

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)

Laura Kepley, Sam Phillips, Gayle Wald, Anthony Heilbut, The Playwrights' Center, Jeremy Cohen, Wendy Knox, Cristiana Clark, Dominic Taylor, Mat Smart, Sanford Moore, The Gersh Agency, Jessica Amato, Ivory Doublette, ShaVunda Horsley, Kate Navin, The New Harmony Project, Mead Hunter, Joel Grynheim, Team Joy, Erica Nagel, Josh Kight, Danielle Brooks, Chaz Hodges, Anna Rhoads, TheatreWorks Silicon Valley, Giovanna Sardelli, Robert Kelley, Michelle E. Jordan, William Liberatore, Scott Rudin, The Atlantic Theater, Neil Pepe, Jeffory Lawson, Annie MacRae, Rebecca Naomi Jones, Kecia Lewis, Felicia M. Collins, Deah Harriott, Steve Broadnax, Jason Michael Webb, Michael Domue, Abigail Katz, Seth Glewen, and Mark Carpentieri.

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 Leroy's 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