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CONCORD
THEATRICALS

CITY MELODIES

by Lorna French

SAMUEL FRENCH

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CITY MELODIES received a staged reading at the Dorfman Theatre, National Theatre, as part of the Alfred Fagon Award ceremony in 2016. Daniel Bailey was the director.

The play also received a staged reading in 2014, as part of Capital Plays Festival at the MAC in Birmingham, in association with StoneCrabs Theatre. Tanja Pagnuco was the dramaturg and director.

CHARACTERS

ANYA – 26-year-old white Romanian woman, girlfriend of Wes.

WES – 28-year-old Black British African-Caribbean man, boyfriend of Anya.

MISS BEE – 64-year-old Black Jamaican woman.

DAWN – 35-year-old Black British African-Caribbean woman.

JT – 17-year-old Black British African-Caribbean boy, friend of Cherise.

CHERISE – 16-year-old Black British African-Caribbean girl, friend of JT.

COACH DRIVER – (voice only) – white British man, 40s

SETTING

Waterloo, London

TIME

2013

Dedicated to my darlings:
Oli and Raine

Scene One

(Jazz music plays as the audience enters. A song in the style of Miles Davis' **["SANCTUARY"]**[*]*.)*

(All four actors stand on stage wearing exactly the same colour hooded sweatshirts (black or navy). These are baggy and not gender specific. All actors stand with their faces covered with their hoods and their hands in their pockets, so that no identifying markers of race, gender or age are discernible.)

ANYA. If I stand here, hood up, face hidden –

WES. Do I scare you?

ANYA. If I stand here, hood up, face hidden –

WES. Do I make you edgy? Make you keep your eyes on the ground?

MISS B. No eye contact –

CHERISE. No, not with me.

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ALL CHARACTERS IN UNISON. If I stand here, hood up, face hidden

*(**ALL CHARACTERS** throw off their hoods in one motion and lookout at the audience.)*

(A strong light illuminates all on the stage.)

Why do you think I mean you harm?

(Beat.)

(Blackout.)

Scene Two

(Lights up. **JT** *is dressed in the same dark hooded sweatshirt as those in Scene One. His hood is up and he is carrying a sports bag.* **JT** *puts down the sports bag, takes off the hooded sweatshirt and throws it down on top of the sports bag. Through this speech* **JT** *is doing warm up stretches before he begins a training session.)*

*(***JT** *has a South London accent. He speaks fast; like a freight train throughout this monologue.)*

Just you against the bar, no one else, just yourself to push, to better, to coax, to nudge a little bit further each time. Two metres four; that's where I'm aimin'; and I can do it, I know; just give me time and I'm up there, watch.

In that moment everythin's the sharpest it has ever been. There's a tingle in the moment, an electricity that has a before and an after and just me and the bar in between. A steady elastic run up, like dancin' on molecules of air. Then the strong left foot take off; not perfect, not yet but almost. I launch myself; soar. I feel complete, wholly myself, wholly me. As if I can soar to the stratosphere, shake hands with the man in the moon, talk in hushed reverent tones with the stars that light my way further and further to an inky place threaded with diamond trails of light that seem to hold my weight.

That blue; colour of the sky, the sea; infinite things that make you feel surrounded, weightless, safe, all at the same time. Reminds me a bit of Miles that does. Just the way time seems to have a feel, a texture to it when you hear those notes. *(He bap bap ba da dows to the*

notes of Miles Davis.) Dad used to play him in the old days, the good days. Used to come in from playin' out and it'd hit you, like they was bound together, meant to be; the sound a Miles jumpin' out the speakers like a man possessed and that smell a fresh-baked cakes that lingers, you know? Brings a smile to your lips no matter what kind of day it's been. Those two things are inseparable to me now coz of that. A nice piece of cake always makes me feel twitchy, like I gotta get those tunes in my ears; remember the good times.

