

Excerpt

RAISING DAVID WALKER

A play

by

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RAISING DAVID WALKER

CHARACTERS

(Requires 3M, 2F actors)

SERENA FOX, early 20's, forensics student, African American

JOSH McCAFFREY, early 20's, drama student, white

*TOM KELLETT, 50's, college lecturer, white

CHIKU HOLMES, 20's, friend of Serena, African American

DAVID WALKER, abolitionist, African American

*THOMAS JEFFERSON

*TV HOST

STUDENTS (2)

**Played by the same actor*

Note: In the first scene of the play, the actors who appear later as Josh McCaffrey and Chiku Holmes play the roles of the two Students.

TIME

The present

SETTING

Most of the action of the play takes place in the living room/kitchen of Serena's and Josh's apartment in Boston. There are also scenes, requiring minimal representation, in a college classroom, a faculty office, a cemetery, and a TV studio.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

A college classroom. At rise, a class on the “History and Development of Racism” is in progress. The professor, TOM KELLETT, leans casually against the front of his desk facing three STUDENTS. One of them is SERENA FOX. The others are a black FEMALE STUDENT and a white MALE STUDENT.

FEMALE STUDENT

He was conflicted, okay? He was a very conflicted person. But if you look at the history, I mean, he proposed the emancipation of slaves in Virginia as early as, I don’t know, 1780.

MALE STUDENT

1769.

FEMALE STUDENT

Thank you. And, as president, in 1807, Jefferson signed a bill abolishing the slave trade. Yes, he was a hypocrite—he spoke out in support of abolition and he owned over 600 slaves in his lifetime. But if he hadn’t have been so deeply in debt, maybe he would have freed them. Okay, I’m done with this devil’s advocate thing.

Laughter. KELLETT gestures to the MALE STUDENT to speak.

MALE STUDENT

(To the FEMALE STUDENT)

Sorry about...

FEMALE STUDENT

No problem.

MALE STUDENT

I was just going to say that the whole colonization project, that really...I found that very revealing. I mean, Jefferson’s version of freeing the slaves was to send them back to Africa because they were basically inferior to white people, and they didn’t belong here.

KELLETT

Serena. Any final thoughts?

SERENA shakes her head.

KELLETT (CONT.)

Thank you all. Next week we'll be focusing on the abolitionist movement. Question: Before you enrolled in this class, had any of you heard of David Walker?

FEMALE STUDENT

He's a football coach at Pitt.

KELLETT

Ah, those Pittsburgh fans. They know it all.

Laughter.

Not that David Walker. And not the guy who played lead guitar with Fleetwood Mac—if that means anything to you. The David Walker I'm talking about is one of those famous Americans most Americans have never heard of. He was born a free black man in Wilmington, North Carolina in about 1796, and he spent the most influential years of his life, from 1824 until his death in 1830, right here in Boston. He was an abolitionist, an anti-racist, an intellectual, a community activist, a political visionary, a Christian millennialist, among other things. And he wrote this, your next reading assignment.

(Holding up a book)

“Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World”. To my mind, one of the most important political and social documents of the nineteenth century. A manifesto of liberation. An impassioned call to the enslaved to rise up and cast off the chains that bound their minds as well as their bodies. Walker had copies of this circulated through underground networks all across the South. It caused such panic among the white elite that new laws were passed against anti-slavery material. It has long been a rallying point for African Americans and it anticipated the radicalism of later black leaders, such as including Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Junior. Please read, absorb and inwardly digest by next Tuesday. I'll see you then.

Lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE TWO

The living room and adjacent kitchen area of a small apartment. Evening. SERENA FOX slowly enters. She's engrossed in reading Walker's "Appeal". A bookbag is slung across her shoulder.

SERENA

Josh?

There's no response. She lets the bag fall to the floor and tosses her house keys on the coffee table. She sits on the couch and continues reading. After a moment, she gets up, puts down the book, and crosses to the refrigerator. She pulls out a carton of eggs, sets it on the counter, and assembles a mixing bowl, kitchen utensils, and an omelet pan. She hesitates, stops what she's doing, and returns to the couch and her book. She begins to read aloud, as if speaking to an audience.

