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Objects in the Mirror

By

CHARLES SMITH

Dramatic Publishing Company

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(OBJECTS IN THE MIRROR)

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“*Objects in the Mirror* was produced in a developmental production in Goodman Theatre’s 2015 New Stages Festival and received its world premiere at Goodman Theatre, Chicago, on April 29, 2017, Robert Falls, Artistic Director, and Roche Schulfer, Executive Director.”

Objects in the Mirror was originally produced in a developmental production in Goodman Theatre's 2015 New Stages Festival (Robert Falls, Artistic Director; Roche Schulfer, Executive Director).

CAST:

Shedrick Kennedy Yarkpai..... Charles Andrew Gardner
Luopu Workolo/Zaza Workolo..... Lily Mojekwu
Rob Mosher..... Jeff Parker
John Workolo A.C. Smith

PRODUCTION:

Director Chuck Smith
Set Design Kevin Depinet
Costumes.....Christine Pascual
Lighting..... Jesse Klug
Sound Mikhail Fiksel
Stage Manager Nikki Blue
Dramaturg Sophie Blumberg

Objects in the Mirror received its world premiere at Goodman Theatre on April 29, 2017.

CAST:

Zaza Workolo Breon Arzell
John Workolo Allen Gilmore
Rob Mosher Ryan Kitley
Shedrick Kennedy Yarkpai..... Daniel Kyri
Luopu Workolo Lily Mojekwu

PRODUCTION:

Director Chuck Smith
Set DesignRiccardo Hernandez
Costumes..... Birgit Rattenborg Wise
Lighting..... John Culbert
Sound Ray Nardelli
Projection Design.....Mike Tutaj
Stage Manager Briana J. Fahey
Dramaturg Jonathan L. Green

For Rob, David, and Shedrick

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 2009, I was invited to Adelaide, South Australia, to see Independent Theater's production of my play *Free Man of Color*. A year later, they asked me back for a production of my play *Les Trois Dumas*. Both productions featured a young Liberian actor named Shedrick Yarkpai. As I got to know Shedrick, he told me about his 10-year odyssey from war-torn Liberia, through desperately impoverished, disease-ridden refugee camps in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire before his final relocation as a refugee in Adelaide, almost 10,000 miles away. I found his story of survival and the decisions he faced—the challenge of leaving one world and jumping feet first into a completely different world with little or no possibility of return—to be morally complex and difficult to reconcile. I sheepishly asked him for permission to retell his story in the form of a play, and he was delighted by the prospect of sharing his experiences through the art form he had come to embrace after his journey.

Years later, in a workshop at Goodman Theatre's New Stages Festival in my hometown of Chicago, I found myself making adjustments to the play now titled *Objects in the Mirror*. Some of the changes I made to Shedrick's story were small, some were more significant, and, at first, I had trouble justifying the changes. I had never lived in a war-torn country, and I was never forced to leave my home for a distant land. I had grown up on the Southside of Chicago, albeit in an area plagued with poverty and gun violence. A tour in the Army had taken me to Germany and Korea, my plays brought me across the U.S. and abroad, and my teaching career landed me in the foothills of Appalachia, which often feels like a foreign country to me. And here I found myself in rehearsal in Chicago, barely 10 miles from where I grew up, yet culturally, socially, economically,

and experientially, I may as well have been 10,000 miles away. That's when I realized that I was incorporating events from my own life in order to tell Shedrick's story. Or perhaps I was using events from his life to tell mine. Finally, I stopped trying to discern between the two. That's when I realized that the objects in the mirror really are closer than they appear.

Objects in the Mirror

CHARACTERS

SHEDRICK KENNEDY YARKPAI: Young Liberian man, early 20s, a shy innocent who is eager to please.

ROB MOSHER: Australian man, early 50s, lawyer with an air of authority. He is a true public servant who has dedicated his life to the protection of children through the courts.

JOHN WORKOLO: Liberian man, early 50s. A mercurial man who is funny and has a playful nature but is also extremely dangerous. He's a chameleon who is capable of turning on a dime.

