

GHANA: Darkness Lifting
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The WOMAN is a college-aged, upper middle class African American woman. MAN is her father. GUIDE is an African student guide at Elmina Castle in Ghana.

WOMAN:

Africa...The Dark continent -the heart and soul of -our people; our mother land: -Calling.

(Music begins of native African origin. Perhaps the WOMAN attempts to dance to it -awkwardly -wanting the music to be more familiar than it is. Perhaps behind her we have a shadow image of realistic, actual dance -distant. Then music either drops out or instrumentation increasingly falls out through this next section, as the enthusiasm wains)

WOMAN:

You know when I first told my parents...

(Conservatively dressed African American MAN appears)

MAN:

(Interrupting)

Africa?

WOMAN:

(Continuing)

...When I first told my parents that I was going to Africa to build houses, I was so excited, and just knew that they would think that...

MAN:

(Interrupting)

Africa? Did you say, "Africa?"

WOMAN:

(Continuing)

...that they would think, what an exciting thing: "Reconnecting"

MAN:

(Curt)

Aren't they building houses anywhere in America? Or in Europe, maybe? How about Paris? That way you could see the Louvre in between pouring concrete.

WOMAN:

But Daddy...

MAN:

Is this what we sent you to college for? To build houses in the jungle?

WOMAN:

The jungle? This is our homeland. These are our people.

MAN:

(Sudden direct, sarcastic)

But we really don't know exactly who "our people" were, now do we? (Pause, then sharply) Do we?

(Beat)

WOMAN:

I was born Sara Beth Wiley in Chevy Chase Maryland, the third daughter of Wynona and Richard Wiley. As far as I know, the name "Sara Beth" came from nowhere in particular; as far as I know, the names "Richard" and "Wynona" came from nowhere or from nobody. Once, I asked about my great grandparents...

MAN:

They put my parents on this earth, who put me on this earth, and I put you on this earth. What else do you need to know?

WOMAN:

(In reaction)

And once, I got the sense, somehow, that sometime way back when, someone who had something to do with our family had spent some of their lives doing something, somewhere in Georgia.

(MAN has made transition into GUIDE)

GUIDE:

Good afternoon. Welcome to Elmina Castle, Elmina, Ghana. My name is Victor, and I will be your guide.

WOMAN:

(Shift; enthusiastic)

When I first saw Africa -oh what a sight! Waves of desert stretched out like an ocean that evaporated in the heat of the African sun! There was nothing, as far as the eye could see. Then looking closer, still -everything. Every face of every person you ever knew, and then, somewhere in there, the face of the one you didn't know yet -the one with the answers. But how would I recognize the sound of her voice? The only sound I heard was the anger within my soul, and so I chose to follow it.

GUIDE:

This is one of the many castles along the African coast where more than two-million men and women were rounded up and set on slave ships for Europe and America. The tale we tell is a horrible one, but one that must be told. Now, if you will please follow me...

(Voices from a disembodied CHORUS begin and continue throughout this section. It is important to stage these actors in such a way so it is clear they are not attempting to be a part of the scene, but only providing a vocal presence that punctuates the dialogue)

CHORUS ONE

Hey, lady?

CHORUS TWO:

You want to buy...

CHORUS ONE:

Pen? Coca-cola?

CHORUS TWO:

Small drink?

WOMAN:

But we couldn't move. All around our group, standing in the way, pulling at our shirts...

GUIDE:

(Yelling at them)

Children!

WOMAN:

... wanting to know, did we want a ...

CHORUS ONE:

...Cold drink?

CHORUS TWO:

You want to buy?

CHORUS ONE

A pen.

CHORUS TWO

Postcard.

CHORUS ONE:

A pen for me -for school?

WOMAN:

And somehow, we continued.

GUIDE:

This is the woman's waiting room where the women were kept, chained, side by side, waiting for the boat to come -sometimes for as long as six months. As you can see, there are no sanitary facilities here, and the women often tore pieces of their clothing -the one shirt they had on their back -to use as sanitary napkins. Then, when the voyage began, they were taken here, to...

WOMAN:

(Interrupting; horrified)

... The master's quarters. Shackled to the hull; No ventilation, living in their own excrement for 120 days. Hunger, disease -human ballast for the ship. Here it is, Papa: ground zero for the "Us" and "them". Suspicious looks, late night highway patrol, "Out of the car and spread-em -'boy'." Here I am, three hundred years later -shackled to the hull of my own anger...What am I supposed to do with this, Papa? Take it to the Louvre?

CHORUS ONE:

Postcard...

CHORUS TWO:

Cold drink...