> *(A momemt.* **JT** *closes his eyes as he collects himself.)*

Steve Smith; 14th of March 1993, Toronto, Canada; outdoors, 2.37 metres. Steve Smith; 4th of February 1994, Wuppertal, Germany; indoors, 2.38 metres. A proper Lege, you arks me, did the business, no messin'. Liverpool through and through he says but if you cut him open he'd bleed red white and blue I reckon.

(Really animated.) Cherise, right, she does him perfect. Can switch it on and off; got the accent spot on. I don't mean a bit like, I mean you're watchin' her right, then next minute she's proper Scouse through and through, like she lived there all her life. From back in the day that I think; all that stuff with her parents, back when they were havin' family days, good days. 'Spose it's hard for her you know, to forget that, give that up. Drives her mom mental though, the accent, I've seen her; goes proper fuckin' mental. *(***JT** *laughs.)*

We all got it in us though; wantin' the red white and blue. The old flag flyin', anthem startin' up just for you, buildin' to a roar to compete with the crowd. And you up on the podium, the highest one. Wrapped in the flag, lookin' down at the other two and feelin' it inside like it's all fused with the DNA, become part of the dividin' and multiplyin' that takes things forward, that carries it all on. The red, white and blue are in it now,

part of things, inseparable. We all know we got that moment in us. Gotta know that, believe that; otherwise ain't no point.

Grabarz knew he had it, you could see it in him. Way he moved; the calm of it, the confidence of it. The Smith you better watch out coz I'm comin' for that record of it. Yeah he only did 2.29 at the Olympics but after that he's gone 2.37 at Lausanne Diamond Leaugue, 23rd of August 2012 that was. Smashed the record but you can see him hungry still, eyin' the 2.4 still.

Me, I'm eyein' the 2.4 yeah but I'm also lookin' beyond it. Call me crazy but I'm lookin' to be the best, the undisputed. Call me crazy but I'm lookin' to Sotomayor it. 27th of July 1993, Salamanca, Spain; 2.45 metres. Imagine that, smashin' that. World Record, twenty years and it's never been beaten. I'm doin' 2.15 as it is but I'm gonna take my time, build it up, put the work in and then I'm tellin' you; Smith, Grabbarz, Sotomayor, you'd better watch out coz I'm comin' for ya and I ain't plannin' to just do what I need to, just scrape it; I'm headin' for the stars. Watch. Come 2016, see if I don't.

(As **JT** *starts doing plyometric drills with three different shaped boxes, the sound of a trumpet nearby practising notes for a piece of jazz music that has not yet been perfected can be heard.* **JT** *does not react to the sound at all at first. However by the time the lights go down* **JT** *is having to shout to be heard over the music.)*

*(***JT** *does two sets of plyometric drills (over three boxes that are laid out in a vertical line moving from down stage to up stage – the first box is slightly higher than the second box and the third box is the highest of the three).* **JT** *starts at the first box, which is down stage and then jumps until he reaches the third,*

and highest box. He then runs around and repeats this action again. As **JT** *lands on the top of each box he recites a specific statistic each time:)*

(Box 1:)

JT. Smith, 2.38

(Box 2:)

Grabarz, 2.37

(Box 3:)

Sotomayor, 2.45

(As **JT** *runs back around and begins his third plyometric drill, the lights go down slowly on him as he continues jumping and reciting to himself.)*

Scene Three

(Early morning. On board a National Express Coach from Gatwick to Victoria. **ANYA** *sits next to* **MISS B**, *a Black Afro-Caribbean lady in her sixties.* **MISS B** *is smartly dressed in a skirt and blouse. There is little space in the small seats and the overweight* **MISS B** *is squashing* **ANYA** *into her seat by the window.* **ANYA** *gazes out of the window.)*

(Spoken over a tannoy system.)

COACH DRIVER. We will be arriving at Victoria at 9:35. That's 9:35. Ladies and gentlemen it is illegal in this country to travel on a coach without your seatbelt. So in the interests of us all getting there in one piece I would ask you all to belt up.

