

Acting Edition

Cephianne's Reflection

A Gullah Fairy Tale for Grown Folk

by Mallory Raven-Ellen Backstrom

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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CEPHIANNE'S REFLECTION was first produced as a staged reading at the Goodman Theatre New Stages Festival (Susan V. Booth, Walter Artistic Director; John Collins, Executive Director) in Chicago, Illinois, on December 2, 2023. The reading was directed by Malkia Stampley, with dramaturgy by Neil Connelly, dialect coaching by Cheryl Lynn Bruce, and stage directions read by Mallory Raven-Ellen Backstrom. The cast was as follows:

CEPHIANNE COLLETTE-AIMEE ST. ELLIS		Dyamone Hopkins
ALCIONE ST. ELLIS		Kalyn Rivers
QUEEN AIMEE ST. ELLIS/OSHUN		Brianna Buckley
NOBLE ST. ELLIS		Gavin Lawrence
TOUT SUITE ST. ELLIS		Matty Robinson
LE' FAYE ST. ELLIS		Sola Thompson
SABATIEN LE' PLONGEON		Anthony Flemming III
CHRISTOPHE LEYTON		Alys Dickerson

DI PIPL

CEPHIANNE COLLETTE-AIMEE ST. ELLIS – (Female, 22) A curvy, saltwater Gullah-Ogeechee gal who becomes the woman she's meant to be. Pronounced: *Seph-ee-ahn*.

ALCIONE ST. ELLIS – (Female, 22) A sultry siren whose influence can blow both ways. Noble's daughter. Pronounced: *Al-See-O-ne*.

QUEEN AIMEE ST. ELLIS – (Female, 20s–30s) The four-hundred-year-old wise woman and matriarch of Ma Isle, blessed with longevity and remarkable powers. She is the mother of Cephianne, Noble, and Tout Suite. Pronounced: *Queen Ah-mee*.

NOBLE ST. ELLIS – (Male, 50s–60s) A stoic father and creator who is missing a piece of his soul.

TOUT SUITE “TOO-SWEET” ST. ELLIS – (Male, 30s–40s) Born too soon, Too-Sweet is a tenderhearted root doctor and a bearish shape-shifter with incredible strength. Pronounced: *Too-Sweet*.

LE' FAYE ST. ELLIS – (Female, 20s) Noble's wife, a skilled herbalist and potion maker. Pronounced: *Le-fah-yay*.

SABATIEN RAFAL ADDALIS LE' PLONGEON IV – (Male, 20s) An enthralling reflection of ancient magick. He's been imprisoned in the mirror world since before the fall of humankind. Pronounced: *Sa-bah-ti-en*.

OSHUN – (Female, 30s–40s) The magnificent and benevolent Orisha of rivers and fresh water, transformation, fertility, beauty, prosperity, femininity, and love. Pronounced: *Oh-SHn*.

CHRISTOPHE LEYTON – (Male, 30s–50s) A real estate mogul looking to reclaim his heirs property.

MA ISLE

An enchanted Sea Island, hidden by the Goddess Oshun, off the coast of Georgia, USA. While the outside world is unaware of them, the inhabitants of Ma Isle are not stuck in time. Upon reaching maturity, everyone is blessed with a special gift. Their community is thriving, and their society has evolved in the presence of undeniable magick.

DI TIME

Despite the otherworldly nature of the setting, the action takes place in the present.

DI MUSIC

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DI CAST

It is not necessary to cast the show with fluent Gullah speakers. For non-Gullah-speaking actors, consider hiring a dialect coach.

DI GULLAH

Partially sourced from *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* by Lorenzo Dow Turner.

Bebe Chile – baby child

Binya – a native of the Sea Islands or a member of the tribe

Bloody Bank – a rice field where enslaved people often perished

Buzzard's Lore – a ritual dance where a man dons the costume of a vulture

Canna – cannot

Comya – someone who does not belong; a foreigner, guest, or visitor

Day Clean – dawn; a new day

Dinna – do not or don't

Fatha/Baba – father

Gwine – going to or will be

H'aint/Fixuh/Spook/Boo Hag – malevolent spirits

Iyami Ajè – women endowed with divine powers; the chosen of Oshun

Motha/Mommie/Maman – mother

Oona – your, you

Plat-eye – skinwalkers, demons who take the form of humans or animals

Ring Shout – a praise dance with a loud spiritual cry

Shol'nough – for sure

Wonga Lo! – Kinkfolk look!