LUOPU WORKOLO: Shedrick's mum, Liberian, late 40s.

ZAZA WORKOLO: John's son, Shedrick's cousin, late teens to early 20s.

TIME: 1995-2007

PLACE: Various locations in Liberia, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Adelaide, South Australia.

PRODUCTION NOTE

The script indicates that Shedrick is speaking to Rob during his Act I narrative. However, Rob should not be onstage during the entire narrative. When John enters during Shedrick's narrative about Liberia, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, Rob should fade and eventually disappear.

Objects in the Mirror

ACT I

Scene 1

(ROB's townhouse in Adelaide, South Australia.

The townhouse includes a clearly visible foyer or entryway.)

ROB. What happened?

SHEDRICK. The bus.

ROB. What bus?

SHEDRICK. The 22 to Henley Beach. I was to change at Grenfell then hop the tram. But the bus ... the bus driver ...

ROB. Shedrick ...

SHEDRICK. The bus comes and there are many people. Most want to board first because they are very important people. So I let the hurry-up people board first. Then it's my turn. I board the bus, and I show the driver my bus pass, but the driver, he looks at me, he looks at my pass, he looks back at me, and he says ...

ROB. What did he say, Shedrick?

SHEDRICK. He calls me a name. Very bad name.

ROB. What name?

SHEDRICK. A name I don't want to repeat.

ROB. I need to know. What name did he call you?

SHEDRICK. He calls me "nigger."

I thought perhaps I was mistaken. Perhaps I did not hear correctly. So I look at him, this man, and he looks at me like

he knows what I'm thinking, like he can read my mind and he says it again, but this time, he says it slowly so there's no mistake. He says, "Nigger, go back to your own country."

ROB. Bloody hell.

SHEDRICK. I wanted to wrap my fingers around his throat.

I wanted to squeeze the life out of him, but I hear a voice say, "No, don't."

So I take a step back off the bus for a moment, and the bus driver, he closes the door and then drives away.

ROB. Did you get his name?

SHEDRICK. His name?

ROB. What about the bus number?

SHEDRICK. The 22 to Henley Beach.

ROB. That's the route number, Shedrick. We need the bus number.

SHEDRICK. Sorry.

ROB. It happened this morning? What time?

SHEDRICK. Eight fifteen, eight thirty.

ROB. Good. We have the time, we can get his name.

SHEDRICK. What good would that do?

ROB. We're gonna file a complaint.

SHEDRICK. Complaint?

ROB. I'm gonna see to it that this man loses his job. A man like that shouldn't be workin' for Metro.

SHEDRICK. You're right. A man like that should not be working for Metro.

ROB. Good. Grab your jacket and let's go.

SHEDRICK. Where?

ROB. Down to file a complaint.

SHEDRICK. I have to go?

ROB. You were the one on the bus.

SHEDRICK. I have to give my name?

ROB. There's nothin' to worry about.

SHEDRICK. It might be best to just let it go.

ROB. There's nothin' to be afraid of.

SHEDRICK. I understand that, Mr. Rob. But it's not a big deal.

ROB. Aren't you keen to do somethin' about it?

SHEDRICK. We can't undo what's already been done.

ROB. We can make sure it doesn't happen to anyone else.

SHEDRICK. I'd rather forget the entire matter.

ROB. All right, then I'll do it. I'll file the complaint. I'll say I was on the bus, and I saw and heard the driver behave in a disrespectful and deeply disturbin' manner.

SHEDRICK. You would lie?

ROB. I consider his behavior to be both disrespectful and deeply disturbin'.

SHEDRICK. But you weren't there. You didn't see it or hear it.

ROB. But it did happen, eh? You're tellin' me the truth, aren't you?

SHEDRICK. Of course.

ROB. Then there's no issue. I'll report exactly what happened.

SHEDRICK. But you'd lie and say you saw it.

ROB. What this man did was wrong, Shedrick. You have rights, and you should not be afraid to speak up against this man.

SHEDRICK. I'm not afraid, Mr. Rob. I would just prefer to let it go.

ROB. All right. If that's what you want ...