CHORUS ONE

Hey misses!

CHORUS TWO

Hey, misses!

CHORUS ONE:

Hey misses!

GUIDE

(Suddenly and sharply)

Children! Go away, at once!

(End music)

WOMAN:

And they did...except one little girl, standing before me, eyes as wide as oceans -looking at me as though I had nothing to do with her or her life or this place; Like I was some kind of Swiss Eskimo of some sort. And her, no shoes, a shirt far too big, dirt everywhere: suddenly reaching up to me -a piece of paper: a note.

(Sudden rapid fire succession, like a last ditch effort)

CHORUS

Cold drink

TWO

Pen.

CHORUS:

Post card

GUIDE:

I said go - now!

GIRL:

(Holding up paper)

A child...When I was her age, I was busy playing with my toys and didn't know anything existed beyond Barbie. I took the note in my hand.

GUIDE:

On this voyage, another one-third would die, their carcasses rotting for days sometimes, before finally being unceremoniously tossed into the ocean.

WOMAN:

My God... (Then suddenly) Perhaps, I would find her in the village -please. My dear, sweet Lord...

GUIDE

(Continues)

And when they came to America....

WOMAN:

....let somebody be there.

CHORUS ONE

Cold drink.

CHORUS TWO

Good pen.

GUIDE

And there they were sold, like a horse, or goat...

WOMAN:

(Interrupting)

I am coming! I said, I am coming!

(This creates the whirl that causes her to go into a spin)

(Transition: Music comes in a big way, perhaps with the random projections of little Ghanaian girls, so the idea of the child remains central. Maybe even juxtapose American kid and Ghanaian. We could return to the shadow dance here, as well. The music is very percussive, wild, a whirlwind of sound) .

(Concurrently, the WOMAN dons the dress of an older Ghanaian WOMAN)

(Complete music)

In this production, the actor Adrienne Reynolds, performed both WOMEN characters, transitioning here into the Ghanaian Village Woman.

Skip ahead in the play to the part where the African WOMAN –Maisa Esi- tells the story of how she came to be possessed by evil spirits. ELDER is the African village elder. All of the male roles in this production were played by Frank Wiley.

WOMAN:

And as you grow from a girl to a woman, this time passes like wind through the trees: Only when it is gone do you realize it won't always be there.

ELDER:

You are getting older, now, Maisa Esi. You are obedient, a good girl. But, there are still many more things for you to learn.

(ELDER has changed to a younger MAN, who enters beside the activity)

WOMAN:

The body changes, and so with it, life changes; and in this change -from one place to the next - you grow the ability to see your life; in this change, memories are created -innocence is lost.

MAN:

For years now, I have been watching the girl, Maise Esi...And I want to know, how old is she?

(WOMAN stops movement/dance with this)

(Concurrently, WOMAN assumes another tone of telling this story; reactive, as though losing her own voice)

WOMAN:

How old am I?

MAN:

Really, what I want to know -is she old enough?

(Music stops. Transition in mood to next section)

WOMAN:

Old enough? (Pause) Old enough for what? Mama?

(Somewhere in this section will begin a different type of music that is more frantic, nervous, and ultimately leads to the ceremonies described later. In fact, it could be a refrain of the percussive sound used to get into the sequence)

MAN

(Continuing)

Is she a humble girl? Will she show respect -and does she work hard? Is she submissive, is she obedient?

WOMAN:

(Suddenly defiant)

I am a good girl!

MAN:

Well? Is she ready, or not?

CHORUS ONE:

I heard that it happened there...

CHORUS TWO:

She was by the river -washing.

CHORUS ONE:

And suddenly, like that...

WOMAN:

(Suddenly screaming, then panicked)

“Ahh! Oh my goodness! Mother! Something has happened! I think that maybe I have a disease!
Am I going to die -mother? Tell me!”

(Sudden burst of chorus)

CHORUS ONE:

Is she pregnant?

CHORUS TWO:

Look, her breasts!

CHORUS ONE:

A woman.

WOMAN:

Mother....Mother!

CHORUS ONE:

Prepare!

CHORUS TWO

Tell everyone!

CHORUS ONE

Of age

CHORUS TWO

She is...

CHORUS ONE:

Maise Esi is of age!

MAN:

(Suddenly)

Alright, then, let us settle.

WOMAN:

Settle?

MAN:

(Reacting to implied negotiations)

What? 20,000 Cedi's and a bottle of schnapps? That is far too high!

WOMAN:

(Looking at self)

Too high?

MAN:

O.K., you say 20,000 Cedi's and a bottle of schnapps. I say, 10,000 Cedi's and a bottle of schnapps.

