Acting Edition

Marie and Rosetta

by George Brant

SAMUEL FRENCH

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MARIE AND ROSETTA had its world premiere presented by the Atlantic Theatre Company in New York City on September 14, 2016. The performance was directed by Neil Pepe, with scenic design by Riccardo Hernández, costume design by Dede M. Ayite, lighting design by Christopher Akerlind, and sound design by Sck Sound Design. The pianist was Deah Love and the guitarist was Felicia M. Collins. The Production Stage Manager was Michael Domue. The cast was as follows:

SISTER ROSETTA THARPE .....Kecia Lewis
MARIE KNIGHT .....Rebecca Naomi Jones

MARIE AND ROSETTA was developed at TheatreWorks Silicon Valley as part of their New Works Festival. Additional development at The Playwrights' Center and The New Harmony Project.

CHARACTERS

SISTER ROSETTA THARPE – An African-American woman in her early thirties. Pretty, vivacious, an irrepressible spirit. A mean guitar player with a bluesy voice. Sings spirituals that swing.

MARIE KNIGHT – An African-American woman in her early twenties, but looks younger. A more traditional alto gospel singer, plays staid piano at first. Gorgeous, on her way to being a spiritual star.

SETTING

Mississippi, 1946

AUTHOR'S NOTES

A note about ages: in historical reality, Sister Rosetta was in her early thirties and Marie in her early twenties in 1946. Productions are welcome to adjust these ages as needed for casting purposes, as long as an age gap of some kind between the two actors is preserved. Their relationship may have more of a sisterly or maternal edge as a result of the actors' ages, but should avoid feeling predatory in any way.

Musicians

If the actors playing Marie and Rosetta are not virtuoso guitarists/pianists, their instruments may be "voiced" by professional musicians. These musicians should also be African-American females.

Sincere and heartfelt thanks to all who supported, encouraged, and lifted up this play in its journey
(in order of appearance)

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For the incomparable Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Madame Marie Knight

(1946, Mississippi. A showroom in a modest funeral home. Several coffins, folding chairs, a spinet piano. Out of place are several open suitcases on the floor and propped up on chairs, a number of guitar cases, and a few dresses hung up on open coffin lids.)

(Two women dressed in formal gowns sit facing each other on folding chairs: **MARIE***, a beautiful, radiant woman who looks about eighteen, and* **ROSETTA***, a pretty, vivacious, plump woman in her early thirties.* **MARIE** *is putting the final touches on* **ROSETTA***'s makeup, humming "Peace in the Valley."* **ROSETTA***'s eyes are closed.)*

*(***MARIE** *steps back, evaluates her handiwork, hopes it's good enough. She girds herself, and:)*

MARIE. Miss Tharpe?
Miss Tharpe?

ROSETTA. *(Eyes still closed, correcting.)* Sister

MARIE. Sister
I think I'm done

ROSETTA. *(Still closed.)* Hm?

MARIE. Everything but the lips just like you said

ROSETTA. Lips?

MARIE. Everything but
Just like you said

ROSETTA. Right

*(***ROSETTA** *opens her eyes.)*

Mercy
I musta fell asleep

You gotta gentle touch

MARIE. Gentle
Scared

ROSETTA. Of what

MARIE. Of messing up
Not sure how much is too much yet
How much blush you need to survive that spotlight

ROSETTA. Shoot
Blush ain't armor girl
Blush just brings what's on the inside out
How 'bout my scar?

MARIE. What scar?

ROSETTA. Listen to you
You know what scar
You had to see my scar my forehead staring right at you
You cover it up?

MARIE. Yes ma'am

ROSETTA. *Sister*
Well then let's see
Mirror

MARIE. Oh
Maybe I

*(***MARIE** *touches* **ROSETTA** *up.)*

ROSETTA. You said you were done girl

MARIE. I know but

ROSETTA. Mirror

*(***MARIE** *acquiesces, hands* **ROSETTA** *a mirror, steps back.* **ROSETTA** *examines* **MARIE***'s handiwork silently. A moment as* **MARIE** *braces for the worst.)*

MARIE. Is it

ROSETTA. Dear God

MARIE. I'm sorry I

ROSETTA. Dear sweet Jesus

MARIE. If you let me just

ROSETTA. Sister ain't never looked better

MARIE. I could put more – what?

ROSETTA. You got the cheeks
Nobody gets the cheeks
You got the cheeks real good

MARIE. You think so? Really?

ROSETTA. And they the most important part
When I look up to Heaven
People gotta see Heaven looking down
Shining on my big ole cheeks
Blessing them
Ooo they blessed now they most surely are blessed
Like a couple'a halos on my face

MARIE. I'm glad real glad

ROSETTA. I saw it I knew I saw it
It wasn't just your singin'
I swear there was a light
There was some kinda light over your head last night and I knew I had to either ignore that light to pretend I didn't see nothing or to let that light into my heart and find out what God had planned for it
And look what He had planned
He had these cheeks in His plan

MARIE. *(Blushing.)* The lips should I

ROSETTA. *(Teasing.)* Lips lips
What you in such a hurry to get to my lips for?

MARIE. *(Deer in the headlights.)* Oh no I'm not I

ROSETTA. You got plans for them little girl?

MARIE. No I

ROSETTA. Well ain't that a shame

MARIE. I don't I

ROSETTA. Lord awful easy to make you blush little girl

Don't even need me a brush

MARIE. Sorry Miss Tharpe

ROSETTA. *Sister*

And relax
I ain't worried 'bout lips
Lips're easy anybody can do lips
Lips are a kiss
Can't do 'em yet anyway
We got singin' to do first

(Returning to the mirror.)

