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SF PERUSALS

Taking Flight

by Adriana Sevahn Nichols

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH

FOUNDED 1830

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TAKING FLIGHT was developed and first produced by Center Theatre Group/Kirk Douglas Theatre in the Festival SOLOMANIA 2006
Michael Ritchie, Artistic Director; Charles Dillingham, Managing Director
"Developed with Assistance of the Sundance Institute"
2004 HPP Festival at South Coast Repertory

TAKING FLIGHT was first produced by the Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles on May 14, 2006. The play was written and performed by Adriana Sevahn Nichols.

The performance was directed by Giovanna Sardelli, with sets by Edward E. Haynes, Jr., costumes by Candice Cain, lighting by José López, percussion by Michito Sanchez, sound design by Adam Phalen, and video by Daniel Foster/EyeAwake Studios. The Production Stage Manager was Scott Harrison.

PLAYWRIGHT'S TECHNICAL NOTES

The overall tone of this play, technically, should be very simple.

The entire play is performed by one actor.

The only set pieces/props that are essential are a chair, live white flowers, a bowl or vessel to float the flowers in, and a black cardigan sweater. Fake flowers should not be substituted as they are an offering to the goddess, Yemaya. Even one live beautiful white flower will do.

The lighting should be magical, transporting us from location to location, easily, depicting the stark fluorescent sterility of the hospital, to the eerie apocalyptic New York streets, to the warmth of the flashback memories, to the "Vegas/magenta/mambo/magic" world of Esperanza.

The Rumi poem should be displayed somehow during the pre-show cue and become prominent as the house lights are going down, prior to the start of dialogue.

When there is an actress, other than Adriana Sevahn Nichols, performing the play, please substitute all references to Adriana with the real first name of the actress. It is important that she feel herself inside this story.

PLAYWRIGHT TO STORYTELLER

The overall pace of the story is mercurial. It is important that the storytelling stay ahead of the audience. The transitions between scenes and the transformations, in and out of each character, therefore, need to be seamless. Explore having the end of one character's gesture become the beginning of the next character's gesture. The more specific you make each vocal and physical choice, for each character, the more grounded and free you will feel as storyteller.

I invite you to use the audience. Make generous contact with them. Dare to see them and feel them. Allow yourself to need them as your confidant, witness, and trusted companion. I have found that it is a gift every time I have told this story. It is also a responsibility. We are asking the audience go on a deep journey of the heart with us, so as storyteller, it is essential not to indulge our emotions. We will certainly feel them, but if we give into them, we risk the audience feeling unsafe. And finally, play the heck out of the comedy, for therein lies the magic!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I began writing for the theatre in 2002, I thought that playwriting was a solitary act. I now know it takes a village. Here's to the most amazing village a girl could ever ask for:

