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*Dramatic Publishing*

# **SHAKIN' THE MESS OUTTA MISERY**

**A Play  
by  
SHAY YOUNGBLOOD**



**Dramatic Publishing**

**Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia**

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(SHAKIN' THE MESS OUTTA MISERY)

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**To all my Big Mamas now living  
and those whose spirits have passed on.**

*SHAKIN' THE MESS OUTTA MISERY* was first presented by Horizon's Theatre Company in a workshop production at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia in July 1988 directed by Elizabeth Omilami.

The play premiered in Atlanta at Horizon's Theatre Company in October 1988. Set Design by Tom Brown, Lighting by Liz Lee, Costumes by Yvonne Lee, Music by Valetta Anderson. Glenda Dickerson directed the following cast:

Daughter .....	<i>Marguerite Hannah</i>
Big Mama .....	<i>Georgia Allen</i>
Aunt Mae .....	<i>Ginnie Randall</i>
Fannie Mae .....	<i>Valarie Eileen Henry</i>
Miss Corine/Miss Tom .....	<i>Mary Holloway</i>
Miss Mary/Miss Shine .....	<i>Carol Mitchell-Leon</i>
Maggie/Dee Dee .....	<i>Margo Williams Moorer</i>
Miss Lamama .....	<i>Elizabeth Omilami</i>

## **Acknowledgments**

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Special thanks to Isabelle Bagshaw for her listening ear and loving support.

# SHAKIN' THE MESS OUTTA MISERY

A Play in Two Acts  
For Eight Women, doubling

## CHARACTERS

DAUGHTER . . . . . black woman, mid to late 20s  
(acts as a child in scenes and as narrator)

*Most other main characters are black women  
aged fifty plus and have Southern accents.*

BIG MAMA . . . . . Daughter's guardian

AUNT MAE . . . . . Big Mama's sister

MISS CORINE . . . . . a hair dresser and professional maid

MAGGIE . . . . . a con woman  
(also plays Dee Dee and Miss Rosa)

MISS MARY . . . . . a maid with unearthly powers  
(also plays Miss Tom)

MISS TOM . . . . . a carpenter and Prayer Circle member  
(also plays Miss Mary)

MISS LAMAMA . . . a maid with an African husband and ways

DEE DEE . . . . . Daughter's fast cousin and know-it-all  
(also plays Miss Rosa and Maggie)

YOUNG WOMAN . . . . . on bus as maid [no dialog]  
(also plays Fannie Mae and Miss Shine)

MISS ROSA ..... runs funeral home  
(also plays Dee Dee and Maggie)  
FANNIE MAE . . . . Daughter's blood Mama, a dancing ghost  
(also plays Young Woman)  
MISS SHINE ..... a maid at governor's mansion  
(also plays Fannie Mae)

Doubling of characters can be reassigned except Big Mama,  
Daughter and Fannie Mae.

Additional character notes in back of script.

**TIME:**

1920s to present.

**PLACE:**

A small southern town;  
a place where memories and dreams coincide.

## ACT ONE

**AT RISE:** *DAUGHTER enters wearing a black coat and hat. She removes her hat and walks around set humming, touching things in a familiar way, remembering, i.e., at Aunt Mae's table, she pretends to pour a drink and toast, at vanity she brushes her hair in mirror, hesitantly sits in Big Mama's rocker, closes her eyes and eases into a story.*

**DAUGHTER.** I was raised in this house by some of the wisest women to see the light of day. They're all gone now. I buried the last one today. Seems like yesterday they was sitting around in this room talking about taking me to the river. I guess they waited to see me steady on my feet before leaving. Those old snuff dippers taught me some things about living and loving and being a woman. I miss hugging them. *(Hugs herself.)* Wrapped up in the warmth of their love, I listened to them all through the years of my childhood, spellbound by their stories of black women surviving with dignity. Big Mama raised me mostly. I didn't call her Big Mama 'cause she was big or even 'cause she was my mama, she wasn't either. She was just regular. An old black woman who had a gift for seeing with her heart. *(DAUGHTER stands and removes her coat. She is wearing a simple pastel summer dress.)*

*(The WOMEN enter humming, forming a circle around the perimeters of the space. DAUGHTER is center stage. Dur-*



*ing their intro each WOMAN exchanges places with DAUGHTER in center. WOMEN sing African ritual song to Yemenjah, Yoruba river orisha to accept their gifts and answer their prayers. "Yemenjah, Yemenjah olodo, Yemenjah ee ah mee olodo." Repeat one time.)*

**BIG MAMA.** Eyes don't see everything only God can do that.  
**DAUGHTER.** Aunt Mae was Big Mama's sister. She taught me how to wear a tall hat on a windy day and how to walk in high heel shoes. She ran an after hours liquor business out of her kitchen. She was what you'd call an independent woman.