ANYA. *(looks in the direction of the coach speakers and then turns to the passenger beside her.)* The message, I …he say what? He talk too fast.

MISS B. Him seh fi put on yuh seat belt. *(Indicating* **ANYA***'s seat belt.)* Dis! … Jus wrap it roun.

ANYA. Thank you.

MISS B. What ah sinting, likkle pickney laka yuh come yah an yuh caa even speak di language.

ANYA. I'm sorry I *(She shrugs to indicate her lack of understanding.)*

MISS B. *(Laughs – a high full laugh.)* What ah sinting.

ANYA. You laughing me?

MISS B. No, hush mi dear.

ANYA. But I learn. I come London learn English very good. No, well? *(Unsure of her choice of phrasing.)* I come learn very well?

MISS B. Ah mi yuh ah ask? Mi deh yah forty year nung an still caaa ansa yuh! Yuh need smady fi show yuh... like ah teacha. My Henglish arite, suh uh wi undastan... although it nuh suh gud mi coulda show yuh.

ANYA. But you in England forty year?

MISS B. Yeah, but mi hav accent. Mi neva laas it. Yuh come fi learn di Queen's Henglish. Mi neva develop wha mi madda call mi telephone vice. Mi si plenty people soun like dem deh downtown Kingston now an as yuh squint, dem change, yuh tink ah Trevor McDonald yuh ah chat tuh. Yuh ago need dat kinda vice or else nutten nah guh gwaan fi yuh.

ANYA. *(Speaking slowly.)* Telephone voice?

MISS B. It arite, yuh young. Yuh wi ketch it inna no time.

*(***ANYA** *has followed very little of what* **MISS B** *has said but smiles politely at her anyway.)*

ANYA. I want to work hard, soon to learn English and soon I get good job and get nice big flat with a garden I think and big space.

MISS B. Well, yuh hav ambition! Nutten nuh wrong wid dat. Yuh kip up wid yuh big dreams yaah!

(A few moments. **ANYA** *turns away from* **MISS B** *and watches the view from her window as they continue their journey.)*

(To **ANYA.***)* But some ah dem lazy! An neva duh nutten fi try help dem self. Yuh... Yuh caaa even chat propa, but yuh seh mek yuh come try? *(***MISS B** *emphasises underlined words.)* All fi mi granddaughter shi, shi tell mi di odd a day, "Nanny, this revision <u>well long</u>", and my food is "<u>bangin</u>"'. Dat shi tell mi di odda day. Mi nuh know weh shi ah seh, but mi jus smile an nod... yuh kno dem way deh?

*(***ANYA** *smiles and nods at* **MISS B.***)*

Shi doin har exams, but shi fail Henglish, yuh can imagine dat? ... Di only language shi talk, an shi fail it! She get suh much more opportunity... more dan mi, more dan har mada. Har mada teach har gud, shi talk nice, an hav telephone vice, if shi waaa use it. But no! Shi ah chat like dem bad bwoy, bout "bangin".

ANYA. Your child?

MISS B. *(Slowly.)* No, mi gran pickney mi seh.

ANYA. OK.

MISS B. Yeah, mi daughter pickney. Shi live wid mi tho. Tell har mada she shi ah move out. Two ere now shi live wid mi... jus appear ah mi front door one day... bout how shi caaa deal wid har mada.

ANYA. So you are mother to her?

MISS B. Mi gran daughter mi seh! *(Gives up trying to explain.)* Yuh kno what? Is arite, nuh bada. Yuh wi learn quick, yuh wi pick up Henglish inna no time.

ANYA. *(Relieved that she understands more of what* **MISS B** *has said.)* Yes, I learn soon.

MISS B. Yeah man. *(***MISS B** *rubs* **ANYA***'s hand briefly.)* Yuh arite.

> *(***MISS B** *wriggles out of her seat with difficulty in the tiny space she has and stands to locate something in her bag in the overheard rack. The coach jerks and* **MISS BEE** *stumbles and has to grab hold of the seat opposite hers.)*

(Apologising to the person in the seat.) Sorry, di space likkle. Nuh space at all. *(To* **ANYA***.)* Ah wah duh dem? Dem tink wi waaa happy stuff inna dis likkle bax?