Yerry – listen, heed

Penned in homage to the Geechee dialect and culture found on the Sea Islands, where Black women learned how to turn pain into power.

Dedicated to Mary-Ellen, Julianne, and Elowwyne.

ACT ONE

Scene One

(The action begins as the audience takes their seats. This is designed to be an immersive experience: a sensual blend of atmospheric sound, an emotionally transformative set, and a provocative scent. We are entering another world...)

(The Praise House.)

(A loose concept of a structure built by the bent branches of an expansive Southern live oak tree. It's decorated with lanterns, candles, birdbaths, and incense burners. Elaborate ancestral altars climb high up on its limbs. We hear the sea, the wind, the tall grass blowing over the earth, and the plentitude of insects. A dangerous hurricane brews at sea, and the moon is swollen-bellied as our ritual begins.)

(Everyone is well-dressed, all in white. Lace flows as freely as the bathtub gin. The women perform a praise dance, scattering sea salt in a wide circle and waving lit sweetgrass bound with lavender, calendula, and sage. They're chasing the malevolent entities and desperate spirits away.)

*(**TOUT SUITE** beats a drum like a commanding heartbeat. He dons the mask of a vulture and*

performs the Buzzard's Lore, pecking at the ground like he's tearing at carrion, flapping his impressive wingspan.)

(QUEEN AIMEE enters, joining the unabashed dancers. They stir up a proper Ring Shout to elevate the vibration and to keep the boo hags at bay.)

(There is music – the drum, the fiddle, and the washboard; the EWI and the guitar. QUEEN AIMEE catches the holy spirit and is moved to tell their history, as is tradition. TOUT SUITE translates.)*

QUEEN AIMEE. *Wonga! Wonga! Wonga lo!*

TOUT SUITE. Kinfolk! Kinfolk! Kinfolk, look!

QUEEN AIMEE. *Kome! Se mbe.*

TOUT SUITE. Gather round! Ya take it / from me.

QUEEN AIMEE. *So, di ain't gwine wari e sol. Di satisfdi wat gawd dan fe mi! / Di satisfdi wat Oshun dan fe mi!*

TOUT SUITE. So, I ain't gonna worry a soul. I'se satisfied wit wat God has done fo' me! I'se satisfied wit wat Oshun / has done fo' me!

QUEEN AIMEE. *Wen di sAn Ddun, DI gwan mi rum / mek kAci. DI se, "Tanki Oshun! Mama! mDse!"*

TOUT SUITE. When da sun goes down, I go to my room / and pray. I say, "Thank you, Oshun! Mother! Master!"

QUEEN AIMEE. *"If di e llw fe si day clean, tek ce e di sol."*

TOUT SUITE. "If I ain't live ta see di morning, take care of my soul."

* See p. 108 for Gullah line pronunciations.

QUEEN AIMEE. *Dats Mdi wad: "Tek ce di sol: DI e MDIn, bat di bDri."*

TOUT SUITE. Dats ma word: "Take care of ma soul; I ain't mind di body."

*(The **ENSEMBLE** Ring Shouts, and the music swells with the singing wind. **TOUT SUITE** begins with a call-and-response.)*

I'll tell ya di story!

ENSEMBLE. BINYA!

TOUT SUITE. I'll tell ya di story!

ENSEMBLE. BINYA!

TOUT SUITE. I'll tell ya da truth within ya!

I'll tell ya di tale!

ENSEMBLE. BINYA!

QUEEN AIMEE. I'll tell ya wat true...

*(**QUEEN AIMEE** takes two large sips of gin. The first sip she spits into vapor in the air; the second she swallows. **QUEEN AIMEE** spins clockwise, pouring out libations to honor the four directions and the dead.)*

Chillun! We comya, (*Whistles.*) sooo long naw we binya! Our roots be buried deep as da ancestors under dis here live oak. Da Ancestree.

