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Dramatic Publishing

KNOCK ME A KISS

by

CHARLES SMITH



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(KNOCK ME A KISS)

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ISBN 1-58342-167-X

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*“Originally produced by Victory Gardens Theatre,
Chicago, Illinois, Dennis Zacek, artistic director.”*

On April 9, 1928, Countee Cullen was married to Yolande Du Bois, the daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois. The Reverend Cullen, Countee's father, officiated over the wedding which W.E.B. Du Bois called "the symbolic march of young and black America...it was a new race, a new thought, a new thing rejoicing in a ceremony as old as the world."

Two months later, Countee Cullen sailed to Paris with the best man from the wedding, Harold Jackman, leaving Yolande, his young bride, behind. Yolande was granted a divorce from Countee on December 9, 1929.

This play is a fictional account inspired by those factual events.

Knock Me a Kiss was originally produced by Victory Gardens Theater (Dennis Zacek, artistic director; Marcelle McVay, managing director) in Chicago, Illinois, on January 21, 2000. It was directed by Chuck Smith; the set design was by Mary Griswold; the costume design was by Birgit Rattenborg Wise; the lighting design was by Todd Hensley; the sound design was by Benjamin T. Getting and Benjamin Recht; the production stage manager was Tina M. Jack. The cast was as follows:

Jimmy Luncefore	MOROCCO OMARI
Yolande Du Bois	YVONNE HUFF
Nina Du Bois	CELESTE WILLIAMS
W.E.B. Du Bois	DEXTER ZOLLICOFFER
Countee Cullen	JASON DELANE
Lenora	LESHAY TOMLINSON

KNOCK ME A KISS

A Play in Two Acts
For 3 Men and 3 Women

CHARACTERS

YOLANDE DU BOIS: The 26-year-old daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois and Nina Du Bois. Yolande is a romantic who has led a very sheltered life. The greatest love she has in her life is the love she has for her father.

JIMMY LUNCEFORD: A 28-year-old big band leader. Graduate of Fisk University and former high school teacher, Jimmy decided that the hand-to-mouth existence of touring on the road with a band he formed was more important to him than maintaining a steady job teaching high school. He is down to earth and very practical, up on current trends and fashions and meticulous when it comes to music. He has a good business sense and loves Yolande dearly.

NINA DU BOIS: In her mid-60s, she is the wife of W.E.B. Du Bois. Nina has a very provincial attitude toward sex which she considers to be fundamentally dirty but necessary. She lives in the shadow of her husband whom she met when he was a professor and she was a student taking one of his classes. The death of her son Burghardt at 18 months, a death from which she never fully recovered, was fundamental in forming her attitude toward her daughter, Yolande, who was born later, and toward her

husband, W.E.B., whom she considered responsible for Burghardt's death.

WILLIAM EDWARD BURGARDT (W.E.B.) DU BOIS: Mid-60s, but very young for his age. Active in national and international politics, he has come to recognize that he is a better politician than he is a husband and father. Even so, he considers his personal sacrifices for the promotion of his personal agenda well worth it. He maintains a very businesslike relationship with his wife and his daughter.

COUNTEE CULLEN: A 25-year-old boy-poet genius and protégé of W.E.B. Du Bois, he is clearly a product of the Ivory Tower, Talented Tenth machine. He is very warm and charming, a man who has used words to get into and out of any situation.

LENORA: Friend and confidant of Yolande, she's the down-to-earth, no-nonsense, tell-it-like-it-is-type of friend we all would like to have.

SET: The set should consist of four or five acting areas. Together, the first three acting areas should constitute the Du Bois apartment on West 150th Street in Harlem. These areas include the foyer outside of the front door to the apartment, a common area inside the apartment, and the book-laden study of W.E.B. Du Bois. The other areas, Jimmy Lunceford's rehearsal hall and Countee Cullen's apartment, should only be suggested.

TIME: 1928.

PLACE: Harlem.

ACT ONE

Scene One

The Du Bois apartment. YOLANDE enters into the foyer outside of the front door to the apartment. She is followed by JIMMY Lunceford. The hour is late—somewhere between one and two in the morning. As they enter, JIMMY sings. YOLANDE tries to quiet him as she fumbles with her keys.

JIMMY. I like cake and no mistake

But baby if you insist...

YOLANDE. Shhh!

JIMMY. I'll cut out cake

Just for your sake...

YOLANDE. Quiet!

(He stops singing.)

JIMMY. Baby, we was swanging.

YOLANDE. If you're gonna come in here, you're gonna have to be quiet.

JIMMY. Am I right?

YOLANDE. Jimmy...

JIMMY. Just tell me. Was we swanging or what?

YOLANDE. All right. You were swanging.