> *(***MISS B** *settles down again and opening a small Tupperware box offers* **ANYA** *the contents.)*

Yuh waaa sweetie? Eeh tek piece.

*(***ANYA** *looks in the Tupperware box.)*

ANYA. No, thank you. I don't know what is that.

MISS B. Nuh cokenat draps… it nice man, tek piece.

*(***ANYA** *breaks a bit off and puts it in her mouth unsure.)*

ANYA. *(Pleasantly surprised)* Ah, is nice.

MISS B. *(Smiling widely.)* Mi kno! Ah long time mi ah nyam dem yah! From mi a pickney ah Jamaica 'til now. Mi kno seh tuh much sweet nuh gud fi mi, but mi caaa resist it.

*(***MISS B** *breaks off a large piece and puts it in her mouth.)*

(Lights down as the two women continue to share the coconut drops.)

Scene Four

(Lights up. **DAWN**, *a slimly built, Afro-Caribbean woman of thirty five, is present. She is dressed down in pyjama bottoms, a t-shirt and slippers. Her hair looks wild.)*

DAWN. And he's turning them over in his hands, examining every piece. Mangled, strangled bits of the hurdles that have been pulled apart like a mass of tiny bone hard limbs on a battlefield of concrete and petrol station bouquets.

There's a claw hammer in his right hand; I can see it moving just slightly but rhythmically, in time to the breaths hitching in his chest.

(There is a large intake of breath by **DAWN**.*)*

Watch, that's all I can do. But I shouldn't. I should look away.

*(***DAWN** *stares fixedly for a moment at a point beyond the few small bouquets of flowers that are now on stage.)*

(Unable to take her eyes off the scene she is witnessing.) His mask has slipped; the emotion is too raw, naked. No polite, civilised wipe of the eyes to spare the on-lookers. Just savage. Unbearable. Pain.

*(***DAWN** *breathes out loudly. It as if she had been holding her breath.)*

(There is a distant sound of a jazz trumpet playing a piece that has not been learnt quite well enough yet.)*

I stand there and I want to tell him what I did, I do but— *(cannot continue.)* How do I admit that? Make him understand? Make her look at me like she did this morning after that? "Mom" she said, that's all, one word. My eyes stay on him, his grief.

(Beat.)

Then one step is all it takes, one step and he's looking up suddenly, looking straight at me. And for a moment, a split second I… *(cannot bring herself to.)* But then "sorry" is all I can manage before I turn and run. *(***DAWN** *takes a step backwards.)* Just one word and I'm back in the flat bolting the door and down on my knees behind it to keep out the look he gave me. Grateful, that's what he was. I don't deserve it.

(The light changes; it dims. **CHERISE**, *a sixteen-year-old Afro-Caribbean girl enters. She wears* **JT***'s hooded sweatshirt from scene two. The hood is up and she is holding a small cheap bouquet of flowers cradled in her arms. She moves over to the flowers and looks at them a moment. She has a South London accent.)*

CHERISE. And there she was, this girl. Just standin'. Twelve pound. She put her hand in her pocket and that's all she had. She just thought, go on then, might as well. Now it'd be all; is it all right? Is she old enough? It might traumatize her; leavin' her family and that so young. Seventeen she was, standin' with her twelve pound and

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her yellow sun dress on. It was the best decision she's ever made. Doing that, for everyone, it was the best thing. For all of us who came after.

But doing that, jumpin', no fear, no thought, nothing; that's somethin' you do when you're young I think. When you're seventeen with your whole life still to come. Don't have to think, turn it over and over in your mind. You know when you gotta decide? And if you go one way you're not sure, but if you go the other it's all unknown?