Off da boat, onta da bloody bank. We Geechee stole from da mother's land and sent here for di Carolina Gold, yea! Da hill rice is wat webe snatched fa.

(A hush falls over the group. Everyone squats around the sea salt circle. The candlelight flickers across their many shades of brown.)

TOUT SUITE. But we no need sing songs of da slave, naaaaaah! Fa webe free here! Praise be ta da yellow fever, dat took di cruel mastahs away in their fitful sleep! Glory ta di Gawddess Oshun, fa choosin' Queen Aimee as her Iyami Ajè! Her right hand on di Earth!

We binya, cuz a Queen Aimee! A lowly slave whipped and werked ta death! Say Queen Aimee be takin' da breath of Oshun inta her bodri. Say her bled dem Orishas inta her chillun. Her belly sooooo swole wit power! And Oshun, *She* says...

*(A supernatural force suddenly possesses
QUEEN AIMEE, her voice deepened by the
 presence of ole-world magick.)*

QUEEN AIMEE. "Here be Ma Isle. Ya gwine live here wit ya friends in da fields and all y'all's chillun... But ya no can leave dis isle, if ya wanna keep dis magick... None a ya! ...Not, eva!"

TOUT SUITE. ...And wat we, Queen Aimee, she says?

ENSEMBLE. I am you, and you are we!

TOUT SUITE. And Oshun?

Wat *She* say?

QUEEN AIMEE. "So, it is. So, it shall always be."

TOUT SUITE. But dats not all, naaaaaaw!

Cuz, I'll tell ya da story!

ENSEMBLE. BINYA!

QUEEN AIMEE. I'll tell ya da truth!

...Oshun says, "All ya chillun be blessed from dis day onta eternity! Ya send em seekin mi, when da moon be round as ya backside, and when dey find mi...dey'll find dem'selves. Yes, sah! Tis true! But should ya bear a babe who seeks, and canna find..."

TOUT SUITE. Dats when Queen Aimee gwine grow ole...and die.”

*(A cold breeze blows, and a shiver scatters
through the group.)*

QUEEN AIMEE. Ma chillun, dat was ova four hundred years ago and webe still here! Seekin’ and findin’ under di light of da full moon...

Scene Two

(There is an eerie hush, and then a soft spotlight rises softly on CEPHIANNE and ALCIONE as they enter through the house, like through a break in the candlelit trees.)

CEPHIANNE. Are ya scared?

ALCIONE. Dinna ebben be askin' me dat!

CEPHIANNE. Alcione, I'se so nervous –

ALCIONE. – SHHHH! Hush mouth! Ya dinna want a *h'aint* ta hear ya! Dat witch'll send ova ta ya bed a boo hag ta be ridin' ya all night! Stealin' ya very breath from ya bodri...

CEPHIANNE. Quit dis! I'se shook already, gal! Besides, ya dinna believe those ole folk tales.

ALCIONE. I shol'nough do! It ain't worth di risk not ta!

CEPHIANNE. Wat ya tink gwine happen tonight?

ALCIONE. Cephianne, it be di same *Seekin' Ritual* everybody been through since fa'ever. So, I tink we gwine grow on up and see fa we'selves. Why aren't ya mo excited?! Ya di bebe chile of Queen Aimee!

CEPHIANNE. Dats why I'm fightin' a fearful fit!

ALCIONE. Dinna be speakin' in fear no mo! It's bad juju! We, binya! We no, comya. Magnificence is our inheritance. Magick is our birthright. Miracles are our legacy.

(ALCIONE sashays ahead with total confidence, at home in all her splendor. CEPHIANNE struggles to walk and breathe. She worries about her dress, tugging at the high, stiff collar, flouncing the extravagant tulle and suffering from a tight whalebone corset.)

Gal, will ya stop pullin' at ya skirt!

CEPHIANNE. Tell true, do dis make mi look fat?

ALCIONE. Nooooo chile.

CEPHIANNE. I dinna believe ya.

ALCIONE. Auntie, di only person who tinkt ya look fat is
yooooou.