My love and deepest thanks to…

My Mom for encouraging me always to live my dreams and to be inspired, not defeated, by a closed door. My Dad for his passion. My Abuela for her example of how to live with unshakable faith, walk with the santos, and be juicy at 90. Giovanna Sardelli, my friend and director, your faith in me before a word was ever written, made the impossible, possible. Angel David, INTAR, and all who participated in 9/11 Writers Respond 2002. Diane Rodriquez (fairy goddess mother of this play), Robert Castro, John Glore, Jessica Goldberg, Gloria Calderon Kellett, Leilani Chan, Eileen Galindo, TeAda Productions, and all of the women in the '04 Latino Theatre Initiative's Women's Writing Retreat at the Mark Taper Forum. The direction of Tony Plana, Suzanne Karpinski, Juliette Carrillo, Jerry Patch, Jennifer Kieger, and all who participated in the '04 HPP at South Coast Rep. Tony your generous gift of time and creative genius at SCR and Rio Hondo College transformed TAKING FLIGHT from a memory monologue into a play. Ivonne Coll, Leo Garcia, and Jen Cleary at Highways Theatre. Philip Himberg, Deborah Stover, the brilliant Mame Hunt, Meredith Lynsey Schade, Larry Cesspooch, my fellow colleagues, the waterfall, and all of nature's spirits in abundance at the '05 Sundance Theatre Lab. Michael Ritchie, Kelly Kirkpatrick, Pier Carlo Talenti, David Franklin, Scott Harrison, Jose Lopez, Adam Phalen, Ed Haynes, Michito Sanchez, Daniel Foster, Candace Cain, Kenny Wurther, the guys of SOLOMANIA, the entire CTG family, Kirk and Anne Douglas, and the Culver City Fire Department. Dr. Bert Mandelbaum, Kerri Campbell, and the amazing donor who gave me his ACL, it is because of all of you that I can dance, again. Susan Loewenberg, wise director Stuart K. Robinson, luminous composer Chaundra Cogburn, goddess music supervisor Allison Clarke, musicians Gooding, Joseph Julian Gonzales, Bruno Coon, Music Express, singers Marissa Steingold, from the Agape Choir: Marianne Lewis, Ian Cousineau, Ken Thomas, Elijah Rock, angel Susan Raab, Mark Ward, Mark Holden, Patrick Morrison, and the entire LA Theatre Works family. The Durfee Foundation and the Spencer Cherashore Fund. Sam Woodhouse, John Anderson, Victoria Petrovich, Tom Jones, Chelsea Kashin, and the entire San Diego Rep family. Anahid Sharik, Karen Kondazian, Simon Levy, Stephen Sachs, Deborah Lawson, Christian Epps, Scott Tuomey, and the Fountain Theatre family. The amazing Gardner House Girls. Henry Godinez, Roche Schulfer, John Collins, and the entire Goodman Theatre family. And to the magic makers, who have inspired me to love, to live, and to fly, my sweetheart Jonathan Nichols, my incredible agent Antje Oegel, my teachers Omar Shapli, Robbie McCauley, Laurie Carlos, Kristen Linklater, Fran Bennett, Carol Gilligan, Peter Loffredo, Master Kim, Satyan and Suzanne Raja, Stephen Garrett, Nilo Cruz, my soul friends Richard Greene and Lynn Milgrim, my sweet girls Maggie and Luna, and to the goddesses Marissa Chibas, Onahoua Rodriguez, Emunah, Anna, Sunny, Allana, Jennifer, Michelle, and Veronica.

–Adriana Sevahn Nichols

I dedicate TAKING FLIGHT to…
Peter Loffredo for showing me the path,
John Leguizamo for illuminating it,
and to my beloved, Jonathan, for crawling,
walking, and dancing with me,
every step of the way.

PROLOGUE

(A Rumi Poem is to be displayed/projected somewhere, on the set, during pre-show look that is visible to the audience:)

The way of love is not
a subtle argument.

The door there
is devastation.

Birds make great sky circles
of their freedom.

How do they learn it?

They fall, and falling,
they are given wings.

–Rumi

(As house lights fade, the poem should be prominently lit, cross fading into start of show…)

*(…***ADRIANA** *enters the stage carrying the bud of a live white rose. She regards the audience. She offers a silent prayer as she places the open blossom into a bowl of water. She walks in a circle around the playing area, arms outstretched, preparing the space. When complete, she reaches into the bowl of water and gathers some in her hands. She throws it onto the circle. Lights shift. The circle is alive. She enters it.)*

ADRIANA. *(on her cell phone)* Hey Rhonda it's me. Listen, I'm running late. I just got out of the workshop. The Introduction to the Shamanic Journey workshop at the Open Center?! Hold on. *(She addresses the audience directly.)* I'm so sorry. I just had to make this call. I'll be right with all of you.

(Back to **RHONDA***.)*

Rhonda, it was amazing. This guy, his name is Machete, El Gran Shaman of Peru. I mean I called him Birdman, because his spirit animals are like the Condor and all of the sacred birds of the Mayans…or was it the Incans? Anyway – no, listen, so all of these freaks are there, right? Like total losers. Quasi-spiritually wounded children types. They all circle around him like he's some freakin' rock star, but me wise woman in waiting…I hold back. I wait until every last groupie had groped him for a blessing. And Rhonda, when I looked into his eyes, I knew, that he knew, that I KNOW!

What? I thought your fitting was next Thursday? Well, we'll figure it out later – listen, listen! I bought this really amazing gourd rattle – it's to call in the spirits – I can't wait to show you. And sweetie, Birdman and I know each other from *before*. I'm getting its somewhere between my lifetime as the priestess of Athena and the beheading in France. Oh! I saw this flyer for this workshop, it's called, "Celebrating the Goddess Within," we have to go! I think it would be great for you to do this workshop before you get married. I don't know…we'll dance, we'll sing, we'll eat chocolate. It'll be great!

What? I thought you were going with purple and mauves?

(Covering the phone, she whispers to audience.) I'm so sorry she talks so much.

