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Ohio State Murders

Adrienne Kennedy

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



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OHIO STATE MURDERS was commissioned by the Great Lakes Theater Festival (Gerald Freedman, artistic director; Mary Bill, managing director) through a grant from the New Works Program of the Ohio Arts Council. The play received its world premiere at the Great Lakes Theater Festival on March 7, 1992. The production was directed by Gerald Freedman; set design conceived by Gerald Freedman and executed by John Ezell; projections by Kurt Sharp and Jesse Epstein; costumes coordinated by Al Kohout; lighting designed by Cynthia Stillings; sound design by Stanley M. Kozak with the following cast:

SUZANNE ALEXANDER	Ruby Dee
SUZANNE	Bellary Darden
DAVID ALEXANDER	Michael Early
ROBERT HAMPSHIRE	Allan Byrne
AUNT LOUISE	Irma Hall
VAL	Rick Williams
IRIS ANN	Leslie Holland
SUZANNE'S FATHER	Michael Early

The New York premiere of **OHIO STATE MURDERS** was produced by Theatre for a New Audience, Jeffrey Horowitz, Artistic Director; Theodore C. Rogers, Chairman; Dorothy Ryan, Managing Director, on October 27, 2007 at The Duke on 42nd StreetSM, a New 42nd Street® project. The production was directed by Evan Yionoulis, scenic design by Neil Patel, costume design by Emilio Sosa, lighting design by Christopher Akerlind, original music & sound design by Mike Yionoulis/Sarah Pickett, projection design by Leah Gelpe. The production stage manager was Linda Marvel, with assistant stage manager, Melissa M. Spengler. The cast was as follows:

SUZANNE ALEXANDER	Lisagay Hamilton
SUZANNE	Cherise Boothe
ROBERT HAMPSHIRE	Saxon Palmer
AUNT LOUISE	Aleta Mitchell
IRIS ANN	Julia Pace Mitchell
DAVID ALEXANDER / VAL	Kobi Libii

OHIO STATE MURDERS was part of the Signature Theatre Company's 1995-96 season devoted to Adrienne Kennedy.

CHARACTERS

SUZANNE ALEXANDER (1949-1952) – The young writer as a student attending Ohio State from 1949 to 1950

SUZANNE ALEXANDER (Present) – A well-known black writer visiting Ohio State to give a talk on the imagery in her work

DAVID ALEXANDER – A law student she will marry

ROBERT HAMPSHIRE – An English professor at Ohio State

MRS. TYLER – Suzanne's landlady

VAL – A friend

IRIS ANN – Suzanne's roommate

MISS DAWSON – Head of the dorm

TIME

Present.

SETTING

Night.

(Stacks: hundreds of books on "O" level beneath the library at Ohio State.

A window high in the distance from which can be seen University Hall, a vast dark structure and falling snow. The snow falls throughout the play.

Sections of the stacks become places on campus during the play.

SUZANNE *enters the stacks, wanders, gazes at the distant window and snow. She takes out a paper, studies it, gazes about her, reads from paper rehearsing a talk.)*

SUZANNE. *(Present)* I was asked to talk about the violent imagery in my work; bloodied heads, severed limbs, dead father, dead Nazis, dying Jesus. The chairman said, we do want to hear about your brief years here at Ohio State but we also want you to talk about violent imagery in your stories and plays. When I visited Ohio State last year it struck me as a series of disparate dark landscapes just as it had in 1949, the autumn of my freshman year.

I used to write down locations in order to learn the campus: the oval, behind the green, the golf hut, behind Zoology, the tennis courts beyond the golf hut, the Olitangy River, the stadium off to the right, the main library at the head of the Oval, the old union across from the dorm, High Street at the end of the path, downtown Columbus, the Deschler Wallach, Lazarus, the train station. The geography made me anxious.

The zigzagged streets beyond the Oval were regions of Law, Medicine, Mirror Lake, the Greek theater, the lawn behind the dorm where the white girls sunned.

The ravine that would be the scene of the murder and Mrs. Tyler's boarding house in the Negro district.