CEPHIANNE. Dats a damn lie! And dinna be callin' me dat!

ALCIONE. Auntie? Why not?

CEPHIANNE. Makes mi feel ole! We da same age!

ALCIONE. But ya is mi Noble father's beloved bebe sistah.

(CEPHIANNE trips on the hem of her gown.)

CEPHIANNE. All dis dumb lace! I look like a frosted pound
cake!

ALCIONE. Dat may not be such a bad ting, Auntie. By day
clean, we gwine be wombyn grown.

CEPHIANNE. So?

ALCIONE. Soooo, maybe one of these saltwater Ogeechee
boi's got himself a sweet tooth! And wanna taste him
some nouveaux magick!

CEPHIANNE. Hush mouth! No'bodri on Ma Isle is interested
in mi. Ya di *special* one –

ALCIONE. – Oh, do shut up! I ain't layin' fa deese roostahs.

CEPHIANNE. Dey still busy cluckin' aftah ya. Dinna matter
ya prefer di white meat.

ALCIONE. Damn shame di poonanny pool is sooooo shallow.

(CEPHIANNE trips on her hem.)

CEPHIANNE. How's a gal supposed ta walk in dis?!

ALCIONE. Dat dress was made for a wombyn! So, ya shol'
should walk like one!

(**ALCIONE** *struts ahead, switching her narrow behind.*)

CEPHIANNE. Wat are ya doin'?

ALCIONE. Tryin' out mi wombyn hips.

CEPHIANNE. Ya got none ta speak of. Want sam'a mine?

ALCIONE. Yes, please! Gimmie sam'a dat opal! I know how ta use it! Cephianne, ya should worship ya curves and 'member where ya got em from. Ya maman be da oldest Iyami Ajè in da whole world!

CEPHIANNE. I ain't ma mother.

ALCIONE. But ya is *special*, and ya could'na help it ebben if ya tried.

CEPHIANNE. Wat da ya tink ya gwine get tonight?

ALCIONE. Since we a *lesser birth* tend ta follow one parent or da other, ma options be kinda limited. Unlike *you*! Ya could get any'ting! Start a nyew ability on Ma Isle!

CEPHIANNE. Well, wat do ya *wanna* get?

ALCIONE. Suppose I wanna inherit ma maman's special. I tink I got ha song in me.

CEPHIANNE. Dat would be a miracle, cuz ya canna hold a tune, gal!

ALCIONE. Dats cuz I'm not *special* yet! Besides, ma baba dinna ebben use his gifts no mo. Wat good's da power ta manifest if ya dinna make no'ting?

CEPHIANNE. Noble ain't paint a dream-come-true in all ma life. Mommie says, his special always took more dan it gave.

(**CEPHIANNE** *smells her fingertips. There's a calming fragrance caught under her nails.*)

ALCIONE. I dinna know no'ting 'bout dat. He barely ebben speaks ta me.

CEPHIANNE. Ma brotha dinna chatter and grin wit nooo'bodri.

ALCIONE. Except... *Her.*

Ya turn. Wat da *ya* want?

CEPHIANNE. Dinna matter. Long as I get...sam'ting.

ALCIONE. Ya will. I know dis.

Naw, will ya stop sniffin' ya fingers?! Dey can see us!

CEPHIANNE. Hmmmm. I love da smell of crushed tobacco. Reminds mi of da past...

(A ghostly humming rushes past them, echoing on the wind, split into many voices through the trembling leaves.)

ALCIONE. Hear dat? Ya fatha's spirit be whistlin' through dem trees, chile. Ya baba is here witchu, just like ma maman is here wit me. All di ancestors be.

QUEEN AIMEE. *(Offstage, calling out to them.)* Here be mi grandbebe Alcione! And mi daughter Cephianne Collette-Aimee St. Ellis!

ALCIONE. We ready?

CEPHIANNE. We binya.