**AUNT MAE.** The wine taste sweeter and the berries have more juice when you got your own.

**DAUGHTER.** And I'll never forget Miss Mary. She knew how to work roots and fix people. Sometimes in the middle of a conversation she would see into your future and start to tell it to you if you didn't stop her.

**MISS MARY.** I ain't never fixed nobody didn't need it.

**DAUGHTER.** Miss Corine was one of my best friends. Friday and Saturday evenings she ran a beauty shop outta her kitchen. She had Indian blood in her and was quick to admit to Geechees on her daddy's side. That's why folks said she had fingers that could braid the wind.

**MISS CORINE.** You got to know where you come from to know where you going.

**DAUGHTER.** Ooh, and Miss Lamama. Her real name was Jessie Pearl Lumumba. When she was seventeen she married an African and took to wearing African dresses and took on African-like ways. That marriage I heard lasted till Mr. Lumumba brought up the possibility of wife number two.

**MISS LAMAMA.** What don't kill you, will make you strong.

DAUGHTER. The summer I was twelve I was at a bend in the road and it was scary not knowing what was on the other side. My blood mama Fannie Mae wasn't there anymore and my Big Mamas kept talking about taking me to the river, a strange and mysterious place.

BIG MAMA. Daughter got her blood this morning. We gonna have to take her to the river.

MISS MARY. I could have told you that. I seen the signs.

AUNT MAE. Looks like time done sneaked up on us. She's becoming a woman. We got to keep a sharp eye on her.

MISS CORINE. By the time her mama come to us she was already on the road to ruin.

MISS LAMAMA. Daughter been restless, asking lots of questions.

MISS CORINE. It's about time she got some answers.

ALL WOMEN. Her gifts too.

BIG MAMA. We can give her what we couldn't give her mama. (*WOMEN sing: "Yemenjah, Yemenjah olodo, Yemenjah ee ah mee olodo." Repeat one time.*)

ALL WOMEN. Yes.

BIG MAMA. Now, Daughter, on your birthday we gonna take you to the river.

DAUGHTER (*insolent*). Why I have to go now?

BIG MAMA. Your blood's come. There are some things you need to know and going to the river is a thing you need to do.

DAUGHTER. It's a long way to the river.

BIG MAMA. Don't have to be no river there.

DAUGHTER. Well, what happens at the river?

BIG MAMA. When a girl child get her first blood...

MISS LAMAMA. Her mama or one like her mama have to prepare her.

AUNT MAE. Tell her things a woman needs to know.

**MISS MARY.** Then the women in the family can take her to a secret place for the crossing over.

**BIG MAMA.** All summer long your Big Mamas gonna be getting you ready.

**ALL WOMEN.** Your Big Mamas gonna get you ready.

**DAUGHTER.** There were so many women and so much love, but something was missing. It was my mama. Fannie Mae wasn't really around anymore, not for real, but I could talk to her, and I would ask her about things. Sometimes I'd even talk to God like Big Mama did. "Dear God, please bless Fannie Mae, Big Mama, Aunt Mae, Miss Corine, Miss Tom, Miss Mary, Miss Rosa and anybody else I forgot. If you have time bless my cousin Dee Dee, even if she is mean to me, I'll need somebody to play with in heaven. And God, I been praying for this last thing a long time now and I hope you hearing me, could you please send my mama back. I miss her. I need her to take me to the river. Amen." Mama? Mama, they want to take me to the river, but I told them I don't wanna go. Well, Dee Dee went two years ago and she mean as ever. Mama, I need you... Why did you leave me?

**BIG MAMA.** Who you in there talking to?

**DAUGHTER.** I was thinking, Big Mama.

**BIG MAMA.** Chile, you suppose to be asleep by now. What you thinking so hard about?

**DAUGHTER.** About dying.

**BIG MAMA.** You too young to be thinking 'bout dying, sugar.

**DAUGHTER.** Not me, Big Mama. I'm scared you might die, then what I do?

**BIG MAMA.** I ain't goin' nowhere till the Lord is ready for me. Listen, baby, your Big Mama got a whole lot more livin' to do.

DAUGHTER. You not gonna go away like my mama did?

BIG MAMA. I ain't goin' nowhere you can't reach me by calling my name. You my sugarfoot and I wouldn't choose to leave you for all the angels in heaven. Stop worrying unnecessary. You got all your Big Mamas. We all gonna be getting you ready. Now you go on to sleep and don't forget to say your prayers.

DAUGHTER. Yes ma'am. Things be going bad for Big Mama, she would up and go to the Bible. She had faith in the power of The Man above to work miracles, and me, I had faith in Big Mama.

