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Tar Beach

By

TAMMY RYAN

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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(TAR BEACH)

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Tar Beach was originally produced by Luna Stage (West Orange, N.J.) from April 9 to May 9, 2015.

CAST:

REENIE Emmanuelle Nadeau
MARY CLAIRE Emily Verla
ROGER Bart Shatto
BRIGIT Heather Benton
MARY FRANCES Alanna Monte

PRODUCTION:

Director Cheryl Katz
Scenic Designer Brian Dudkiewicz
Lighting Designer Oliver Wason
Sound Designer Erik T. Lawson
Costume Designer Deborah Caney
Production Manager Liz Cesario
Stage Manager Daniel Viola

The play was subsequently produced by Theatre Lab at Florida Atlantic University (Boca Raton, Fla.) from Nov. 30 to Dec. 16, 2018.

CAST:

REENIE Abby Nigro
MARY CLAIRE Krystal Millie Valdes
MARY FRANCES Amy Coker
ROGER David A. Hyland
BRIGIT Niki Fridh

PRODUCTION:

Director Matt Stabile
Scenic Designer Michael McClain
Lighting Designer Jayson Tomasheski
Sound Designer Matt Corey
Costume Designer Dawn C. Shamburger
Properties Designer John Shamburger
Choreographer Jeni Hacker
Stage Combat Choreographer David A. Hyland
Production Stage Manager Joanna Orrego

For Noreen, who learned to fly.

Tar Beach

CHARACTERS

REENIE: 14 years old, the dream-weaver of the play. Painfully shy and introverted.

MARY CLAIRE*: 16 years old, Reenie's older sister. Seeking rebellion and freedom.

MARY FRANCES*: 16 going on 30, Mary Claire's best friend and cohort. Blunt and rebellious.

ROGER: 38 years old, Reenie's father. Works as a Teamster truck driver and moving man, as well as in a warehouse. A bit of a dreamer and a heavy drinker.

BRIGIT: 35 years old, Reenie's mother. Works as a cook in a deli. Exhausted and unhappy.

*Mary Claire and Mary Frances are most often referred to as Claire and Frances to avoid confusion in the text.

TIME: July 12 to 14, 1977, and present day.

PLACE: Various areas of the Ozone Park, Queens, home of Reenie's memory, including the roof, the second floor hallway, the girls' bedroom, the living room, around the dining room table and on the beach.

PRODUCTION NOTES

As this is a memory play, it is not meant to be straight naturalism. The characters in the play spring from Reenie's memory, almost like actors playing the roles that she assigns them. The scenes should move like snapshots in a photo album, orchestrated by Reenie. While there is darkness in this story, there is love and humor woven throughout. Fight the darkness.

Tar Beach

ACT I

PROLOGUE

(Darkness. Then, a bare light bulb is switched on above REENIE sitting cross-legged in the dark. We can barely make her out.)

REENIE. Pretend this is a dream. This is a dream you're having about me. About a girl you don't know. It's OK, you don't have to understand everything right now. This is only the beginning. It's the only way I can tell this story. *(Beat.)* It is July 12, 1977. It's hot, and I'm sitting in my mother's closet where she stores all of her things. Winter clothes are jam-packed in here. And boxes and boxes of stuff. Memories. Photographs, drawings and homemade cards, the red construction paper Valentine's Day hearts on white doilies and the little soap fish my sister made in Brownies. My parents' wedding pictures, all of our baby pictures, every school picture since kindergarten. Stuff like that you save forever. There is a ladder in here, too, if we want to get out. *(She stands suddenly.)* Like if there was a fire, we could escape onto the roof. We could jump roof to roof to roof until we got to safety—or Atlantic Avenue—whichever came first. Except, there's not always enough warning before things catch on fire. *(She pushes her way through the closet.)* Reaching through her scratchy coats and polyester pantsuits, I find the ladder, yank it open, then climb hand over hand, pulling myself up out of quicksand to get to the top. Then with both hands flat against the ceiling, PUSH as HARD as I CAN to OPEN it—

(Sound of a trapdoor lifting as the light from the closet shines straight up into the night sky. She walks to the edge and takes a deep breath.)

REENIE *(cont'd)*. Down there, it's like you're trapped on the A train—in the tunnel, under the river, packed with people, and it's a hundred and fifty degrees, with *no air*. My father doesn't believe in air conditioning. OK, he believes in air conditioner. And it's in their bedroom, where it's so loud you can hear it, but they're the only ones who can feel it.

(We hear the sound of the elevated train rumble past, distant sirens, a couple shouting at each other and then distant waves crashing softly onshore.)