Scene Three

*(The young women join the **ENSEMBLE** in a percussive praise dance under the Ancestree. **TOUT SUITE** pecks at them with his vulture's mask. The women sage **ALCIONE** and **CEPHIANNE** from head to foot, cleansing them. **QUEEN AIMEE** takes a bushel of rosemary and splashes them with Florida Water from Le' Faye's cast-iron pot. Everyone Ring Shouts Alcione and Cephianne's names. The two women sit on their knees in the center of the circle. **TOUT SUITE** crowns the young women with sunflowers and marigolds braided into an old piece of lynching rope.)*

QUEEN AIMEE. Grateful is we dat all we friends could be here ta witness these gals come grown. Tonight, Cephianne and Alcione be seekin' dem'selves in di trees, wit di spirits and di shadows. So, webe callin out ta da ancestor's fa dey blessings and fa dey protection. Naw, where be da rest of me chillun? Noble! Tout Suite! Di moon be high, it's time webe layin' hands on we gals!

*(The **ENSEMBLE** lays hands on **CEPHIANNE** and **ALCIONE**. **NOBLE** is oddly cold and detached.)*

NOBLE. Alcione, ya maman ain't here ta see ya come full grown, but Baba and Granny-Nanny are proud of who ya *could* be...if ya only tried. Ta mi bebe sistah, Cephianne. Ya come from boundless power, gal. Just 'memba dat.

TOUT SUITE. Cephiiy! OOOOOhhh! We canna wait fa ya ta get back here! *(Whistles.)* We gwine have sam gumbo, fry okra, and black-eyed peas, yea! – I had dem sittin in di water all day cuz I know ya like dem sooooo much! – And we gwine have sam peach cobbler, after we eat dem pig feet, greens, and suck dem neck bones clean! It gwine be Toooooo-Sweet!

(Thunder shakes the heavens, and the super moon swells into fullness. A shiver of euphoric magick snakes through the crowd.)

Oshun wanders da wilderness.

QUEEN AIMEE. It's time. Ha feet are on land. Bebes, ya canna have fear and faith, nor worry and pray. When ya in da dark, expand ya light and y'all be free ta claim ya awesome. Dis is how webe turnin' pain inta power all these generations.

CEPHIANNE & ALCIONE. Yes, ma'am.

QUEEN AIMEE. Ya beloved. Ya must believe dis. Know dat it's true and Oshun'll come ta ya.

CEPHIANNE & ALCIONE. Yes, ma'am.

(TOUT SUITE hands QUEEN AIMEE two baskets woven from sweetgrass, pine needles, and palmetto fronds.)

QUEEN AIMEE. Take ya baskets. At day clean we had ya fill a hundred mojo bags with tobacco. Ya ta spread dem in a circle round ya'selves fa protection from di h'aints and fixuahs. Ya canna have light wit'out di shadow, but wat dwells in darkness ya are ta leave in darkness... Gwine naw. Ya have 'til dawn ta find Gawd inside ya. And 'membaba...da mommie's soooo in love witchu.

TOUT SUITE. Di Seekin' Ritual is begun!

(TOUT SUITE thumps his staff like a frightened heart beating. The ENSEMBLE is eerily quiet. They meditate on their lit candles, taking up vigil throughout the night. ALCIONE and CEPHIANNE take their pouches and a swig of moonshine. ALCIONE swallows it thirstily. CEPHIANNE takes a teeny taste and almost chokes to death. Everyone exits, leaving the young women downstage alone as the flickering tea lights go out. The storm increases. God is coming.)

Scene Four

(The Wild.)

(Trees and tall grass; critters, crawlers, cattails, and the roar of a menstruating sea. The scamper of furry bodies scurrying across the land, the hoot of an owl, and the happy howls of a pack of coyotes feeding. It is dark, and there is a supernatural chill in the air.)

ALCIONE. Which way ya gwine? ...Dis or dat?

CEPHIANNE. Canna we stay ta'gether?

ALCIONE. – Sshhh!

Ya hear dat? Dat...sangin'...

(ALCIONE hears a spectral sound on the sea breeze.)

CEPHIANNE. Dinna be tryin' ta scare mi naw!

ALCIONE. I tell ya, there's a wombyn sangin' in dem trees!
She's cryin' out ma name... I gotta go find her!

(A change comes over ALCIONE. She is overwhelmed with a sensual joy.)

CEPHIANNE. Ya gwine leave mi here by ma lonesome?!

