. So did yo's . . . and good rid'nce to boph uv em'.

LUDIE. Look, I don't even want to talk about it anymore. I'm goin' down to the store and get me a pack of cigarettes. *[Rises with her purse]* You just sit here and think about what I said and prepare yourself. Your baby boy will be here in a few minutes. *[She goes down the steps.]*

LENA. Yeh, 'at's jes like you . . . evertime anythin' impo'tant comes up, you gotta go off and git yo cigarettes. *[LUDIE rushes off Right.]* Oh, Lawd . . . where'd I fail? Where? *[She sobs softly. MAUDE enters from Left and shouts over to Lena.]*

MAUDE. Well, Lena, you was right. They're takin' over Mary's house, too. *[Starts up her steps]* Lord help us.

LENA. Yeh, Lawd hep us. Girl? Be careful on dem steps. You ain't fin' to want no fall at yo age. *[MAUDE ascends the steps and moves to her rocking chair.]* You know? I

think I'll go on down the road an' see if they's runnin' old Man Parker off'n his land, too. *[She rises and moves down the steps.]*

MAUDE. Yeh, you do that and you let me know when you get back.

LENA. I see you later. Hum, hum . . . po' old Mary. Jes runnin' folks off like 'at. *[She mumbles as she exits Right and MAUDE settles, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. Her son FRANK enters from Left.]*

FRANK. Mom? Hey, wake up.

MAUDE. *[Quickly stirring and opening her eyes. She puts her glasses on.]* Oh . . . Son . . . I didn't hear you drive up . . .

FRANK. *[Moving onto the porch]* Caught you . . . being lazy . . . sleeping the day away.

MAUDE. Never could fool you, Son. *[He kisses her on the cheek.]* Just like your Daddy . . . never could fool him either.

FRANK. *[Moves to the edge of the porch]* This is still the most peaceful spot on earth. It seems strange not hearing all the noises of the city.

MAUDE. Yeh, it's peaceful all right. But those city an' state folks'll mess it up yet.

FRANK. Mom, there are a lot of things going on today that we just can't do much about.

MAUDE. That's a bunch of tom-foolery! You know well as me that if you get enough people workin' together you can get most anythin' done . . . or undone. *[She leans forward.]* You come here to help me beat this freeway business?

FRANK. There's nothing that can be done.

MAUDE. I can refuse to budge and that's what I'm gonna do . . . refuse! ! ! !

FRANK. *[Rises and moves to bench]* Mom, when a road goes through we just can't get in the way.

MAUDE. Used to be roads went *by* a body's house, not through it. What happened to people, Son? And you? You went to college for I don't know how long to become a archi-

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tect and you set there an' try to tell me they taught you how to build things where they ain't wanted? You folks go to school and come out dumber than you was when you went in.

FRANK. It isn't a matter of smart.

MAUDE. The devil it ain't! You 'member buildin' that bridge over there 'crosst that ditch?

FRANK. Yeh, Mom.

MAUDE. You couldn'ta been over fifteen or sixteen and no one had to tell you to build a bridge over a ditch an' not under it or down the middle of it.

FRANK. There's a lot of difference between building a bridge over a little ditch and constructing a freeway.

MAUDE. Oh, I see . . . buildin' is different from constructin'. Seems to me you folks learn a bigger word just to go with a bigger job.

FRANK. There's logic in construction today. It's all planned out beforehand.

MAUDE. Like the construction company that built all them fancy brick houses over there crosst Simms Bayou? First big rain an' them folks is up to their rear ends in water.

FRANK. But, Mom, they had never had floods over there before they . . .

MAUDE. Son, you forget that your Mama's been here for over fifty years. I could'a told them carpenters and brick bats to pack up their hammers and bricks and wait a spell an' see. Ever' time it rains a little for as many as four days and then comes a gully washer, that blamed bayou floods its banks near to a mile from where it's at.

FRANK. Okay, Mom, you're right about that. But this freeway deal is different.

MAUDE. I'd rather fight flood water . . . at least it'll go away sometimes. And with a flood, folks come to help a body, even those in her own family.

FRANK. *[Rises]* Well, it isn't a flood and there's nothing we can do about it. Mr. Wallace phoned and asked me to get a power of attorney if you stick to your decision not to sell.