REENIE *(cont'd)*. Up here, I can breathe even though it's like a hundred degrees out and so humid we might as well be underwater. Sometimes if I concentrate, I can smell salt from the ocean ... if there's a breeze.

(She looks up at the sound of an airplane flying overhead.)

REENIE *(cont'd)*. There were never any stars in the sky. OK—*star*. Sometimes there's one. But no, that's an airplane ...

(She follows the plane, looking out over the neighborhood.)

REENIE *(cont'd)*. If I could fly ... I'd be gone.

(She pulls back from the memory, discovers a box and starts unpacking it, first pulling out a small rose-patterned diary.)

REENIE *(cont'd)*. My diary. I keep it at the back of my underwear drawer. I think no one will find it. But, just in case, I place a hair on the page I've just written on so I'll know when someone reads it. And, I keep it locked at all times with a key.

(The key on a string goes around her neck. She puts the diary in her jeans pocket. Then, out of another box, she pulls out a paper mache head with wild red eyes, green skin and snakes for hair.)

REENIE *(cont'd)*. My Medusa. I won a prize for her.

(She places Medusa on the ledge of the roof. Then she lays out two bath towels and the following objects.)

REENIE *(cont'd)*. Baby oil. Sun In. Pack of Kools. Boom box.

(She sets up the radio next to the towels and stashes the cigarettes and lighter in a straw beach bag. She discovers a suede '70s-style floppy hat and puts it on her head without comment. Then she pulls out a photo album and holds it to her chest.

Sounds of sirens and then fire trucks. A forty-alarm fire. The red and blue lights of ambulances and police cars bounce off her face as she looks toward Atlantic Avenue.)

REENIE *(cont'd)*. And then I'm back. Tar Beach. The way I remember it.

(REENIE crouches suddenly and opens up a real trapdoor. Light shines up through it like a beacon. She exits down it, taking the photo album as the lights fade on Medusa, left behind.

REENIE suddenly pops back out for a moment, reaches over and turns on the boom box. Something from the late '70s, like "Dream Weaver," plays as she disappears again. The last light to fade is the light streaming out of the trapdoor.

Lights shift.)

SCENE 1

(Lights rise, transitioning from darkness to dawn, eventually ending in the afternoon of a hot sunny day in July, the day before the New York City blackout of 1977. The radio comes through the boom box, playing more songs of the late '70s.

MARY CLAIRE and MARY FRANCES, dressed in two-piece bathing suits, lay side by side on the towels on the roof. They are both soaked in baby oil. The Medusa head sits on the ledge of the roof between them. Suddenly, CLAIRE bolts upright and cries out in pain.)

CLAIRE. Give me a towel, the towel! OW, OW, OW! That towel you're sittin' on!

FRANCES. Did you get it in your eyes?

CLAIRE. It burns! Ahhh. Give me your water, your water, pour it on my eye!

FRANCES. Damn girl, you're going to go blind for some highlights. Yow, my feet are burning, yow, yow, yow, yow—this roof is on fire!

CLAIRE. Hurry!

FRANCES. I am, I am, I got it, here. Pour it on. How's that?

CLAIRE. It's still stingin'.

FRANCES. Keep pourin' it right on your eye. You gotta wash it out.

CLAIRE. What does it say if you get it in your eyes?

FRANCES. It says you'll go blind.

CLAIRE. What?!

FRANCES. I'm kiddin'. It says wash it out.

CLAIRE. Ahhh, it friggin' hurts ...

FRANCES. You should have stuck with the lemon juice.

CLAIRE. That burns too.

FRANCES. It can't be worth all this agony.

CLAIRE. It's still burning ...

FRANCES. Uhm, Mary Claire ... I know you're in pain and everything ... but can you please turn that head the other way around? It's startin' to freak me out.

CLAIRE. Uhm ... Mary Frances ... I feel like I have a hot poker in my eye, do you think you can do it yourself?

(FRANCES leans over and turns Medusa to face away from them.)

FRANCES. That's a little better.

(CLAIRE hands a spray can to FRANCES while holding the towel to one eye.)

CLAIRE. Here, spray some in the back.

FRANCES *(shakes can, spraying)*. It hurts to be beautiful.

That's what my mother says. Not that she'd know. *(Beat.)*

Did you get any money from your mother?

CLAIRE *(shaking her head)*. Uh-uh. You?

FRANCES. Slipped a ten from my father's wallet. He just got paid, he'll never miss it. How much you got altogether?

CLAIRE *(grabbing her beach bag, she empties it, pouring all the money out on the towel)*. About seven ... in change.

FRANCES. That should be enough for a six pack, bottle of Jack and some munchies—and train fare if we need it.

CLAIRE. Am I gettin' red?

FRANCES. Fryin' like a fish.

CLAIRE. Too red?