SERENA

"Men of colour, who are also of sense, for you particularly is my Appeal designed. Our more ignorant brethren are not able to penetrate its value. I call upon you therefore to cast your eyes upon the wretchedness of your brethren—

She pauses and looks around, as if she's heard a noise; then continues.

—And to do your utmost to enlighten them—go to work and enlighten your brethren—Let the Lord see you doing what you can to rescue them and yourselves from degradation."

Again, she pauses, listens, resumes reading.

"Do any of you say that you and your family are free and happy, and what have you to do with the wretched slaves and other people? So can I say, for I enjoy as much freedom as any of you, if I am not quite as well off as

SERENA (CONT.)

the best of you. Look into our freedom and happiness, and see of what kind they are composed!! They are of the very lowest kind—they are the very dregs!—they are the most servile and abject kind, that ever a people was in possession of!”

VOICE OF DAVID WALKER

“May God have mercy on your freedom and happiness!”

Startled, SERENA looks around her. At the same moment, JOSH McCAFFREY enters.

JOSH

Hey.

SERENA

Was that you?

JOSH

What?

SERENA

Just now. You said something.

JOSH

Hey.

SERENA

Before that.

JOSH

No, I just...Are you okay?

SERENA

Yeah. I'm fine.

JOSH

Hey.

SERENA

Hey.

They kiss.

I am hung-ry. JOSH

Me too. SERENA

She kisses him again, hungrily. He breaks away.

Starving. JOSH

He goes to the kitchen area and grabs a jar of peanuts from a closet and a beer from the refrigerator. SERENA returns to the Appeal.

You won't believe what he did today.

Who? SERENA

Paulius. JOSH

Who? SERENA

Paulius The Genius. Our famous Lithuanian director. JOSH

(Vaguely, absorbed in her reading)
Oh right. SERENA

(As he eats and drinks)
We yelled nursery rhymes at each other for forty minutes. Be loud, be angry, be joyful, be harmonic, be existential. It was like we were in some kind of Meisner kindergarten. And then we were supposed to take what we had learned from this exercise in "emotional kundalini" and use it in the gravedigger scene. We all looked at each other, like... Al Pacino!

What? SERENA

JOSH

Pacino in Boston in his early days? I told you about this. Okay, well, he was in this production of *Mother Courage* playing multiple minor parts—Spear Carrier Number Two, Citizen Number Six, whatever—and he’s backstage, waiting to go on, and it’s Brecht, right, and he turns to one of the other actors, and he says: “Do you have a fucking clue what you’re doing, because I don’t.” That’s what it was like today. None of us had a clue, and we were freaked. Not that we have any reason to be, I mean, we’ve barely touched the text, we open in three weeks, and it’s only *Hamlet*, it’s only a showcase, it’s only our future as theatre artistes on the line. What’s this?

(Beat.)

Hell—oo!

SERENA

I’m sorry, what?

JOSH

These eggs.

SERENA

What about them?

JOSH

You have a plan for them?

SERENA

I thought maybe a Spanish omelet?

JOSH

Great.

SERENA

I’ll be right there.

JOSH

It’s okay, I got it. And a salad. I visualize a monster salad. Let’s see...

(He pulls items from the fridge)

We got romaine, we got tomatoes, we got cukes, olives....Shit, where’s the feta? Did we finish the feta?

SERENA

David Walker.

JOSH

What?

SERENA

Does that name mean anything to you?

JOSH

(Searching the fridge, finding the cheese)
David... Walker... Yes! I knew we had some left.

SERENA

What do you know about him?

JOSH

He was a legend in his own time.

SERENA

And?

JOSH

The early stuff was classic, the whole British blues thing, it was derivative but it had guts. It was real.

SERENA

I'm talking about the abolitionist.

JOSH

Ah, that David Walker.

SERENA

You've heard of him?

JOSH

I know I should have.

SERENA

(Holding out the Appeal)
Read this.

JOSH

What is it?

SERENA

It's by David Walker.

JOSH

This is your elective, the racism class?

SERENA
(Thrusting the book towards him)
The History and Development of Racism.

JOSH
I can't now, I'm—

SERENA
(Insistently, grabbing his wrist)
Please.
(Beat.)

JOSH
(Taking the Appeal)
Okay.

SERENA
Out loud.

JOSH
Out loud?

SERENA
That's the way he wrote it. To be read aloud. Most slaves were illiterate.