## SCENE TWO

DAUGHTER. Colored folks as you know are the most amazing people on this earth. Big Mama raised me in the company of wise old black women like herself who managed to survive some dangerous and terrible times and live to tell about them. Their only admitted vice, aside from exchanging a little bit of no-harm-done gossip now and then, was dipping snuff. They were always sending me to Mr. Joe's grocery store to buy silver tins of the fine brown powder wrapped in bright colored labels with names like Bruton's Sweet Snuff, Georgia Peach and Three Brown Monkies. One time, my mean old cousin Dee Dee told me that snuff was really ground up monkey dust, a delicacy in the royal palaces of Africa.

*(DEE DEE enters with straw in a cup. DAUGHTER skips over to her, curious. They begin hand clapping game, sing-song their responses.)*

DEE DEE. For real, girl! I ain't lying! All you got to do is try it.

DAUGHTER. What? Snuff? That stinky stuff!

DEE DEE. Ain't you got no sense at all? Don't you know nothing?

DAUGHTER. How come you know so much?

DEE DEE. Oh, I forgot you ain't been to the river yet. There's a lot of things you don't know.

DAUGHTER. Have you ever tried it?

DEE DEE. What you think?

DAUGHTER. What it taste like?

DEE DEE. With milk it taste just like a chocolate milk shake. What you do is mix three big spoons of monkey dust in a glass of milk and drink it through a straw, fast. If you drink it all you'll wake up and be real pretty. Like them African dancing girls we saw on TV. They drink it every-day. It'll make your teeth white too. It's a secret though, and you got to swear on the Bible not to tell nobody.

DAUGHTER. All right.

DEE DEE. Go get Big Mama's Bible.

DAUGHTER. Girl, you crazy!

DEE DEE. You want to be pretty, don't you?

DAUGHTER. Yeah. *(Steps back, whispering to DEE DEE.)*  
She gonna beat my butt! *(Tiptoes towards BIG MAMA who is sleeping in her chair.)*

DEE DEE *(whispering back)*. Tell her you need it for Sunday School!

DAUGHTER *(reluctantly)*. All right.

DEE DEE. Repeat after me. I promise...*(DAUGHTER slips Bible away from BIG MAMA's lap. She dashes back to DEE DEE.)*

DAUGHTER. I promise...

DEE DEE. ...not to tell nobody...Not Aunt Mae...Not Big Mama...Not Miss Mary... 'Cause if I do...I'll turn into a monkey...You gonna be real pretty.

*(Drinking from DEE DEE's cup, DAUGHTER gags. DEE DEE hides behind furniture as BIG MAMA wakes.)*

BIG MAMA. What's the matter, baby? You get choked on something?

DAUGHTER. I fine, Big Mama.

BIG MAMA. What's all this? Child, what is going on here?

DAUGHTER. I ain't suppose to tell. I promised on the Bible. Big Mama, I don't want to go to hell.

BIG MAMA *(seizes Bible)*. Uh huh! You gonna get me a switch off that bush if you don't tell me what's going on. You ain't going to hell for promising to keep something to yourself that ain't right.

DAUGHTER. Dee Dee said snuff was monkey dust and it make you real pretty.

BIG MAMA. Pretty is as pretty does. It's pretty ways that will get you in heaven. All the monkey dust in the world can't give you a good, kind, honest heart. I'm gonna switch the spite out of that Dee Dee.

DAUGHTER. Big Mama, why you dip snuff? That stuff is nasty.

BIG MAMA. Snuff ain't no worse than them cancer sticks that be killing folks left and right. Ain't never heard tell of snuff harming nobody. 'Cept the one time I recollect. Corine come close as green to a dollar to getting us killed on account of some snuff.

DAUGHTER. What happened, Big Mama?

BIG MAMA. Hold on, chile, I'm getting to it. A story ain't something you just read off like ingredients on a soap box.

A story's like a map, you follow the lines and they'll take you somewhere. There's a way to do anything and with a story you take your time. If you wanna hear, you got to listen.

DAUGHTER. I'm sorry. I'm listening, Big Mama.

BIG MAMA. Now, getting back to the story. It was a time when the only place colored folks could sit on a bus was in the back. But the number 99 was known as the Maid's Bus. It arrived downtown every weekday morning at 6 a.m. to pick up the colored domestic workers bound for the rich, white suburbs ninety minutes away. Now on this day, not only was the weather hot, but colored folks was stirred up over the lynching and the killings of colored peoples all over the south. A colored woman had just been found dead. She was raped and sawed open by six white men who made her brother watch 'em ravish her. The whites were getting meaner as the summer got hotter.

*(YOUNG WOMAN, MISS MARY, and MISS CORINE march in singing a spirited gospel tune—they stand to wait for bus, fanning in the heat.)*

MISS MARY. Ain't it hot.

MISS CORINE. Too hot to sit in the shade.

MISS MARY. Clothes dried stiff on the line before I finished the breakfast dishes yestiddy.

BIG MAMA. Some awful bloody things happened that summer.

MISS CORINE. It's 5:59 and there come Ralph, right on the dot.

*(MISS LAMAMA rushes in.)*