WOMAN:

Papa?

MAN:

(Reacting)

10,000 Cedis and "two" bottles of schnapps....well, then -O.K. I guess that is good.

(MAN turns to address WOMAN)

Maise Esi, you are now second wife. You will work in the cocoa fields with me, and care for your children. What I have to give, I will give half to you and half to my first wife. Whatever I buy for you or your children, I must buy for her and her children, and whatever I buy for her and her children, I must also buy for you and yours. I will sleep with her one week, then with you the other week. If I get a third wife, I will sleep with you every third week, and so on.

(The WOMAN turns, has become the American WOMAN, holding a tape recorder and mike in her hands)

WOMAN/AMERICAN:

Second wife? Well of course, it sounded -evil. Demeaning, degrading... But what could I say? It was the way of their people, their custom; a way of working really, surviving. If a man had a lot of land, he could afford more wives, and he needed more of them to work his land. And so, second wife...

(WOMAN/AMERICAN transitions back to WOMAN/AFRICAN)

MAN:

Now, it is the week I must go. Maise Esi, you will stay at the family house...Here -the wash bucket. Take it. (Drops it before her) My sister will show you the place to sleep. And remember to honor my name. There are 43 people in seven rooms, and there is no place for a woman who does not behave herself.

WOMAN/AFRICAN:

But, when will you...

(Again, the chorus provides a series of staccato, undefined voices that punctuate the dialogue)

CHORUS ONE

Hey....

CHORUS TWO

The bucket!

CHORUS ONE:

It doesn't belong there!

WOMAN:

(Moving the bucket)

Oh, I am sorry...

CHORUS ONE:

And him?

CHORUS TWO:

That smoke!

CHORUS ONE

It is not your turn to cook!

CHORUS TWO:

He is with first wife!

CHORUS ONE:

Second wife

CHORUS TWO:

Second wife

CHORUS ONE:

Second wife

CHORUS TWO:

Hey, what did I tell you?

CHORUS ONE

The bucket goes over there!

CHORUS TWO

And the smoke!

CHORUS ONE:

Your feet!

CHORUS TWO:

Your wash!

CHORUS ONE:

And the bucket....

WOMAN:

(Suddenly yelling, first full words we've heard from her since nubility)

It is my bucket, I will do what I want with my bucket, and I will put the bucket right here!

MAN:

(Quickly arriving)

Woman! They say you have been causing trouble with your family. (Pause no response) They say they cannot wait for me to come and take you away! (Pause, no response) Try to remember whose name you bear, and do not cause me such disgrace. Now go into the field. There is work that needs to be done!

(WOMAN is given a hoe, again begins to work. The WOMAN falls into another pattern of speech in telling the story, as though it has all overwhelmed her, and she can't stand to be in the narrative anymore, finds a more distant, somewhat despondent place to tell the story from -memory.)

WOMAN:

Memory...It comes from a change in place -somewhere you were, looking back somehow from where you are -memory. Years passing, like seasons, a hot wind from the Sahara, and all the time wondering -because you never feel your feet on the ground.

MAN:

Remember. You have four -five children now. Five children, and I now have a third wife...If we don't work hard...

WOMAN

(Deadly calm -connecting to the other story)

Five children; six, seven...Each day bringing the season further along, as the dry winds from the Sahara blow hard across our lives, January, February and March. Foreboding. Ill intention. A precursor -a punishment. Seven children -eight. In 'hope' of the rains of Spring, planting maize,

planting yams planting plantains -then, the rains of May, and June; mercy. Nine, ten children-:
and the harvest, until the hot winds of the Sahara... wondering, if it will ever rain, again. Until
one day...

CHORUS ONE:

(Sudden, fearful)

Listen!

CHORUS TWO:

What is that noise?

MAN:

But, what...what can it be?

CHORUS ONE:

Listen!

CHORUS TWO:

Like an ocean.

CHORUS ONE:

Listen.

CHORUS TWO

(Suddenly)

Look!

MAN:

(Screaming; absolutely panicked)

Quick, everybody...

(They all freeze -absolute silence; the one moment of the play that is so)

WOMAN:

(Deadly calm)

Before it hit, from the corner of my eyes, I saw the expression on my husband's face. It was the first time he knew he was powerless; face to face with something so unimaginable. A great wall of fire -bigger than a cloud, faster than the wind; Where did it come from? I only know that it had always been there, waiting; the hot wind, blowing -teasing. Then suddenly, as if itself, overcome from its own pain, -burning -racing towards the sea, it's only relief. Leaving behind it

children, still kneeling, as if about to pick up something, but dead, burned, frozen. My children: four dead, the others living with a memory. It leaped over us as if it wanted to leave witnesses. A soul collects these things...Where does it all go when the work must continue?