The music I remembered most was a song called “Don’t Go Away Mad,” and the music from *A Place in the Sun*, that movie with Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift based on Theodore Dreiser’s *American Tragedy*.

(SUZANNE takes out a picture of DAVID running the 100-yard dash at Ohio State.

DAVID is an extraordinarily handsome young black man. He looks like Frantz Fanon, whose biography he will one day write.)

SUZANNE. *(Present)* This is a picture of my husband, David, who, as you know, is a writer, political activist, and biographer of Frantz Fanon. Most people don’t know David started out as a lawyer.

Although we were both at Ohio State in the winter of 1950 I had not met David. But I had seen this photograph of him running the 100-yard dash at Ohio State’s spring track meet.

I knew he was a state champion and now he was in law school. David had lived in the boarding house that was to become my home. Mrs. Tyler hung this picture in her hallway. She loved David Alexander. That was later.

But first I started my freshman year in the fall of ’49.

I took a required English survey course although I was not an English major. I had declared no major course of study. We read Thomas Hardy.

(SCENE: Quonset hut. HAMPSHIRE enters. SUZANNE [1949] watches him. As a student she wears pale skirt, sweater [powder blue], saddle shoes, and socks.)

SUZANNE. *(Present)* The professor was a young man. His name was Hampshire. He was small and dressed rather formally in a tweed suit with a vest. He always walked straight to the lectern and without any introduction started his lectures.

(HAMPSHIRE looks at his notes. SUZANNE [1949] watches him intently. She is fragile, pale.)

The class was held in a quonset hut, a temporary barrack-like structure that had room for fifty to sixty students. These huts were built to house the overflow of students after the war. Professor Hampshire read from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

HAMPSHIRE. "In spite of the unpleasant initiation of the day before, Tess inclined to the freedom and novelty of her new position in the morning when the sun shone, now that she was once installed there; and she was curious to test her powers in the unexpected direction asked of her, so as to ascertain her chance of retaining her post. As soon as she was alone within the walled garden she sat herself down on a coop, and seriously screwed up her mouth for the long-neglected practice. She found her former ability to have degenerated to the production of a hollow rush of wind through the lips and no clear note at all."

(**HAMPSHIRE** *draws a map.*)

SUZANNE. On a makeshift blackboard he drew a map of Wessex.

HAMPSHIRE. Blackmore Vale, Marlott, Edgdon Heath, New Forest, Chalk Newton, Casterbridge.

(**SUZANNE** *continues to watch him intently.*)

(**SCENE ENDS.**)

SUZANNE. (*Present*) (*Stands in stacks.*) These places in Wessex, Marlott, New Forest, Chalk Newton intrigued me as did *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

One afternoon late, almost early evening, I walked over behind the Oval to the English Department and inquired about the catalog for English majors. A secretary said, "Come back any morning around ten. A Miss Smith will give you the information about becoming an English major. What is your major now?" she asked.

I told her I was undeclared.

I didn't know there were no "Negro" students in the

English Department. It was thought that we were not able to master the program. They would allow you to take no more than two required freshman courses. After that you had to apply to the English Department to take courses that were all said to be for majors.

In my dorm across from the Old Union there were six hundred girls. Twelve of us were blacks. We occupied six places, rooming together two in a room.

The other dorms, Canfield and Neil, each also housed a few black girls.

The schools I had attended in Cleveland were an even mixture of immigrant and black. You were judged on grades. But here race was foremost.

Very few Negroes walked on High Street above the university. It wasn't that you were not allowed but you were discouraged from doing so. Above the university was a residential district encompassed by a steep ravine. I never saw this ravine until the two days I visited Bobby at his house (the ravine was where the faculty lived).

A year and a half later one of my baby twin daughters would be found dead there. That was later.

But in my freshman year the continuing happiness was Professor Hampshire's discussion of the Victorian novel.

When he lectured, his small pale face was expressionless. Only his blue eyes conveyed anger, joy, vitality.

(SCENE: Quonset hut, 1949. As SUZANNE watches HAMPSHIRE lecture she becomes excited, leaning forward listening to him more intently than ever.)