SHEDRICK. That's what I want.

ROB. OK. But for the record, I want you to know that a man like that should not be workin' for Metro.

SHEDRICK. Agreed. Now may we please forget it?

ROB. The paint's in the foyer. And I decided you were right. The foyer should be bright, full of light. Ablaze. That's the color you chose, eh? Ablaze.

SHEDRICK. Ablaze. Reminds me of the sun.

ROB. I got two gallons. Should be enough for two coats. There's a roller, brush, drop cloth. And I've decided to pay you up front, but I want you to take your time, Shedrick.

(ROB hands SHEDRICK some cash.)

ROB *(cont'd)*. There's no need to rush. If it takes you a couple of days, a week, that's fine with me. All right?

SHEDRICK. This is too much.

ROB. I want you to go shoppin' and get yourself a pair of shoes and a new jacket. Time for you to freshen yourself up a bit.

SHEDRICK. I can't accept this.

ROB. Broke boys should never argue with ready cash. Take the money. Buy yourself somethin' nice. You have lunch yet?

SHEDRICK. I had planned to stop.

ROB. There's a curry in the fridge you can reheat later. You remember how to work the microwave?

SHEDRICK. You won't be here?

ROB. I have a court appearance this afternoon. Here's a key so you can come and go as you please. It'll unlock the gate and the top lock.

SHEDRICK. A key?

ROB. I'm not sure how long I'll be gone. This case ... young boy, eight years old. His father beat the hell outta him for years. We took the tyke away and now the father wants him back, but we're not gonna let that happen.

SHEDRICK. You can do that? Take a man's son away?

ROB. The courts are here to protect those who need to be protected.

SHEDRICK. The boy?

ROB. That's right. And if the father is abusive ...

SHEDRICK. Will you put him in prison? The father?

ROB. We'll try to work with him. Get him into a program. See if we can help him. But you can't help everyone.

SHEDRICK. Those you can't help, you send them to prison?

ROB. There are people in this world who live on the fringes. Do you know what that means? They live just outside of the law, outside of everything good and decent. The man who beat his son or that bus driver, these people live on the fringes. But unless they've committed a crime, we usually don't put them in prison. Unless they've committed a crime, we try to help them. We try to give them tools they need to live within a civil society. But some people want nothing to do with a civil society. Like the bus driver and the man who beat his son, some people are more comfortable living on the fringes, and for these people, we have the courts.

SHEDRICK. What if there was someone who wanted to live in a civil society but also committed a crime? Would you put them in prison?

ROB. Depends on what kinda crime. Serious crime?

SHEDRICK. Some would say it was serious.

ROB. Somethin' you did?

SHEDRICK. If it were something I did, would you help me?

ROB. What did you do?

SHEDRICK. I can't tell you unless you agree to help.

ROB. And I can't agree until you tell me what you did. If it's serious, I may not be able to help.

SHEDRICK. You can help, Mr. Rob. I know you can. It is well within your power to help. You could fix things for me.

ROB. I can't fix things, Shedrick.

SHEDRICK. You know the law. And you have friends in the court.

ROB. Still ...

SHEDRICK. The boy whose father beat him. You fixed things for him.

ROB. I'm his advocate. I was appointed by the court to protect him.

SHEDRICK. You could be my advocate.

ROB. Doesn't work that way, Shedrick. Now what did you do?

SHEDRICK. Something bad. Something very bad.

ROB. Tell me what you've done, and I'll see what I can do.

(SHEDRICK considers.)

SHEDRICK. I have an uncle. Uncle John. He's like a genie, Uncle John. He would always appear out of nowhere, when you'd least expect it.

(UNCLE JOHN appears.)

SHEDRICK *(cont'd)*. Not long after the unrest had begun back home, my mum sent me to live with my grandfather Kennedy in the bush. I was only ten, but Monrovia had become a very dangerous place to live. There were killings almost every day, and my mum thought that living in the bush in Guinea with my grandfather Kennedy would be better, even though he had lots of wives and lots of children. I had been there almost a year when one day, Uncle John appears.