(back to **RHONDA***)* I don't know. I'll have to see it – look I'm hopping on the train right now. Ok. I love you too. Bye. *(She hangs up.)*

(to audience)

My best friend Rhonda and I are planning her wedding for next fall and she is driving me crazy talking endlessly about the minutia of every last detail, every day. The day Brian and I get married, it will be by a mountain stream or on a beach somewhere – you know…simple…home-cooked…a handful of special people. Not Rhonda. So far her guest list is pushing two hundred and that's small to her.

*(***RHONDA** *speaks with a very heavy Long Island "Jewish-American Priestess" accent. Her laugh is deliciously annoying and reminiscent of Fran Dresher and a blender crushing ice.)*

RHONDA. Honey, you remember how I told you my dream was to get married in the Italian countryside? Well it's going to come true. Mike and I just found the place.

ADRIANA. Oh. That's great.*(to audience)* Shit. I have already been feeling stressed out about financing the bridesmaid dress I will never wear again and the expensive gift I'll have to give them. I mean Rhonda has always been so generous to me and now a ticket to Italy?

RHONDA. Are you ready for this? We just found a little fake Tuscan villa, on a vineyard, right out on the tip of Long Island.

ADRIANA. *(whispers to audience)* Thank God!

RHONDA. And, in the middle of all those grapes, it came to me. I'm gonna have gold, crimson, and burnt orange decorations. A *harvest* theme. And I'm gonna walk down that aisle in an apricot colored taffeta Vera Wang with hair extensions down to my waist. *(laughs)*

ADRIANA. Okaaay…It's starting to sound like the Godfather meets the Mists of Avalon.

RHONDA. Oh shut up. I'm not done yet! So, what was my second dream???

ADRIANA. *(unenthusiastically)* To have Bon Jovi play at your wedding – OH MY GOD! You got Bon Jovi to play your wedding?

RHONDA. No Einstein, but I got the best Bon Jovi cover band on Long Island to play for the ceremony, and they gave me a great deal cuz I told them I have hot lookin' bridesmaids in corsets and they could stay for the party!

ADRIANA. Great. So I'm gonna have a drunk Bon Jovi wannabe waiting for my tits to pop out of my dress?

RHONDA. Don't worry Brian will give him that icy Nordic stare of his and scare him off.

ADRIANA. What about the Klezmer band your parents hired?

RHONDA. I'm putting them outside the bathroom. Now shush…sit down. I worked out the opening, I want you to see it, and then you can show me your magic gourd.

*(We hear the dramatic opening of a rock n' roll Bach Fugue which sounds something like the opening to Bon Jovi's "Let it Rock."** **RHONDA** *speaks over the music. She paints each image as the musical interludes accompany her epic plan.)*

Ok…The iron gates to the vineyard fly open…this is where you guys start filing in down the aisle. Bridesmaids…Bridesmaids…Bridesmaids…Bridesmaids… My little cousin with the flower petals. Now…silence… I enter…everyone sees my dress. I look gorgeous. I look at my Father. I take my Father's arm. *(beat)* Ok, I don't know what do with this part. I was hoping you could help me. But when Bon Jovi starts singin', that's when I'm gonna start walking down the aisle towards Mike. You ready?

*See Music Use Note on Page 3.

*(***RHONDA** *gives herself space to walk down the aisle.)*

Oh my God, what are you cryin' for already? She's so dramatic! Aaaannd…

(As the electric guitar plays a march-like rhythm, **RHONDA** *does a rock n' roll walk down the aisle.)*

What do you think?

(Phone rings. Music stops as lights shift.)

ADRIANA. Hello? Mike! Oh my god! I told you she was. Where is she? What? Uh-huh…Uh-huh…What does that mean? Do you think she's going to make it? She did? No, I'll be there…I don't know…but you tell her I'll be there…I will…you too...

(She hangs up the phone. She dials frantically.)

They found Rhonda. Yeah. No, it's not good. She's in ICU. Mike just called. The doctors are saying they don't know if she's going to make it and he said that she was asking for me, so…I wanted to ask if you'll go to the hospital with – No, I can't ask Brian. He's home, but I can't ask. No, its ok, I understand. You too –

(She hangs up. Back to audience.)