JOSH
Fine. Where do you want me to...?

SERENA
Top of the page.

JOSH
(Reading)
“I will ask one question here: Can our condition be any worse? Can it be more mean and abject?”

SERENA holds up her hand. He stops.
She glances around, listening.
What?

SERENA
Nothing.

JOSH
Are you okay?

SERENA

Yeah. I'm good. It's just that I keep thinking I hear something.

JOSH

What?

SERENA

Like a scratching sound.

JOSH

An existential mouse from Lithuania.

SERENA

Go ahead.

JOSH

"If there are any changes, will they not be for the better, though they may appear for the worst at first? Can they get us any lower? Where can they get us? They are afraid to treat us worse, for they know well, the day they do it, they are gone."

He stops. She says the next line as if from memory to encourage him to go on.

SERENA

"But against all accusations...."

JOSH

Sweetheart, my blood sugar is like—

SERENA

(Motioning him to continue)

"...which may or can be preferred against me..."

JOSH

"...I appeal to Heaven for my motive in writing—who knows that my object is, if possible, to awaken in the breasts of my afflicted, degraded and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness in this *Republican Land of Liberty!!!*"
Amen.

He hands the Appeal back to SERENA.

(As he returns to the kitchen)

Now that would be a great part.

SERENA

(As she resumes reading the Appeal)

What?

JOSH

David Walker. Too bad I'm not right for it.

(Beat. He gets no reaction.)

That was funny. I think.

(A pause. He chops, she reads.)

You're really into this Walker guy.

SERENA

(Putting down the Appeal)

Oh God, I can't do this. I have got so much other stuff to do.

JOSH

When do I get to meet him?

SERENA

What?

He crosses to her, and playfully places a stick of cucumber in her mouth. He munches from the other end until his lips reach hers. They kiss.

Lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE THREE

The same. Night. The distant sound of a police car siren. SERENA enters in her pajamas. She switches on a lamp next to the couch. She takes a course book and her laptop out of her book bag and sits on the couch. She starts to study. We hear her reading to herself from the course book.

SERENA (V.O.)

“...Though far from science, this gruesome identification epitomized the early work of forensic anthropologists: giving names to the dead through the study of variation of physical traits, most especially the bones and teeth, which persisted long after the flesh fell away...”

The powerful voice of DAVID WALKER takes over in her head. She looks up, alarmed and confused.

THE VOICE OF DAVID WALKER

“....I pray that the Lord may undeceive my ignorant brethren, and permit them to throw away pretensions, and seek after the substance of learning. I would crawl on my hands and knees through mud and mire...

JOSH enters, unseen by SERENA. She surprises herself by completing the passage from the Appeal out loud in her own voice without looking at the text.

SERENA

“....To the feet of a learned man, where I would sit and humbly supplicate him to instill into me, that which neither devils nor tyrants could remove, only with my life. For coloured people to acquire learning in this country makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation.”

JOSH

That is amazing.

SERENA

Oh God! You scared me.

JOSH

I'm sorry. How did you do that?

SERENA
What?

JOSH
Memorize that speech?

SERENA
I didn't. Well, not intentionally, I just read it through a few times.

JOSH
That's it?

SERENA
You're jealous.

JOSH
No shit. The Hamlet memory stick, plug me in. What are you doing?

SERENA
I couldn't sleep.

JOSH
How come?

SERENA
I don't know, I'm just wired.

JOSH
What is it with this Walker dude?

SERENA
(Picking up her course book)
He's not helping me get any work done, that's for sure.

JOSH
Sweetheart, it's two o'clock in the morning.

SERENA
I've got a paper due.

JOSH
I'll get you up early.

SERENA
No, I gotta do this—

JOSH

Come on—

SERENA

No, really. I won't be long.

He kisses her and exits to the bedroom. She sits still for a few moments, her eyes shifting from her course book to the Appeal and back. In the end, she can't resist. She picks up the Appeal and is instantly re-engaged. Again, as she reads, she hears Walker speaking the words of the Appeal.

THE VOICE OF DAVID WALKER

What can the American preachers and people take God to be? Did not God make us all as it seemed best to himself? What right, then, has one of us to despise another, and to treat him cruel, on account of his colour, which none but the God who made it can alter? Can there be a greater absurdity in nature, and particularly in a free republican country?

The lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE FOUR

The same. The next morning. Lights up on DAVID WALKER. He sits on the couch reading the Appeal. He's wearing clothes typical of what he was: the owner of a small-time used clothing store in early nineteenth century Boston. JOSH enters, half-dressed, with the script of "Hamlet" in hand. He's running late and slightly panicked. As he finishes dressing, he recites lines rapidly to himself. WALKER is invisible to him.

JOSH

"Fie upon't! foh!—About, my brain! I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul, that presently...

JOSH scans the floor for his shoes. He sees them beneath the coffee table, and stretches past the unseen WALKER to retrieve them.

They have proclaim'd their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with...with....with..."
Shit!

He checks the script.

"With most miraculous organ."

He looks down at his crotch and appeals for help.

Most. Miraculous. Organ.

Continuing to recite lines, JOSH crosses to the kitchen and opens the fridge. He pulls out a carton of orange juice and takes a swig.

JOSH (CONT.)

“For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I’ll have these
Players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle.”

(He glances at his watch)

Shit!

He grabs a banana from a basket on the
kitchen counter and exits hurriedly.
WALKER returns to reading the Appeal.
SERENA, dressed in a robe, shuffles in. She
doesn’t immediately see WALKER,
although, unlike JOSH, she can.

WALKER

(Tapping the Appeal)

Too long and too rhetorical.

SERENA

Jesus!

WALKER

Please do not take our Lord’s name in vain.

SERENA

Who are you?

WALKER

Forgive me, I did not mean to frighten you.

SERENA

Who are you? What are you doing here?

WALKER

My name is David Walker. Delighted to make your acquaintance.

SERENA

I don’t believe this. Is this another stupid Lithuanian game?

WALKER

I beg your pardon?

SERENA

Josh!

WALKER

He departed barely a moment ago—

SERENA

JOSH!

(To WALKER)

Why do you people go along with this shit? I mean, you think this is avant-garde? You think this is cutting-edge? Invading someone's home and freaking them out?

WALKER

You did invite me.

SERENA

What?

WALKER

We have an appointment.

SERENA

Who are you anyway? Are you a friend of Josh's?

WALKER

I sincerely hope that we will be friends once we have become better acquainted.

SERENA

Get the fuck out of here right now.

WALKER

I must confess, I find your language—

SERENA

Now!

WALKER

Profanity is more than an insult to God—

SERENA grabs a kitchen knife and wields it menacingly.

SERENA

I'm going to count to three and then I'm calling the cops. One...

WALKER

(In orator mode, quoting from the Appeal)

"They know that their infernal deeds of cruelty will be made known to the world.

SERENA

Two....

WALKER

"Do you suppose one man of good sense and learning would submit himself, his father, mother, wife, and children, to be slaves to a wretched man like himself, who, instead of compensating him for his labours, chains, hand-cuffs and beats him and family almost to death, leaving life enough in them, however, to work for, and call him master? No! no! he would cut his devilish throat from ear to ear, and well do slave-holders know it. The bare name of educating the coloured people, scares our cruel oppressors almost to death."

(Beat.)

SERENA

You certainly know your lines.

WALKER

I should. I wrote them.

SERENA

So you... what? You do this in schools and libraries and stuff?

WALKER

Let's just say that I try to be true to myself whenever I make an appearance.

(Slight pause. He indicates the knife in her hand)

Would you mind...?

SERENA

(Putting the knife on the counter)

I'm sorry, I...

(Beat.)

You really do have to leave.

WALKER

You asked to see me.

SERENA

Look, I don't have time for this, okay, and it's weird, it's real weird, and, you need to go. Like immediately. Like right now.

He doesn't move. A pause.

What do you want with me?

(Beat, still no response)

I've just been reading your Appeal, okay? That's all I've been doing. It's a class assignment.

WALKER advances towards her, as if to comfort her. She shrinks from him.

Don't touch me.

He stops.

WALKER

I assure you, young lady, I mean you no harm. What do you think of it?

SERENA

What?

WALKER

The Appeal.

SERENA

I don't know.

WALKER

But you have read it?

SERENA

Yes.

WALKER

So you must have formed an opinion.

SERENA

It's good. It's, it's...strong.

WALKER

Strong?