> *(***CHERISE** *gently places her bunch of flowers next to the few bunches already on the stage. She considers them a moment. She takes out one flower whose stem has broken so the flower droops. She holds the flower as she continues speaking.)*

(She worries, that the flower she holds between her palms absentmindedly as she speaks, and without meaning to, she crushes it.) I like that about her; that she just went for it. No messin'. Never tell her that mind. Wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

> *(***CHERISE** *takes down the hood on her sweatshirt. She now speaks with a strong Liverpudlian accent.)*

He was the same usually, no messin' usually. Just came out with it usually. Liked that, no, loved that. But him and me, there was mess. Lots of mess. Took his time coming to the point. Months and months and then one morning he's in the street shouting up to me, all the way up to the third floor, asking me so everyone can hear. Nan was mortified. But then she's not seventeen anymore, and that yellow sun dress; it's worn, faded and hidden at the back of her cupboard now.

When he asked, and I know it was just Nandos, and maybe I should've played hard to get, made him wait.

But I felt like jumpin', no fear, no thought, nothin'. So I did, I jumped in, both feet.

*(***CHERISE** *looks down at the crushed flower in her hand and is horrified by what she has done. She places the mangled flower next to the rest of the bouquet and tries in vain to gently smooth out the few remaining petals.)*

(Grabbing up her bunch of flowers.) No, these aren't right, not for him.

(Lights dim gradually on **CHERISE** *and come up strong and clear on* **DAWN.** **DAWN** *is straightening up her flat as she speaks. She is obsessive about getting the coffee table in exactly the correct position. Also she sweeps her floor very carefully and eventually resorts to getting down on her hands and knees to pick up any stray bits of fluff or dirt she has missed.)*

DAWN. Yes, I heard the name, of course I heard the name; everyone did. But I... I see so many. I didn't...

It wasn't until I saw his picture. That face starring up at me from some 24-hour news channel. That angry face, that disgusted face. Looking at me, judging me.

He was right, I did put him in a box. I looked at him that first time and all I saw was the way he moved, the way he talked, that swagger. And that stupid cap. I like to think I would have been different. I like to think I wouldn't have looked away. But what you like to think and who you really are two different things.

(Beat.)

If I'm honest, really honest, he reminded me of her that first time. That's why I thought; if I can do this thing for you, help you, then maybe she... *(Can't say the words.)* It was stupid really.

I shouldn't say reminded, that seems past, over with. We're not that, her and me, at least as far as I'm concerned. Especially not after this morning. "Mom", that's all Cherise said. But that was enough. I men I rang up there straight after the ambulance had been; the police tape was just going up. But she still won't see me and that's fine, her choice, and I respect that I do. But maybe in time, you know?

(Beat.)

Would have thrown him out soon as he walked into the office; been nice of course, not obvious about it but firm. But it was that cap of his. She has one just like that. I know; I gave it to her. A load of presents last Christmas and the cap's the only thing she kept. The only thing she didn't put through my door still in the paper I'd wrapped them in; red and purple with tiny bows on each; used to be her favourite colours. The ipad, the nano, the phone, the perfume set, all in bits, deconstructed into smashed component pieces and jammed through the letter box. The crushed mess waiting on the mat when I got in from work. The place reeked of that Gucci Guilty for a month. Clearly the irony was lost on her. Even now, slightest whiff of it turns my stomach. Me and her; it's always messy. 'Spose mothers and daughters always are in their own different ways.

(Lights down.)

Scene Five

(Lights up. Night. Five days before the events of the previous scene. A tiny cramped flat in Waterloo, London. **ANYA**, *white Romanian, twenty six and* **WES**, *Black British-Afro Caribbean, twenty eight are present.* **ANYA** *still has a thick Romanian accent while* **WES** *has a South London accent.)*

ANYA. These fucking people; pushing always pushing.

WES. What?

*(***WES** *ignores her and continues practising his fingering on the trumpet.)*

ANYA. *(Indicating.)* I have this much space, just enough that I don't suffocate. *(Indicating again.)* Only this much. Just enough so I feel always someone behind me, always in front, always beside, both sides, breathing down my fucking neck.