Dear Jesus would you look at your Rosetta
I swear every man in my hand just got fired
They just got the pink slip every one

MARIE. Because of blush?

ROSETTA. You think Kermit can put on blush?
With his big ole ugly drummer hands?
I shoulda found me a gal sooner
Pink slips for all'a 'em every one

(They laugh for a moment, then:)

You ain't said nothin' 'bout yours

MARIE. Mine?

ROSETTA. Your face

MARIE. Oh I thought I I'm sure I did

ROSETTA. Nope

MARIE. Oh well I think it's

ROSETTA. Too late now you said it all

MARIE. No no I love it it's

ROSETTA. That was your cue see
You gonna have to learn to pick up your cues
That's all this is gonna be you know
You and me
Pickin' up cues

MARIE. I know and I'm so

ROSETTA. So pick it up

MARIE. I love it

ROSETTA. Like you mean it

MARIE. It's perfect

ROSETTA. Without skipping a beat

MARIE. Like I got two little halos sitting on my cheeks

ROSETTA. Yeah
Yeah
Yeah you do look mighty good don't you
Ooo-ooo!
Look at that
I had a little part in that
Feel like I should sign it somewhere
That face of yours
In the corner on the jawline or something

MARIE. *(Blushing.)* Now

ROSETTA. No you can blush all you want but between me and Jesus we made us a masterpiece

MARIE. *(Blushing.)* Thank you

*(***ROSETTA** *moves to the piano.)*

ROSETTA. Now let's make a little Good News in here

*(***ROSETTA** *plays a phrase on the piano.)*

Poster says we got a show tonight

[MUSIC NO. 00 "ROSETTA AT THE PIANO"]

Better come up with one

MARIE. We're rehearsing here?

ROSETTA. There a piano on the bus?

MARIE. No
But this place

(The funeral home.)

My goosebumps got goosebumps

ROSETTA. This?
Oh you better tell them goosebumps to settle down honey

We here for the duration

MARIE. The duration?

No

The show isn't here

ROSETTA. No

MARIE. So we rehearse a little here and then we're gone

ROSETTA. Yep

But then we back

MARIE. Back?

ROSETTA. That's right

Where you think we sleep?

MARIE. Sleep?

(Horrible truth dawning.)

No

ROSETTA. We not in New York anymore honey

MARIE. No no

ROSETTA. We not in Chicago

MARIE. No

ROSETTA. Can't stay in no hotel down here

MARIE. But you

You're famous

ROSETTA. To some folk

To the thousand or so Leroys and Wandalyns coming tonight

To the rest of Mississippi I'm just another nigger

MARIE. You?

ROSETTA. Why you think we got a white bus driver?

Who else gonna buy us food?

Who else gonna talk to those flashing lights if we get pulled over?

When we get pulled over?

MARIE. You're serious

ROSETTA. Honey

Maybe you noticed

We ain't playin' no Carnegie Hall tonight
No Savoy Ballroom
No Café Society
We playin' in a warehouse
Tobacco warehouse on the outskirts of town
Dresses gonna stink of smoke for a week
Next night's a barn
After that a hangar
Anywhere a bunch a black folk congregatin' won't be noticed
There's rules down here
We northern Negroes
We got to be invisible
We step off stage and we got to disappear
And beds?
Down here we depend on the Good Samaritan Circuit for a bed cuz God knows there ain't no room at the inn
Sometimes it's somebody's garage
Kitchen
Couch
And sometimes it's a miracle like this
A piano in the corner
Plenty a' elbow space
And a showroom to choose from for when we lay down our heads

MARIE. Lay down – where –?

ROSETTA. Your choice
Cot or casket

MARIE. You can't be –

ROSETTA. I'm a casket gal myself
Like sleeping on a cloud

MARIE. I could never

ROSETTA. Suit yourself
Cot it is

MARIE. Not even a cot
Not here
I won't be able to sleep
All night looking for ghosts

ROSETTA. Well you keep an eye out for ghosts I'm gonna be snoring in the corner
In the deluxe satin-lined model
And you thank Walter in the morning you hear?
Whether you sleep all night or just a minute cuz'a ghost-watchin' you thank him
Good Samaritan Walter of "Walter's Funeral Home and Insurance Company"
Cuz without him little Marie would be sleeping the night in the bus cute little black girl out there sleeping under her coat pretty face in the window for all the white world to see

MARIE. All right
I'll thank him

ROSETTA. Who?

MARIE. Walter

ROSETTA. Good
Someday I'll get enough money
Deck that bus out put some beds in there
Mirrors closets dressing rooms
Won't have to worry 'bout this every night
Until then we depend on our friends
Wherever we find them
Understood?

MARIE. Understood

ROSETTA. It's not all funeral parlors honey

MARIE. All right

ROSETTA. But it's more than one
Nothing to be scared of though
Nothing but a bunch of souls gone to Glory

MARIE. But don't rehearsing here seem a little

Like
Like maybe we're not respecting them enough

ROSETTA. Respecting them?
No
They like the music

(**ROSETTA** *jauntily underscores the following.)*

Better than that sad old organ wheezing through they service
We give 'em something good before they move on
Something to remember
Something to tap their tootsies to on their way to the pearly gates

(Piano out.)

MARIE. You're joking with me

ROSETTA. A little
It's awful easy
You ever joke?
Or you serious all the time
Makeup is one thing
Singing
But are you gonna be any fun?

MARIE. I'm fun
I think
Plenty fun

ROSETTA. Well give me some warning or I may have a heart attack
Raise your hand or something 'fore you tell a joke
So I know it's comin'

MARIE. I will

ROSETTA. That was a joke

MARIE. I know

ROSETTA. Ooo-eee fish in a barrel

MARIE. I guess I don't
Don't get too much practice