HAMPSHIRE. The idea of Chance only reminds the reader of the sphere of ideal possibilities of what ought to be happening but is not. The illusion of freedom diminishes in the course of Hardy's novels. The net narrows and finally closes.

Inherent in almost all Hardy's characters are those natural instincts which become destructive because

social convention suppresses them, attempting to make the human spirit conform to the "letter." Hardy absorbs Tess's personal situation into a vast system of causation.

(SCENE ENDS.)

SUZANNE. *(Present)* For a long time no one knew who the killer was. She was the one I had called Cathi. But that was later.

Before Christmas of my freshman quarter, Professor Hampshire wrote on my paper, "Make appointment to see me."

(SCENE: English office. SUZANNE and HAMPSHIRE, 1949.)

SUZANNE. His office in the English Department was along a path beyond the Oval. I seldom walked there and once I left the Oval I got lost on the streets on that side of the campus and was almost late for my four o'clock appointment. It was dark. He was sitting in a greyish office with several empty desks.

(SCENE: English office. SUZANNE enters in saddle oxfords, skin, matching sweater, cloth woolen coat. Again she wears powder blue, a popular color in 1949.)

SUZANNE. *(Present)* I was quite nervous. It was the first time a professor at Ohio State had asked to see me.

(In the office SUZANNE sits opposite HAMPSHIRE.)

SUZANNE. *(Present)* He was crouched over his desk writing and seemed smaller than in class, very pale, glasses, the same grayish woolen suit.

SUZANNE. *(In office.)* Professor Hampshire, you wrote on my paper you wanted to see me.

HAMPSHIRE. Oh yes, Suzanne, sit down, please. Did you bring your paper?

SUZANNE. Yes.

HAMPSHIRE. Let me see it.

SUZANNE. (*Present*) For a moment he seemed to forget me and read the brief paper in its entirety. For a moment watching him I realized he was a man of about thirty. I later was to discover he was a lecturer and this was his first year at Ohio State.

HAMPSHIRE. What is your major?

SUZANNE. I am undeclared. But if I do well this quarter I want to apply to take another English course in the spring, but I know I have to have special permission for further English courses.

SUZANNE. (*Present*) He didn't seem to hear me.

HAMPSHIRE. (*In his office.*) Did you write this paper yourself?

SUZANNE. Yes, Professor Hampshire.

HAMPSHIRE. What reference books did you use?

SUZANNE. I used no reference books. I wrote this paper late one night in the dorm, the night before it was due.

SUZANNE. (*Present*) He returned the paper to me, staring at the desk top. Suddenly he looked up.

HAMPSHIRE. Have you read Hardy before?

SUZANNE. (*Present*) He didn't seem to want to continue speaking. I tried to tell him that I wanted to study more English courses, how much I loved literature. But he stood up interrupting me. He didn't speak but gathered his books together. And stared at me, then nodded. I saw the conference was over.

(*SUZANNE stands in office, moves away staring back at HAMPSHIRE.*)

(*OFFICE SCENE ENDS.*)

(*SCENE: Stacks. From the window snow is falling.*)

SUZANNE [*Present*] studies her paper.)

(*SUZANNE [1949] walks across the Oval in darkness.*)

SUZANNE. (*Present*) I got lost again between two buildings behind University Hall.

Walking back in the darkness I remembered passages of my paper. And I remembered the comments Professor Hampshire had written on the margins.

SUZANNE. (1949) (*Stands on Oval.*)

"Paper conveys a profound feeling for the material."

"Paper has unusual empathy for Tess."

"The language of the paper seems an extension of Hardy's own language."

(*She hears HAMPSHIRE 's voice.*)

HAMPSHIRE. It's brilliant. It's brilliant.

(*SCENE ENDS.*)

(*SCENE: Dorm. Lights on dark corridors and a dim small room lit by a single lamp.*)

IRIS ANN is lying across the bed crying. Like SUZANNE she wears a pale skirt and sweater [possibly pink] and like Suzanne her hair is in a soft page boy.

From the corridors we hear sounds of muffled laughing and talking.

SUZANNE enters room.)