FRANCES. You're really freckled.

CLAIRE. Does it look like a tan? Am I gettin' tan lines?

FRANCES. Put it this way, if you squint your eyes, all the freckles blend together and you can call it a tan.

CLAIRE. Good.

FRANCES. Turn over. You're done on that side.

(FRANCES rubs oil on CLAIRE's back. CLAIRE pulls out a box full of half-smoked cigarettes.)

CLAIRE. Wanna smoke?

FRANCES. What about your mother?

CLAIRE. She's downstairs somewhere readin' TV Guide. She won't come up here.

FRANCES. We're smokin' menthols now?

CLAIRE. My mother left them in the bathroom.

FRANCES. Menthols make your lungs bleed, you know.

CLAIRE *(lighting up a cigarette butt with her mother's stolen lighter)*. Really?

FRANCES. There's fiberglass in them, or some shit.

CLAIRE *(blowing out the smoke, then suddenly worried)*. No there isn't.

FRANCES *(gives her a look, "See, what'd I tell you")*. You don't have any Marlboro 100s left?

CLAIRE *(looking in her box of butts)*. I've got one Parliament, but I was savin' that for later.

FRANCES. We'll buy a fresh pack. You don't wanna be smokin' stinky butts tonight.

CLAIRE. No, I hope I'm not smokin' stinky butts ...

(They start laughing hysterically.)

CLAIRE *(cont'd)*. God, I can't wait for tonight!!

FRANCES. Did you ask your parents?

CLAIRE. My mother said yes.

FRANCES. She won't call my house, will she?

CLAIRE. I don't think so.

FRANCES. 'Cause I'm tellin' my mother, I'm sleepin' here.

CLAIRE. What about your mother, will she call?

FRANCES. Uh-uh. She'll be too busy naggin' my father to death, in between sayin' the rosary.

CLAIRE. Good.

FRANCES. Bonfire on the beach! Then we'll watch the sunrise! With any luck, you'll be under the boardwalk with Jimmy, and I'll be with Bobby or Anthony or Michael, depends on who comes. I'm not picky. I'll take your castoffs, I'm not proud.

CLAIRE. I still haveta ask my father.

FRANCES. You were supposed to ask him last night!

CLAIRE. I couldn't ask him last night—

FRANCES. We got it all set up for tonight! And hopefully Anthony is comin' with *his car*, otherwise we'd have to take the train, and we'll never get the guys to take the train all the way to Rockaway—

CLAIRE. If I woulda asked him last night, he woulda said no.

FRANCES. *Whenever* you ask him he's gonna say no. Then you start *beggin'*. You won't have time to wear him down if you're just startin' now! Just go, your mother said yes. He won't even notice.

CLAIRE. Oh no, he'll notice. He doesn't miss anything.

FRANCES. OK, OK, OK, then tell him on your way out the door, "By the way I'm sleepin' over at Mary Frances' house tonight because she has air conditionin'," and it's goin' to

be like a hundred and fifty degrees in your room—he can't say no to that! That's child abuse. Not even a fan in there. He can't even spring for a fan.

CLAIRE. Cuz he's friggin' cheap.

FRANCES. I'll buy you a fan, how much could a fan cost?

CLAIRE. He doesn't care about that. Look, I'll figure somethin' out.

FRANCES. You better. Because this is a good plan. Genius. If we have all night, something's bound to happen.

CLAIRE. And what if it doesn't?

FRANCES. Then we'll go to Forest Park and look for Son of Sam.

CLAIRE. Just what I want to do tonight—get shot by the forty-four caliber killer.

FRANCES. “Get Son of Sam Before He Gets You.” I saw it on a T-shirt.

CLAIRE. I don't think they mean *us*.

FRANCES. Who better?

CLAIRE. Sixteen-year-old girls are supposed to go out and capture a homicidal maniac?

FRANCES. Hey, we're the targets! I don't want to be afraid the entire summer of my sixteenth year. I want to be carefree.

CLAIRE. And what do we do if we find him?

FRANCES. We call the cops and get our picture in the paper.

CLAIRE (*putting her hair in a ponytail*). In the meantime, you better put your carefree hair in a ponytail. Son of Sam likes girls with long, brown, shoulder-length hair.

FRANCES. Yeah, well, Son of Sam can suck my ...

(She leans over and whispers in CLAIRE's ear.)

CLAIRE. That'll be hard—

(FRANCES bursts out laughing, spraying water.)

CLAIRE *(cont'd)*. To do! Since you don't have one—!

(Without warning, REENIE's head pops up from the trapdoor.)

REENIE. Daddy's home!