WES. You eaten?

*(***ANYA** *stops and looks at* **WES.***)*

ANYA. What I said?

*(***WES***'s attention remains on the trumpet as he speaks.)*

WES. I'm hearin' you man.

ANYA. Yeah?

WES. *(Glances up at* **ANYA** *briefly.)* Moanin' innit, like always? Been here almost a year and you ain't worked it out yet? That's just London, always will be; ain't got much space for anyone. Relax.

ANYA. Relax?

*(**ANYA** picks up **WES**'s clothes that he has strewn around the living room.)*

WES. One minute, listen.

ANYA. There's no space in this fucking city. Not even when you're under the ground.

*(**WES** plays a bit of the trumpet jazz solo* – he is clearly off key.)*

(Laughing.) Sounds like many, many, how do you say? *(Thinks a moment.)* Yes, like many elephants.

WES. *(He reaches for his dark hooded sweatshirt and throws it at her.)* Cheers.

(The sound of drilling in the flat above theirs.)

ANYA. *(Getting a broom from a corner of the room she uses it to pound on the ceiling.)* Every night!

*(**ANYA** swings the broom barely missing **WES**, who has to duck.)*

WES. Easy.

ANYA. *(Indicating the man above.)* It is fair this? Ten o'clock and still bang, bang, bang, like there is no other people.

WES. Fixing up his flat.

ANYA. Pretending, building like he's dreaming. Trying to make his tiny box a castle.

WES. Ain't nothin' wrong with that.

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ANYA. *(***ANYA** *uses the broom to bang on the ceiling again. The drilling stops.)* You can't build castles in the air here. Even in the night dreaming doesn't work in this city.

*(***WES** *takes the broom from her and puts it as far out of her reach as possible.)*

WES. Don't say that.

ANYA. Why? Is true. Eleven month I been here and I am still care assistant. Every day more and more far from ever being music teacher again.

WES. You'll get there.

ANYA. You say. Sometime I think I should never have leave Constanta. I am teacher there. People respect me there.

WES. I respect you.

(A moment. The two watch each other.)

ANYA. Ah, I am just tired.

WES. Yeah?

ANYA. Yes Wes.

*(***WES** *goes back to practising his fingering on his trumpet.)*

WES. Mom came round before, brought some dinner, cooked too much she said.

ANYA. Oh yes. She thinks that you starve, that I don't cook for you.

WES. It ain't even like that you know it ain't.

ANYA. Do I? Four, five night every week she cook too much and brings it here and smile. *(Takes a plastic bag out of her handbag and dumps it on the table, which is covered in* **WES***'s sheet music.)* So you don't want this? Got it on my way home for us.

WES. Careful! *(He quickly clears the table of most of the sheet music and then removes the sarmales from the bag and looks at them and then at her.)* We could have this as well.

ANYA. Who heard of that? Having…?

WES. Curry goat.

ANYA. Curry goat with sarmale?

WES. We can start a new trend, our own thing.

ANYA. Speak for yourself. *(She breaks one of the sarmale in half and eats both halves.)*

WES. I gotta learn this, you gonna help me or what?

ANYA. *(Reaching for the trumpet.)* Let me see it.

WES. *(Won't give it up.)* I can do it.

*(***WES** *eats a sarmale.)*

ANYA. Well go on.

WES. Turn around then.

ANYA. Wes?

WES. You'll only watch, and pick, pick at everything I'm doing wrong.

ANYA. *(A little hurt.)* But only to help.

WES. Turn around.

*(***ANYA** *turns around. As* **WES** *plays* **ANYA** *listens and portions out the sarmales for them both, takes a container of curried goat from the table and places a serving on each plate.* **WES** *ends the solo and* **ANYA** *turns back to him.)*

ANYA. Still elephants I think, but not so may that time.

*(***ANYA** *kisses* **WES**, *puts a plate of food in the microwave and turns it on.* **WES** *watches her every move with a smile.)*

(Lights down.)

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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