SUZANNE. (*Present*) At the dorm my roommate, Iris Ann, was waiting for me to eat. Iris was lying on the bed crying. Her boyfriend had broken their engagement. We went down to the dining room and ate as usual at one of the tables where the Negro girls sat.

(*SCENE IN DORM ENDS with SUZANNE looking at IRIS ANN.*)

SUZANNE. (*Present*) After dinner we walked across the wet grass up to High Street. The path wound around a new structure half finished. We chattered. All except Iris Ann. After dinner it was not uncommon for us to go to Tomaine Tommy's and bring back cheeseburgers to be eaten later that night. On the way back to the dorm Iris started sobbing. It had begun to snow.

And often music came from the corridors. A song called "Don't Go Away Mad" was popular.

(Sound of music in the corridors.)

SUZANNE. *(Present)* In class the next week Professor Hampshire read again from Hardy.

(SCENE: Quonset hut. SUZANNE stares up at HAMPSHIRE.)

HAMPSHIRE. *(Reads.)* "... It was not until she was quite close that he could believe her to be Tess.

'I saw you – turn away from the station – just before I got there – and I have been following you all this way!'

She was so pale, so breathless, so quivering in every muscle, that he did not ask her a single question, but seizing her hand, and pulling it within his arm, he led her along. To avoid meeting any possible wayfarers he left the high road, and took a footpath under some firtrees. When they were deep among the moaning boughs he stopped and looked at her inquiringly.

'Angel,' she said, as if waiting for this, 'Do you know what I have been running after you for? To tell you that I have killed him!' A pitiful white smile lit her face as she spoke.

'What!' said he, thinking from the strangeness of her manner that she was in some delirium.

'I have done it – I don't know how,' she continued. 'Still, I owed it to you, and to myself Angel. I feared long ago, when I struck him on the mouth with my glove, that I might do it some day for the trap he set for me in my simple youth, and his wrong to you through me. He has come between us and ruined us, and now he can never do it any more. I never loved him at all, Angel, as I loved you. You know it, don't you? You believe it? You didn't come back to me, and I was obliged to go back to him. Why did you go away – why did you – when I loved you so? I can't think why

you did it. But I don't blame you; only, Angel, will you forgive me my sin against you, now I have killed him? I thought as I ran along that you would be sure to forgive me now I have done that. It came to me as a shining light that I should get you back that way. I could not bear the loss of you any longer – you don't know how entirely I was unable to bear your not loving me! Say you do now, dear, dear husband; say you do, now I have killed him!'

'I do love you, Tess – O, I do – it is all come back!' he said, tightening his arms round her with fervid pressure. 'But how do you mean – you have killed him?'

'I mean that I have,' she murmured in a reverie.

'What, bodily? Is he dead?'

'Yes. He heard me crying about you, and he bitterly taunted me; and called you by a foul name; and then I did it. My heart could not bear it.'

(SUZANNE cries.

HAMPSHIRE *glances at her. He leaves quonset hut. She remains in her seat.*)

(SCENE ENDS.)

(Dorm music.)

SUZANNE. (*Present*) One by one the white girls went to live on The Row. Their pattern was to live in the dorm their freshman year and then go live in The House. Although we had sororities, Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta, we did not have "houses." We met in rooms on campus or in private homes. So we remained in the dorm.

(Dorm music. SUZANNE [1950] sitting in dorm room.)

SUZANNE. Sorority Row right off High Street seemed a city in itself: the cluster of streets with the columned mansions sitting on top of the lawn appeared like a citadel.

SUZANNE. (*Reads her book of symbols.*) "A city should have a

sacred geography never arbitrary but planned in strict accord with the dictates of a doctrine that the society upholds.”

(SCENE ENDS.)

SUZANNE. *(Present)* I never walked on those blocks and saw them only from Mrs. Tyler’s coupe. There was no reason for Negroes to walk in those blocks.

(SCENE: University Hall, 1950. IRIS ANN and SUZANNE watch vivid footage of film Potemkin.)