JOHN. Shedrick! My boy! Look at you. Look at how you have grown. My God, you've gotten huge. And look at those muscles. Make a muscle for me. Come on. Show me a muscle!

(SHEDRICK makes a muscle, and ROB fades away.)

JOHN *(cont'd)*. My God, look at that! Bet you could wrestle a full-grown lion singlehandedly.

SHEDRICK. Naw.

JOHN. Bet you could. How much you wanna bet? Bet you a dollar you could wrestle a lion singlehandedly. And win the fight. You wanna bet?

SHEDRICK. No.

JOHN. Course you don't. You know why? 'Cause it's a fool's bet, that's why. That bet is what we call a losing proposition, and you are no fool, no siree. Tell me, what have you been doing to grow such large muscles?

SHEDRICK *(wielding a machete)*. Day in, day out, I chop, chop, chop the stems of the palm nut heads so that the older boys can make palm oil.

JOHN. You're very good with that machete.

SHEDRICK. Lots of practice.

JOHN. Tell me something. And this is merely conjecture, you understand. Simply hypothetically speaking: How would you like to come home?

SHEDRICK. Home?

JOHN. Back to Monrovia. Back to civilization. Your cousins, your aunts, uncles and grandfather, they are happy here. But you, I suspect that you are a city boy. Am I right?

SHEDRICK. I'm attending bush school.

JOHN. You don't need to go to bush school. Look at you. You're already strong enough to wrestle a lion singlehandedly. You know how to chop the stems off the palm nut heads, so what will you learn in bush school that you don't already know?

SHEDRICK. I am learning the names of things.

JOHN. Don't you already know the names of things?

SHEDRICK. Some things but not all things. Knowing the names of things is very important.

JOHN. You're a smart boy, Shedrick. You should be in school. Proper school. School in Monrovia so you may begin your secondary education. If you were in school in Monrovia, you could study many interesting subjects. Like mathematics. Would you like to study mathematics? It's the science of numbers, you know.

SHEDRICK. I know what mathematics are.

JOHN. Would you like to study them?

SHEDRICK. Baba says you can learn things in bush school you can't learn any other way.

JOHN. Secrets.

SHEDRICK. The secrets of the bush.

JOHN. The secret of becoming a man, I know. Your baba is very wise. He is right about a great many things. But not everything. Let me ask you this. Do you miss your mum? It's all right to say you do because you know what? Your mum misses you.

SHEDRICK. Then why did she send me here?

JOHN. To keep you safe, Shedrick. She loves you, she misses you, so she sent me here to bring you home.

SHEDRICK. Why didn't she come herself?

JOHN. She's a very busy woman. She has a new husband and guess what? You have a new baby brother, so she asked me to come.

SHEDRICK. And it's true, that she misses me?

JOHN. Her heart breaks without you.

SHEDRICK. And is it safe?

JOHN. Of course it's safe.

SHEDRICK. The unrest over?

JOHN. For the most part. We still have to be careful. Especially when traveling. We have to be very careful and remember to trust no one. If we are stopped and someone asks, you say that we traveled across the border into Guinea to purchase cigarettes in order to sell in Monrovia. However, we were robbed by bandits and now we are traveling back to Monrovia with no money or cigarettes. That will be our story.

SHEDRICK. Isn't it illegal to transport cigarettes?

JOHN. Course it is.

SHEDRICK. So why confess to doing something illegal?

JOHN. Confession is a strong elixir. It's the revelation of a secret and the revelation of a secret is something people always believe.

SHEDRICK. They wouldn't believe us if we told them the truth?

JOHN. Perhaps.

SHEDRICK. Then why lie?

JOHN. If we tell the truth, if we say that you were living here with your grandfather, then whoever stopped us will know about this place. And if they know about this place, they will come here. Government forces, rebel forces, doesn't matter. They will come and they will take the girls, your cousins, and use them for their sexual pleasure. They will put guns into the hands of the boys to replenish their numbers.

SHEDRICK. Baba would stop them.