JIMMY. Swinging? No, uh-uh, baby, we wasn't swinging. The Duke, he be swinging. Cab Calloway was swinging. But us, baby, we was swanging.

YOLANDE. I didn't know there was a difference.

JIMMY. You know what the difference is. When you swinging, you only going through the motions, you doing it how you think it should be done, you only repeating what you've heard. But when you swanging, baby, the motions are going through you, you making it up as you go along, you are following a voice that's coming to you from somewhere deep down inside.

(YOLANDE gets the door open as they enter the apartment.)

YOLANDE. You're gonna have to be quiet, Jimmy.

JIMMY. Ain't nobody home.

YOLANDE. My father isn't home. My mother, she's always here. She never goes anyplace.

JIMMY. Exactly what I expected.

YOLANDE. Is that right?

JIMMY. Yes sir. This here is one swank stack of bricks.

YOLANDE. Swank?

JIMMY. That's right. I expected your old man to live in a joint like this. Books. Very intellectual. All in the head, you see. Nothing in the heart.

YOLANDE. How you know?

JIMMY. I know your ole man.

YOLANDE. I didn't realize you two were such aces.

JIMMY. Don't have to be his boon coon. Don't even have to meet the man. Listen to you talk about him all the

time. Talk about how you used to sit here waiting for him to come home.

YOLANDE. You want your drink or not?

JIMMY. I'd rather get a lil taste of something else.

YOLANDE. I swear to God you got a one-track mind.

JIMMY. Ain't my fault you put a conjure on me. Every time I close my eyes, all I can see is you. Your eyes, your lips sweet like candy, peaches and bananas, like a couple of Louisiana plums.

YOLANDE. Jimmy...

JIMMY. Come here and let me run my tongue across those sweet plums of yours.

YOLANDE. Please.

JIMMY. Come on and knock me a kiss.

YOLANDE. My mother's here.

JIMMY. I'll be quiet. I swear. Quieter than a mouse pissing on cotton.

YOLANDE. How many times I have to tell you?

JIMMY. And I won't go too far. When you want me to stop, I'll stop. Promise.

YOLANDE. I'm not fooling around with you. Especially not here.

JIMMY. Then come back with me to my place, Yolande. Come on.

YOLANDE. I'm not going back to that rattrap you call a room.

JIMMY. Well I'm sorry, but we all can't afford to stay at the Waldorf.

YOLANDE. Maybe not.

JIMMY. We ain't all connected like you.

YOLANDE. Don't have to be connected to afford to stay someplace better than you staying now.

JIMMY. Okay. Tell you what I'm gonna do. If it's that important to you, snatch up your stuff and let's go down to that swank stack on the boulevard and get ourselves a real nice room. A suite, order a bottle of bubbles, something to eat...

YOLANDE. You can't even afford a decent room. How you gonna afford a bottle of bubbles?

JIMMY. I got kick.

YOLANDE. Since when?

JIMMY. Since the hen broke wind. Check it out. *(He produces an envelope which contains a stack of bills. He fans the money out and begins to count it.)* Ten, twenty, thirty...

YOLANDE. Where'd you get that?

JIMMY. Forty, sixty, eighty, one hundred.

(There is more.)

YOLANDE. Jimmy...

JIMMY. As you can see, I can obviously afford to purchase a bottle of bubbles.

YOLANDE. That's the band's money, ain't it?

JIMMY. My money.

YOLANDE. You better not be messing with them men's money.

JIMMY. Who's the head nigger in charge? I'm the head nigger in charge.

YOLANDE. Why you always have to use that word?

JIMMY. What word?

YOLANDE. You know what word.

JIMMY. Nigger?

YOLANDE. That word.

JIMMY. Hell, it's true. I am the head nigger in charge. It is my band, I'm the HNIC, and I say, if you want a nice room, you want a lil champagne, we go get ourselves a sweet suite and a bottle of bubbles. Nothin' but the best for my baby.

YOLANDE. Do I look like I just got off the boat?

JIMMY. What boat?

YOLANDE. You think that all you have to do is rent a room and buy a bottle of booze to have your way with me?

JIMMY. I'm trying to give you want you want.

YOLANDE. What I want is to get married, Jimmy.

JIMMY. Okay. Let's get married.

YOLANDE. When?

JIMMY. Name the time and the place.

YOLANDE. How 'bout here and how 'bout now?

JIMMY. Unless you got a preacher in your pocket, baby, we gonna least have to wait till the morning. So how about this? Tonight, we get ourselves a nice room and get real comfortable. Let me curl your toes a lil bit, you curl mine. Then, first thing in the morning, we'll go down to city hall and jump us some broom. What you think about that?

YOLANDE. Was that supposed to be a marriage proposal?