(REENIE sees the Medusa and shoots CLAIRE a deadly glare as she grabs the head and disappears. Then CLAIRE and FRANCES move fast, stubbing out their cigarettes, getting rid of any evidence.)

FRANCES. Holy crap.

CLAIRE. What's he doin' home!?

FRANCES. Holy crap!!

CLAIRE. Don't panic, he won't come up here—I don't think.
Put the butts in the can.

FRANCES *(holding open the beach bag)*. Here. In this, throw it all in this!

CLAIRE. OK, lay down. Stop pantin'.

(They lie down, frantically waving their hands above them to dissipate the smoke.)

FRANCES. I'm sorry, your father scares the livin' crap out of me.

CLAIRE. Turn the radio off. No wait! Leave it on. Lower it. No wait. Act normal.

FRANCES. Shouldn't he be at work??

CLAIRE. What time is it?

FRANCES. Do you think he's drunk?

CLAIRE. He doesn't usually start drinkin' till Friday. Sometimes Thursday, but never Tuesday.

FRANCES. He's nicer when he's drunk. When he's sober, he looks at me with those x-ray eyes that say, "I know you're doin' somethin' bad with my daughter."

CLAIRE. He's home early on a Tuesday, that's not a good sign—

FRANCES. Shhh! Did you hear—he's coming! Oh my God, he's comin' up here!? Please tell me he's not comin' up here!!

(The girls freeze, eyes glued to the trapdoor:

Lights shift.)

SCENE 2

(REENIE backs out of the closet holding onto Medusa. She bumps into ROGER, dressed in a blue work uniform jumper; zipper down, and a white wifebeater T-shirt visible underneath.)

ROGER. Where you goin'?

REENIE. Nowhere.

ROGER. You're goin' somewhere.

REENIE. I live here.

ROGER. Where's your mother?

REENIE. Nap.

ROGER. Where's your sister?

REENIE *(hesitates briefly)*. Roof.

ROGER. What?

REENIE. She's on the roof. With Frances.

ROGER. That kid. What is with your mother, lettin' them go up on that roof?

REENIE. They always go up there.

ROGER. They do? Why aren't you up there with them?

(Beat.)

REENIE. She didn't ask me.

ROGER. You can go up on the roof with them, I'll let you. Go ahead.

REENIE. No.

ROGER. You want to invite one of your little friends over?

REENIE. No.

ROGER. Then go up there with them.

REENIE. She doesn't want me to.

ROGER. Tell her I said so.

(He takes a pack of Parliments out of his chest pocket and starts fishing for a cigarette out of the pack. It's empty, he crushes the pack.)

ROGER *(cont'd)*. Hey. You're not smokin' my cigarettes, are you?

REENIE. No.

ROGER. What is that?

REENIE. Medusa.

ROGER. Me do what?

REENIE. Medusa. She's a ... a mythological creature.

ROGER. A what?

REENIE. She's a Greek ... monster.

ROGER. She needs a new hairdo.

REENIE. They're snakes. Athena turned her hair into snakes because she was jealous of her because she was—well, I forget that part.

ROGER. Uh huh. Why does she got them red eyes?

REENIE. If you look in her eyes, she'll turn you to stone.

ROGER. Yeah. I've seen that look before. Where'd you say your mother was?

REENIE. Takin' a nap.

ROGER. Yeah, she's pissed off at me again. She's a hard woman, your mother. Don't get her pissed off at you. So where you goin' with Me Do Woo?

REENIE. Medusa.

ROGER. What you said. Why are you carryin' it around like that? I thought you were too big to play with dolls.

REENIE. Mary Claire took it. Her and Mary Frances keep *stealin'* it. It's not a doll.

ROGER. Maybe I'll give the sneaky Marys a heart attack and make a surprise visit to Tar Beach?

REENIE. Where?

ROGER. When I was a kid, livin' on Steinway Street, we had no money for the train, so we'd go up on the roof. It was like the beach with our sunglasses and the radio and our parents' cigarettes. Except no sand. That's why we called it Tar Beach. I know what you kids are doin' before you even think about doin' it. So don't.

REENIE. I'm not doin' anything.

ROGER. Get me a beer and bring it up there.

REENIE. Get it yourself.

ROGER. How about Me Do Wop, she wanna get me a beer?

REENIE. She'd rather turn you to stone.

ROGER. She's too late for that. Here, feel this, feel it, feel me here. Go ahead, you can punch me.

REENIE. I don't want to.

ROGER. Go ahead, right in the gut. Like a rock. Hah? How many of your friends' fathers are like that? Here, my biceps, go ahead, feel 'em. Hah? I'm like the Incredible Hulk, right? C'mere. Give your father a kiss. You're a good kid, Reenie. I love ya. Now get your father a beer.

REENIE. I'm busy right now.