JOHN. He would try, no doubt. And when he tries to stop them, he will be butchered in a very public display of force. Is this

what you want? Your baba to be butchered? Of course not. So how do we make sure that we are not the ones to set this machinery in motion? We tell a story. Not a lie but a story. A simple story. And it's not a difficult thing to do to tell a story. It's easy. In fact, I think you'd be good at it. Come on, try it, repeat after me. We come to Guinea to purchase cigarettes.

SHDRICK. We come to Guinea to purchase cigarettes.

JOHN. Marlboros.

SHDRICK. Marlboros.

JOHN. See? Easy. No worries. It will be an adventure, you and I traveling together. You like adventures don't you?

SHDRICK. Sure.

JOHN. Of course you do. You and I will be on one big adventure.

(JOHN exits as ROB reappears.)

SHDRICK *(to ROB)*. Soon after we arrived back in Monrovia, we received word that soldiers had discovered my grandfather's home. They did everything Uncle John said they would. They took the ten-year-old, eleven-year-old and twelve-year-old girls and made them their wives. They put guns into the hands of the boys and taught them how to ambush and attack. Everyone else, they shot and killed, except for my grandfather Kennedy. They chopped him into pieces. If Uncle John had not come for me ...

A curfew had been established in Monrovia and the Westerners were starting to flee. So we moved to a different section of the city and stayed there until the Charles Taylor forces started kidnapping young men, taking them to go fight. We moved again and then again, but no matter where we went, there were rapes, murders and kidnappings.

Finally, we heard of a place called Greystone. It was a

twenty-acre annex next to the American embassy. The Americans had opened it and were letting people inside. There were thousands of people there, all living in makeshift tents made out of tarpaulin. Finding a safe and dry place to sleep was difficult. Food was scarce, and occasionally, my mother would disappear for days at a time. But I was happy, 'cause I was there with my cousin Zaza.

(ZAZA appears.)

ZAZA. Take one last look. Drink it all in. Find whatever friends you have left and say your goodbyes 'cause we are finally leaving this place. We are going to the United States.

SHEDRICK. We? What we?

ZAZA. Us we. You and me we. You, me, Korlu and my father we. Everything's been arranged, the paperwork's been approved, we are getting on a jet airliner and flying to the United States. Yeah, mon. First thing I'm gonna do when we get there is get myself a lady. One of them fine American girls. A sista. What about you, eh? What you gonna do when we get there?

SHEDRICK. I dunno.

ZAZA. You better figure it out, baby brother. Get yourself a plan 'cause in a few days we're gonna be there. New York City, hanging with the homies and chillin'. Big time, boi!

(JOHN enters with LUOPU as ROB fades away.)

JOHN. Listen. Shedrick has been shortlisted.

LUOPU. How do you know?

JOHN. Blamo told me.

LUOPU. Nathaniel Blamo?

JOHN. He heard it from Mamadee Dukuly.

LUOPU. And you believe it?

JOHN. I'm telling you—

LUOPU. According to Blamo who heard it from Mamadee who probably heard it from a ghost after rolling voodoo.

JOHN. Mamadee was in the camp outside of Danané. She saw our names on the list and wrote them down. See? Look. If she got this from voodoo it was some very good voodoo 'cause I'm the only one who knew these names.

(He reads from the list.) John Workolo!

Here, sir! And ready for relocation!

(Reading.) Zaza Workolo!

ZAZA. Here sir, and ready for relocation!

JOHN *(reading)*. Shedrick Workolo!

(Beat. All eyes on SHEDRICK.)

JOHN *(cont'd)*. Shedrick Workolo?

ZAZA. You're supposed to say—

SHEDRICK. I know what I'm supposed to say, but that's not my name.

JOHN. Whaddya mean not your name? Shedrick Workolo.

SHEDRICK. I'm not Workolo. I'm Yarkpai.

JOHN. Yarkpai?

LUOPU. Yarkpai, John.

SHEDRICK. Shedrick Yarkpai.

JOHN. You let this boy take his father's name?

LUOPU. I don't want to hear anything from you.

JOHN. The man takes no responsibility.

LUOPU. Nothing.

JOHN. But you let him take his name?