JIMMY. All right. I can see where this is going. Yolande, will you marry me?

YOLANDE. No one will ever accuse you of being a Valentino.

JIMMY. You said you wanted to get married.

YOLANDE. You make it sound like I asked you to clean out my bathtub drain.

JIMMY. I said I'd do it. Damn.

YOLANDE. I want to get married with a little romance, Jimmy. I don't want to get married by no judge. Judges shouldn't be marrying people. Judges send people to jail.

JIMMY. Don't matter who says the words. Long as we believe them.

YOLANDE. We get married tomorrow, where we gonna go on our honeymoon?

JIMMY. Dayton.

YOLANDE. Dayton?

JIMMY. Dayton, Ohio. Got a gig at a stomp shop there Friday next. We get married, get on the bus, go to Dayton and indulge ourselves in some sweet honeymoon.

YOLANDE. Is that all you ever think about?

JIMMY. My lips and your plums on our honeymoon.

YOLANDE. Jimmy...

JIMMY. I'm a man, baby. Shit, if I wasn't thinking about it, something be wrong.

YOLANDE. All right. I want you to do something for me.

JIMMY. You know I'll do any damn thing for you.

(YOLANDE hands a silver-tipped walking cane to JIMMY.)

YOLANDE. Here.

JIMMY. What's this?

YOLANDE. What's it look like?

JIMMY. Looks like a cane but I ain't gimpy. Nothing wrong with my legs.

YOLANDE. It's not that type of cane, Jimmy. Here. Take it. Stand over here.

JIMMY. For what?

YOLANDE. I wanna see what you look like.

JIMMY. Don't you already know what I look like?

YOLANDE. Jimmy!

JIMMY. All right. (*JIMMY takes the cane and moves to the bookcases.*)

YOLANDE. Stand up straight. Come on. Hold your chin up, Jimmy. When was the last time you talked to your mother and father?

JIMMY. My mother and father?

YOLANDE. The people who gave birth to you?

JIMMY. This is your daddy's cane, ain't it?

YOLANDE. It's nobody's cane.

JIMMY. You trying to make me look like your daddy.

YOLANDE. I'm trying to imagine what you gonna look like at the wedding.

JIMMY. I can tell you this: Whatever I look like, I'm not gonna be carrying your daddy's silver-tipped walking stick. I can tell you that.

YOLANDE. And I'm not getting on a bus and going to Dayton, Ohio, for a honeymoon with you. When I get married, I wanna get married in a church, Jimmy. With flowers and a ring.

JIMMY. What kinda ring?

YOLANDE. Diamond ring. I want a diamond engagement ring and I want a wedding ring. I want a church wedding with lotsa flowers and ushers and bridesmaids. And on my honeymoon, I wanna sail on a boat, Jimmy, first class. I wanna sail to Paris or Vienna. I'm not getting on nobody's bus going to no damn Dayton, Ohio.

JIMMY. You want a society wedding.

YOLANDE. I want a wedding that corresponds to my stature. According to who I am.

JIMMY. You are sounding more and more like your daddy every day.

YOLANDE. And what's wrong with that?

JIMMY. Nothing, if you don't mind sounding saddity.

YOLANDE. Saddity?

JIMMY. Your daddy is one of the most sadditiest Negroes I've ever seen in my life. Saddity and self-righteous, that man's nose so high up in the air, if it rained, he'd drown. And now here you come, you starting to act just like him.

YOLANDE. I'm about tired of you passing judgment on my father.

JIMMY. I don't care nothing about your daddy. Hell, he don't care nothing about me. I don't fit into his master plan of producing a batch of upper-crust Negroes. Shit, what I care about him for? And I'll tell you something else: I ain't scared of him either. Everybody walking around this country scared of that nigger. I ain't scared of him and I don't care who knows it. In fact, I can't wait till I meet him. Hell, I'll tell him to his face exactly what I think of him. Shit, the way I see it, he's just like every other nigger walking the face of this earth. He's just as—

YOLANDE. That's enough, Jimmy.

JIMMY. I'm sorry, Yolande, but I got to call it like I see it.

YOLANDE. And now I'm gonna call it like I see it. If you ever wrap your mouth around my father or his reputation again, I swear to God, Jimmy Lunceford, I will break it off with you so hard, fast and complete I won't even leave a memory behind. You understand me?

JIMMY. All I'm saying is, your daddy—

YOLANDE. I know what you saying and I'm tired of hearing it. My father has worked too long and too hard to have some ignorant son of a Negro like you come along and badmouth him.

JIMMY. So why I got to be ignorant?

YOLANDE. Call it like I see it.