I call three other people before I finally reach Gabriella, a mutual friend of mine and Rhonda's. She is my last hope, so when she says, "I'll go to the hospital with you even though Rhonda didn't ask for me," I am so relieved. Gabi is a champion synchronized swimmer and she sees everything as a competition, which can be so exhausting, but I appreciate her honesty and I am grateful not to have to go alone. I have no idea how the hell I'm going to get down there and I don't know what the hell to wear. I mean what do you wear to maybe say goodbye? Do you get dressed up? After all, Rhonda is the high priestess of the fashion police. No! That's ridiculous. I'm going to wear a grey t–shirt, an old pair of jeans, no make–up, my hair pulled back... that seems respectful. I'll try and get a cab to 14th Street and then pray for a miracle. I take my Grandmother's rosary beads with me, just in case.

(Takes rosary beads from a small altar. She holds them as she prays…)

Abuela. Por favor. Cuidame a Rhonda. La queiro ver. Y ayudame a llegar al hospital. Te queiro tanto. Gracias.

(Lights shift to a tight special. Inside the cab. She speaks to the audience.)

The cab driver looks at me intently through the rear view mirror. I cry most of the drive. I tell him the little I know about Rhonda's condition. It helps me to keep talking. He shakes his head…and he says…

CABBIE. *(In a heavy Haitian accent)* You know what scare me now…dis enemy…is like a ghost…ya don see…you can't see…so who do you trust?

ADRIANA. I notice the tiny brand new American flag he has taped to the meter. It's around 9 pm when he drops me off. He won't take any money for the fare, not even a tip, he says,

CABBIE. Dat what you tole me Miss, break my heart. But I gon' pray for you and your friend.

(Lights shift)

ADRIANA. I start trying to convince the cops on York Avenue to let me cross the barricade.

ADRIANA. Excuse me officer, my friend is in ICU and –

COP #1. *(Heavy NY accent)* Only residents with the proper ID, M'am, next –

ADRIANA. First Avenue…Officer my friend is in ICU and she's –

COP #2. *(African–American.)* I'm sorry Ma'am it's just too dangerous, I can't let you by here, next –

ADRIANA. Second Avenue…Officer please –

COP #3. *(Irate New York accent)* I'm not tellin' you people again – now back it up!

ADRIANA. I am now a wreck on Third Avenue. I march right up to the Highway Patrol Cop with the kind eyes… "Please Officer, my friend is in ICU – I gotta get down

there – she's asking for me and she may not make it through the ni – " He puts his hand on my shoulder and he tears up. I knew I had found my man, or maybe the cabbie had just started praying…

(She crosses through the barricade.)

My cop with the kind eyes starts flagging down every vehicle allowed past the barricade, but no one will take me. Finally, this tiny blue Honda civic pulls up with a tired looking doctor still in his stethoscope, scrubs, and clogs. He agrees to take me. I tell him about Rhonda's condition and ask him if there is any way he thinks she can survive…the deep breath he takes before he answers…tells me no. When we get within a few blocks of the hospital. Cops yell at us to get out of the car. No private vehicles allowed past the checkpoint. But I don't want to get out of the car alone – thankfully my doctor, Dr. Earl Noilan, says he'll walk with me.

(Lights shift. It is dark. There is a faint sound of a gritty wind and distant siren that penetrate the eerie silence. She moves slowly.)

We get out of the car. I can't see. The black smoke is so thick I can't see the names of the streets. My lungs feel as if they are being squeezed. I can't get any air. We move slowly…feeling what we can't see…I begin to feel nauseous…from the smell…the horrible smell that I taste in my mouth. We are lost in a labyrinth of streets. I can't breathe…my chest hurts…then I remember… I have a doctor next to me…so I ask him if it would be ok if I hold his hand…and he says of course and reaches his warm hand out to me.

(Lights shift.)

We turn the corner and we are blinded by an apocalyptic veil of white light and there in the midst of this eerie cloud is the front entrance to the hospital. It looks like the set of a movie…like maybe some TV show had lent the hospital those big lights they use for the night shoots. The entrance is shrouded in an endless wallpaper of missing people flyers…fluttering smiles…last seen…last wearing…

Mike is standing out front and Gabi is right there next to him. I hug my doctor goodbye and as I watch his green form re-enter the dark ash, I think…I should bake him some cookies.

Well Gabi is wearing her sexy ivory colored sundress and make-up and of course I immediately feel underdressed.

(They enter the hospital.)

It's hard to believe that 12 hours ago this place was a major medical center. Now, the entire hospital is running on a generator, no lights or A/C in nonessential areas. The phones are dead. And outside every window is the relentless blizzard of black ash. We stop briefly in the bathroom on the first floor to collect ourselves.