ALCIONE. Ya not alone, Auntie. Can ya not feel *Ha?* *She's*
all around us.

CEPHIANNE. Wat'sit I'se supposed ta feel?

ALCIONE. I canna explain it...sam'ting like...

...Power...Freedom...Love.

*(ALCIONE wanders away, enchanted.
CEPHIANNE is left onstage, alone.)*

CEPHIANNE. Ya just gwine go off like dat?! Great... Naw, wat?

(She takes a few steps and leaps into the air when a spiderweb brushes the back of her neck. She swats at the relentless mosquitoes and suffers in the sweltering heat.)

*(We honor the silence in which her fear and uncertainty are evident. She takes the little sachets from her basket and brings one to her nose. **CEPHIANNE** begins to scatter the colorful mojo bags around herself in a tight circle.)*

I smell ya, Baba... Please, help mi earn ma special. I ain't terribly particular, but I got suggestions if ya willin' ta put in a good word fa me on di other side? Maybe I could command di trees ta grow. Ooor...I could fly?! Mommie says, flyin' is divine! ...We canna go nowhere but... Know dis, I'd happily settle for sam'ting useful like callin' di fish out da water, whistlin' oystahs out dey shell or da fiddlah crabs outta dey holes. Oh! It'd be nice ta see da future...though only da weather changed since webe stuck on dis isle... I could command di pot ta boil faster...but dat might spoil de gumbo. So, dats no good. But it shol'nough would cure ma plump behind. Lawd, I'd love da power ta lose twenty to thirty pounds.

(The silence is filled with crickets, cicadas, and the wind picking up speed.)

Alright, Oshun. Where ya at? ...Why's no'ting happenin'?

...Anyway, I certainly dinna want ta turn inta a bear! But, Mommie says, bein' a dolphin ain't half bad.

*(**CEPHIANNE** pulls at her dress. It is the most elegant thing she's ever worn, but panache and comfort rarely go together. It starts to rain. She opens a lace parasol, and like her attire, it's couture but ineffective.)*

CEPHIANNE. Swear dis makes mi look like a fat, fluffy fowl! Alcione looked way prettier dan moi, per usual. She probably already back there wit ha feets up, showing off ha special, eatin' okra soup and lima beans. She sam'where dats dry, laughin' wit all ha sparklin' teeth out... Oh Baba, every'bodri like ha mo' bettah dan me. I dinna know why I ebben try! I feel so stupid fa lettin' Mommie gussy mi up like dis!

(Fighting back tears of self-doubt, she sniffs her pouch for comfort.)

I smell ya...but I swear, sam'ting shoulda happened by naw... Gwine Oshun! Make mi special, yea?

(Her heel wobbles beneath her. She takes her shoes off and stubs her foot on something buried beneath the soil. She digs at the moist earth with her toe and excavates a box of playing cards. She snorts.)

Wat's dis fa? Am I gwine be waitin' here so long I need a game? Naaaaahhh, God! I'se wet and hungry! Hit mi wit di magick... *Please?*

(She stuffs the deck in her sack. Nothing happens, and she becomes discouraged. The storm swells, rain falls in sweeping sheets, and tree limbs snap from the force of the swirling wind.)

Oshun, ya bettah werk quick! Please! I'se bout ta be blown away!

*(The hurricane is a violent smash of light and sound. Then a voice can be heard in the distance, getting closer. A woman belting her heart out! The storm surges and then begins to dissipate as **ALCIONE** enters, commanding the weather with her voice.)*

ALCIONE.

AH BE DE STORM, EN DE STORM BE MI.

AH BE DE LAN', DE WATA, EN DE TREE.

ALL GAWD CHILLUN, NAW OONA YERRY TA ME!

DO SO AH SAY, EN LEH WEBE FREE!

*(The **ENSEMBLE** runs out at the sound of her song. **ALCIONE** sings/speaks with the authority of heaven, and when she's through, the storm has broken apart and disappeared. **ALCIONE** is embraced by her family, but **CEPHIANNE** stands apart, downstage. Her ritual is still unfinished.)*

*(The lights fade on **CEPHIANNE**.)*

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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