JIMMY. Let me say something before we start to drift too far from land. I love you, Yolande, and I will marry you any day, any time, all you have to do is say the word. However, I can't afford no diamond rangs and no church weddings and no honeymoons in Vienna. At least not now. I'm struggling right now, baby. If somethin' comes outta tonight, if that cat from the Cotton Club dug us or if that cat from the Lafayette liked what he heard, if either one of 'em books us for a gig here in Harlem, baby, we'll be picking in high cotton. Hell, we just as good as the Duke. We just as good if not better than Cab Calloway. I mean, what the hell is hi-de hi-de ho? Don't nobody know. People sing it, but they don't know what the hell they singing. So why did Cab Calloway come up with it? 'Cause it distinguishes him and his band from everybody else and they band. And that's all I got to do. Distinguish me and my band from everybody else. Soon as I figure out a way to do that, I guarantee you, we'll be playing all over this town, and maybe then, I'll have enough money for diamonds and church weddings. But until that happens, I got to keep on playing Dayton, and Cincinnati and Buffalo and every little gut-bucket in between. You wanna come along? Baby, you're certainly welcome.

YOLANDE. I'm not traveling with you as your concubine.

JIMMY. I already told ya I'd marry ya.

YOLANDE. You just don't understand romance, do you?

JIMMY. I guess that's just something I'm just gonna have to work on. You wanna go back to my place with me or not?

YOLANDE. What did I tell ya?

JIMMY. Can I at least have a good-night kiss?

(She acquiesces. He kisses her. She kisses him. After a moment, his hands develop a mind of their own.)

YOLANDE. Jimmy... *(He continues.)* Please don't touch me there. *(He likes it.)* Jimmy!

JIMMY. All right. Sorry. Sleep tight, Honeymoon.

(JIMMY exits. NINA, who was eavesdropping on the scene, enters.)

YOLANDE. Jesus. Must you always spy on me.

NINA. Must you always use that type of language?

YOLANDE. You'd think a woman could have a little privacy.

NINA. A woman doesn't need privacy. Not a proper woman. The only type of woman that needs privacy is a woman who's doing something she's not supposed to be doing. But then, you wouldn't call that type of woman a woman, now would you?

YOLANDE. I wasn't doing anything improper.

NINA. I heard a man's voice.

YOLANDE. That was Jimmy.

NINA. He's a man.

YOLANDE. I wasn't doing anything, Mother.

NINA. Two o'clock in the morning.

YOLANDE. He walked me home.

NINA. Man, woman, two o'clock in the morning.

YOLANDE. So what? If I stayed out until five o'clock in the morning, what's it to you?

NINA. Doesn't mean anything to me. Might mean something to your father, though.

YOLANDE. I haven't done anything wrong.

NINA. Didn't say you did. Just saying that your father might be interested in knowing about this behavior.

YOLANDE. Jimmy is a friend of mine, Mother.

NINA. A friend?

YOLANDE. That's all. There is no behavior.

NINA. You've been out with your friend almost every night this week.

YOLANDE. I am twenty-six years old. I should be able to go out with whomever I please.

NINA. We'll see what your father has to say about that.

YOLANDE. Tell him. I don't care. You think I live my life to please Daddy? Is that what you think? I don't care what you tell him. I'm not gonna be here when he gets here anyway.

NINA. And where do you think you're going?

YOLANDE. Daddy's not here, I'm going back to Baltimore.

NINA. Why do you have to keep an apartment in Baltimore, Yolande? What's wrong with living here in New York?

YOLANDE. I plan to begin my work in Baltimore, Mother.

NINA. What work?

YOLANDE. I plan to follow in Daddy's footsteps and dedicate my life to the betterment of the Negro race.

NINA. And somebody told you that Baltimore was the place to go if you wanted to begin this betterment?

YOLANDE. I plan to teach high school in Baltimore, Mother.

NINA. High school?

YOLANDE. I plan to help the downtrodden and the less fortunate.

NINA. That's like the blind leading the blind. You're just as downtrodden and are at least as less fortunate as everybody else.

YOLANDE. I'm not gonna allow you to depress me.

NINA. You should forget about helping others and think about helping yourself, Yolande.

YOLANDE. They want me, Mother. They need me. They asked me to come in for an interview at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon.

NINA. Then you will miss seeing your father because he'll be here tomorrow morning.

YOLANDE. Tomorrow morning?

NINA. The 10:45 from Pittsburgh.

YOLANDE. Why didn't you say something?

NINA. You weren't here to say something to.

YOLANDE. Look at me. I have to go to the beauty shop. I have to get my hair done. And look at this dress. Mother, you should have said something. I have to go shopping. There's not enough time.

NINA. Doesn't matter what you look like once your father finds out that you've been carrying on with that musician.

YOLANDE. I haven't been carrying on.

NINA. We'll let your father be the judge of that.