SUZANNE. *(Present)* Before she dropped out of Ohio State, Iris Ann wanted to be a music major. She had been first violinist in her high school orchestra. She told me some of the music students went to University Hall to a film society. We went a few times, walking across the Oval in the rain and saw a movie called *The Battleship Potemkin*. The movie was shown on the ground level of the hall. Down the massive stairwells with iron flowered balustrades we walked to a small auditorium. I had never seen a movie as old as that. There were two showings. We went back to see the other half.

SUZANNE. *(At Potemkin.)* Who is Eisenstein?

SUZANNE. *(Present)* Iris Ann said she would ask one of the music students, Sonia. Sonia gave Iris Ann a typed paragraph on a small piece of paper describing the movie.

(SUZANNE [1950] and IRIS ANN continue watching Potemkin.)

SUZANNE. *(Present) (Reads paper.)* “*Battleship Potemkin* concentrates on the mutiny on a battleship of the Black Sea Fleet during the 1905 Revolution with the massacre on the Odessa steps. Down a seemingly endless flight of steps march soldiers advancing on the fleeing citizens.”

SUZANNE. *(Present)* There was more on the scenes I had been drawn to.

(SUZANNE and IRIS ANN continue watching film.)

SUZANNE. (*Present*) (*Reads paper.*) "The storming of the Winter Palace, the dismemberment of the Tsar's Statue and a dead horse caught at the top of an opening drawbridge."

When we went back to see the second half I tried to remember what I had read. I asked Iris Ann were any of her music students there. She said she had seen one down front of the auditorium. I went to the library and tried to find out more about "this Eisenstein."

For some reason the crumpled bit of paper Sonia had given Iris Ann about *Potemkin* became important to me. I kept it in the top desk drawer in my room and would unfold it and read it over.

SUZANNE. (*At Potemkin, SUZANNE studies film.*) *Battleship Potemkin* concentrates on the mutiny on a battleship of the Black Sea Fleet during the 1905 Revolution with the massacre on the Odessa Steps... the storming of the Winter Palace... the dismemberment of the Tsar's statue...

(SCENE ENDS.)

SUZANNE. (*Present*) Iris Ann could play the violin beautifully. And sometimes she'd go into the study room at the end of the corridor and practice. I asked her about the courses she was taking. They're all theory, she said. Sue, I just like to play. I've studied since I was eight at the Institute. But here courses are all theory. She studied the theory books often on Saturday and Sunday.

Her uncle, a well-known doctor from Akron, came to visit us one Sunday. He made Iris Ann come out of the study room. That department is putting you under too much pressure, he said. I don't think they want you.

I became pregnant the following Christmas, 1950. My parents thought I spent the last day of my break with Iris in Akron but I had come back to Columbus and spent two days with Bobby above the ravine.

(*SCENE: Path near quonset hut, 1950s.*)

SUZANNE. (*Present*) I had not seen him after the spring quarter ended. In fact, I did not see him until the next fall in 1950. I had applied to be an English major but had been denied. They let me take a trial course on Shaw, Wilde, Moliere. I had seen Professor Hampshire on his way to the quonset hut.

SUZANNE: I am taking a trial course.

HAMPSHIRE. It's a shame.

SUZANNE. (*Present*) The previous quarter I had taken his course on Beowulf. Again he had liked my papers.

HAMPSHIRE. (*On path.*) It's not necessary for you to take a trial course. It's a shame.

(*SCENE ENDS.*)

SUZANNE. (*Present*) He hurried on.

On that same path in one year we would meet.

It was February 1951 when I told him I was pregnant. He was on the same walkway that led to the hut. Within the quonset I could see students gathering. I had not seen him since December, when I had gone to his house above the ravine.

On that cold morning I stopped him as he came toward me. I had been waiting for him as he came up the steps of University Hall and onto the Oval. The immense circle of buildings was majestic amid dark trees and snow.

I told him I was pregnant.

(*SCENE: Path near quonset hut.*)

SUZANNE: (*Hardly audible.*) I am pregnant.

SUZANNE. (*Present*) He stopped an instant.

HAMPSHIRE. (*On path.*) That's not possible. We were only together twice. You surely must have other relationships. It's not possible.

SUZANNE. (*Present*) He walked past me.

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