(MAN has been studying burnt crop)

MAN:

The village -gone. Everything... The cocoa, too, all gone! -ashes.

WOMAN:

We must plant more.

MAN:

(Suddenly)

And what will we eat this year? It takes five years for cocoa to bear fruit. How will we feed ourselves and the children in the meantime?

WOMAN:

Maize...

MAN:

Everyone here is planting maize. What's worse -everyone here is selling maize!

WOMAN:

I will take it to the market in Kumasi.

(Then, as though reacting from her return from the market)

MAN:

What? The whole crop sells for only 2,000 Cedi's?

WOMAN:

I will take it to the market in Accra...

(WOMAN hands him the money)

MAN:

Only 1,500 Cedi's?

(He takes the money, counts it, but won't give it to her. She waits)

WOMAN:

(To MAN)

And my children...we need food.

MAN:

(Throws something down)

What do you want me to do?

WOMAN:

We haven't enough space to live...

MAN:

Here! Here is a knife, you can rip open my stomach and live there!

WOMAN:

We have nothing to eat

MAN:

Neither has any body else!

WOMAN:

Fine....I will go into the field. I will scratch the earth myself for some casaba -some root - anything.

MAN:

To the field...But, you cannot go today! It is the third Friday of the month -a taboo day.

WOMAN:

I said, my children are hungry!

MAN:

(Backing up; exiting)

Woman...woman.

WOMAN:

It was windy...no one in sight. I scratched the earth looking for some casaba... "Mama, I'm hungry... Mama." (Pause) "Here is a knife...my stomach..." (Then suddenly) "Put the bucket over there!" My children are hungry... "The minor God of evil....looking for a bride." (Sound effect; eery) I said, my children are hungry! (EFFECT) My children... (EFFECT) What? Who are you making that sound? Are you the madman of the village? Go find someone else to bother. Curse you madman! You are a crazy man, and I spit on you! (Pause) "Oh, woman...you should have never...you should have never..."

(Build or begin drumming as would be for a funeral -wildly cathartic sound)

Drums....what is that? Drums... Do you hear? Drums... Drums...

(She builds towards increasingly frantic dance as drums come up, she just continues -total release for her)

MAN:

Woman, what is wrong with you?

(No response, she keeps dancing)

Woman -are you a witch?

(No response, just frantic dancing)

What is wrong with her? She hears the drums anywhere -she runs! She is wild -like the wind - uncontrollable. She leaves everything, and she never tires. Her hair is not washed; her clothes are tattered, and she doesn't care! Some days, she runs, just runs for miles, and nobody can catch her. (Then calling to her) What is wrong with you? What is wrong with you?

(WOMAN suddenly begins to yell out in a combination of Ghanaian, the voices of others, and the voice of a third character, 'Bertie')

WOMAN:

(First, in Ghanaian) What, and who is calling to me? Don't you see the wind and hear the trees? It's moving, because so are we all of us, somewhere. If you want to know where....(Then in English) "Ohh... We're hungry, Mama, and there are too many people in the house, mama...." (And sharply) "Put that bucket over there!" (Ghanian again) I feel it, don't you feel it? It is there -always. I can feel....(And in voice of Bertie) Oh, Bertie, you are such a good dancer. How I love to dance with you...Oh, you make me feel so good. You give my body life!

Play continues.

At the end of the section, in light of her experience in the village, the American Woman is left to reflect on her initial anger over slavery and recalls the note the young girl gave her at Elmina Castle

WOMAN/AMERICAN

Maisi Esi had no idea about the slaves. No one in the village did. Apparently, their culture does not pass on negative information from one generation to the next. That pain had been buried long ago. Funny thing, this idea of “Help.” Maisi Esi reminded me of the story I had told her about the little girl at the castle, and the note: (She takes out letter and begins to read it) “Dear Misses: I am Sara. Will you write to me? Good. Will you think of me? Good. Will you please -help.” To them, I was like Joseph in the Bible, who undergoes a great journey, becomes rich, and comes back to help their people. Me help them? It’s a complicated thing, this idea of “help.” Christ came to show us things in a different way; to see the exact same thing from a different point of view - with a different set of eyes. What I found was, His eyes are everywhere, all around the world -waiting to help us see, the moment we reach out beyond ourselves. That’s why we go, I guess: To help her; help them...help me.

End

For information about Darkness Lifting , please write me at tdetitta@earthlink.net

Also, please see:

**Ghana
Articles and Letters**