SHEDRICK. Does this mean I can't go?

JOHN. No, this is you. Workolo/Yarkpai, doesn't matter.

You've been short-listed for an interview for resettlement in the US. Get your things together.

LUOPU. I want you to change the paperwork.

JOHN. How am I supposed to change the paperwork?

LUOPU. Change it or he's not going.

JOHN. I can't change it, Luopu. Perhaps once we get to the US—

LUOPU. Then he's not going.

JOHN. You would keep him here because of the name?

LUOPU. He's too young to be away from his mother.

JOHN. The boy's fourteen years old.

SHEDRICK. Fifteen.

JOHN. Fifteen.

LUOPU. I know how old he is.

JOHN. You sent him to the interior to live with his grandmother when he was eight. You sent him to Guinea to live with his grandfather, for God's sake.

LUOPU. That was different.

JOHN. How different?

LUOPU. He was safe.

JOHN. At his grandfather's?

LUOPU. I could see him whenever I wanted. I could travel for a day or two and be with him.

JOHN. You can travel and be with him in the US.

LUOPU. I don't want to travel to the US.

JOHN. Because of your new husband?

LUOPU. He is too young to go.

JOHN. But not too young to die? Look around you, Luopu. How many boys his age do you see here? Out of the thousands here in the camp, how many men between fourteen and forty do

you see? I count three: Zaza, Korlu, and Shedrick. These boys are valuable commodities, more valuable than a cache of oil and diamonds because them wielding weapons will ensure an endless supply of oil and diamonds. We've been lucky they haven't been murdered or kidnapped. But eventually our luck will run out, and they will come for them.

LUOPU. We're safe here.

JOHN. We may starve, but we're safe.

LUOPU. Nobody's starving. Who's starving? You want food? We have plenty of food. We have rice. More than enough to sell. You want fish? I can get you fish. You want meat? I'll get you meat.

JOHN. There was a food drop?

LUOPU. This rice is more valuable than diamonds, I can trade it for anything.

JOHN. You're doing business outside the fence.

LUOPU. All you have to do is tell me what you want.

JOHN. Doing business with killers in order to eat?

LUOPU. Children.

JOHN. Children with guns and machetes.

LUOPU. Children who miss their mums. You know who's out there? Titus. You remember Titus with the crooked smile? Fatima's son. You two used to play football together.

SHEDRICK. Ataya?

LUOPU. Yes, Ataya. He was with a group of other boys. I called out to him, I said, "Titus!" He looked at me, and I could tell, he didn't recognize me. Not at first. And then I remembered his other name. So I called, "Ataya!" And his face lit up with that crooked smile of his. He ran over and hugged me and kissed me and said, "Don't worry, Queenie"—that's what they call me, the boys, they call me

Queenie—he said, “Don’t worry, Queenie, I’ll take good care of you.”

And he did. They respect me. I remind them of their mums they lost or the mums that they never had. I give them comfort.

JOHN. You give them cigarettes.

LUOPU. I give them what they want. What they need.

JOHN. It’s a losing proposition, doing business with those boys. They are full of drugs, and they will eventually turn on you. Then what? What happens to Shedrick if you’re not here to look after him? You think your new husband will look after him? What about Titus and the other boys you call children? Will they be as kind to him as they are to you? Perhaps they will be. Perhaps Shedrick will join them and learn to fight. Perhaps he will become a butcher. He’s a smart boy, and he’s already good with a machete. Do you think he can learn to become a butcher? I don’t know, and I’ll never know ’cause I won’t be here to find out. I’m leaving. I’m taking Zaza and I’m taking Korlu and we’re going to the US. And if you cared anything at all for Shedrick, you’d allow him to come with us.

LUOPU. You don’t even know if he wants to go to the US.

JOHN. Of course he wants to go.

LUOPU. Did you ask him?

JOHN. Who doesn’t want to go to the US?

LUOPU. I don’t want to go.

JOHN. Besides you.

LUOPU. Let’s ask him and see what he says. If he says he wants to leave me here and go to the US with you, fine, he can go.

JOHN. Come on, Luopu.