ADRIANA. *(fixing her hair in the mirror)* Should we say a prayer?

GABRIELLA. Here in the bathroom?

*(***ADRIANA** *nods.)*

GABRIELLA. *(tentatively)* Ok.

(They take hands.)

ADRIANA. Great Spirit…Abeula…and all those that watch over us. Thank you for getting us here safely. Thank you for taking care of Rhonda today. Please keep her safe from…*(The prayer becomes inaudible while* **ADRIANA** *continues and the sound of a toilet flushing loud and long drowns out her voice.)* and help us to know what…*(flushing toilet again)…(after toilet gurgles settle)…*thank you.

GABRIELLA. That was beautiful.

ADRIANA. Thanks. You ready?

(To audience) We take the dark stairs up to room 302.

(A lone sound of a heart monitor beeping.)

We enter Rhonda's room…quietly.

*(***ADRIANA** *crosses to center where the chair is placed with the black sweater over the back. This will become the hospital room and bed whenever referred to as such.)*

She looks beautiful. I am so relieved to see that her face has been untouched. It's hard to get close to her because of all of the equipment around her. Her heart monitor starts racing when she sees us. She struggles to speak around the respirator tube in her mouth…

RHONDA. *(heavily drugged)* I'm so fucked up…I'm so fucked up.

ADRIANA. Gabi and I stand on either side of her bed side, holding both of her hands, like two bookends, not knowing what to do. Rhonda can't take her eyes off of Gabi, she looks so luminous in her sundress.

RHONDA. *(struggles to speak)* Oh Gabi you…Goddess…

ADRIANA. *(to audience)* Shit hello? I dress down out of respect and I am virtually invisible.

RHONDA. Oh…Yemaya…

(Lights shift. We hear soft ocean waves. **RHONDA** *rises out of the chair and comes forward. She is completely healthy and strong as she embodies this memory. This will be true of all flashbacks.)*

RHONDA. Adriana and I were goin' on this retreat called, "Celebrating the Goddess Within," and part of our homework was ta choose a goddess and start a relationship with her. So I didn't know what goddess ta pick. And I was talkin' ta Adriana about it, so she asks me, "What do I love most in nature?" So I tell ha, I love the sea. I'm from Oyster Bay, Long Island and I've always loved the ocean. So she starts tellin' me about this goddess that her Grandmother used to pray to called, Yemaya. So Adriana takes me up to this place called a Botanica. *(She laughs.)* We walk in and there's this weird lookin' creature behind the door – well I mean it wasn't alive or anything, but like this figure, made out of wood with coconuts all around it and pennies and candles – black candles – which made me a little uncomfortable. It was a teeny tiny little place, but there was all this stuff for the money, the health, the good luck – it all felt a little hokey to me, you know,

like a lot a voo doo tschotchkas, but then we got to this section where they had all of this stuff for Yemaya, the goddess of the sea...

(We hear a soft sensual drumbeat…magic enters the story.)

...and she is so beautiful. She has this really long dark hair and it looks like she has a bit of a tan. She's in this beautiful flowing white dress, nice figure, and her arms are open like…like she was calling me and when I looked at her I felt such peace, that I knew I had found my Goddess. *(Drumbeat ends.)*

So I got a Yemaya candle. A royal blue one to bring with me on the retreat. And they put some silver sparkles on it – I could choose between silver and gold – I chose the silver because I did not think the gold matched Yemaya's outfit. Adriana had chosen the goddess, Oya *(She laughs.)* Oyaaaaa! I couldn't resist asking if she was the goddess from Minnesota? So Adriana looks at me real serious like she does sometimes and she goes, "No. Oya is the goddess of the wind and the cemeteries. She's a warrior goddess symbolizing female power, righteous anger, and the storms of change!" You know Adriana can be so dramatic sometimes. So I said well ok, honey, that sounds festive. So she got her burgundy colored candle with everything on it and off we went – laughing and walkin' arm in arm down Amsterdam Ave. Oh!! They were filming *Law & Order* on the corner and we were trying to see Jesse Martin. I think he's so cute. And I was tellin' Adriana, "See, she shoulda been carrying around her headshots!" Cuz, I mean you never know, that coulda been a great opportunity for her. We really had fun that day…the day I fell in love with Yemaya, the goddess of the sea.

(We hear the return of the ocean waves. **RHONDA** *recedes back into the chair. She takes two slow deep breaths. Her heart monitor starts beeping again.)*

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