

Excerpt

RAISING DAVID WALKER

A play

by

Peter Snoad

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RAISING DAVID WALKER

CHARACTERS

(Requires a minimum of 3M, 2F actors with doubling)

SERENA FOX, 20's, forensics science student, African American

JOSH McCAFFREY, 20's, student actor, white (1)

TOM KELLETT, 50's, college professor, white (2)

CHIKU HOLMES, 20's, friend of Serena, African American (3)

DAVID WALKER, 34, abolitionist, African American

THOMAS JEFFERSON (2)

TV HOST (2)

WHITE MALE STUDENT (1)

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT (3)

(1) Can be played by the same actor

(2) Should be played by the same actor

(3) Can be played by the same actor

TIME

The present

SETTING

Most of the action of the play takes place in the living room/kitchen of Serena's and Josh's apartment in Boston, Massachusetts. There are also scenes, requiring minimal representation, in a college classroom, a faculty office, a cemetery, and a TV studio.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

A college classroom. At rise, a lively discussion is in progress in a class on the "History and Development of Racism." The professor, TOM KELLETT, leans casually against the front of his desk with a small pile of books beside him. He faces three STUDENTS. One of them is SERENA FOX. The others are a BLACK FEMALE STUDENT and a WHITE MALE STUDENT.

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT

....so it seems to me that he was kind of a tortured soul.

WHITE MALE STUDENT

Jefferson?

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT

Yeah.

WHITE MALE STUDENT

He was conflicted because he was invested in the system.

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT

No, see, I think it's more than that. I think the guy was serious. He had to be. I mean, he proposed emancipation in Virginia as early as...whenever it was –

WHITE MALE STUDENT

1769.

FEMALE STUDENT

And when he was president, he signed a bill abolishing the slave trade. And yet, you know, big contradiction, he owned six hundred slaves in his lifetime.

WHITE MALE STUDENT

He couldn't afford not to.

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT

Oh right, if it wasn't for his debts, he would have freed them all.

KELLETT
You think so?

FEMALE STUDENT
(With a laugh)
No!

WHITE MALE STUDENT
No, because....
(He checks himself)

KELLETT
Go ahead.

WHITE MALE STUDENT
Okay, we don't know what was in his head. But we do know what Thomas Jefferson did. He supported the American Colonization Society and that whole project – set up a new colony in Africa and send all the free blacks there because they're inferior and they don't belong in this white Christian nation. I mean, that to me speaks volumes.

KELLETT
Any other thoughts? Serena?

SERENA FOX shakes her head.

Well, we have to leave it there for now. Thank you all. Next week we'll take a look at David Walker. Who was....? Anyone?

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT
A football coach at Pitt.

KELLETT
And I thought I was the king of sports trivia. No, this David Walker did not coach linebackers, he did not drive racing cars, and he did not play a mean blues guitar with Fleetwood Mac, although he was kind of a rock star of his time for black folks.

He picks up three copies of a book on his desk and hands one to each of the three students.

This David Walker was born a free black man in North Carolina in about 1796, spent his most influential years in...?

WHITE MALE STUDENT

Boston?

KELLETT

The very same. From 1824 until his death in 1830. He was quite a guy – abolitionist, community leader, public intellectual, political visionary, Christian millennialist. And he wrote this.

(Indicates the book)

Your next reading assignment. The title, *Serena*, if you please.

SERENA

“David Walker’s Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World”.

KELLETT

An appeal to rise up and cast off their chains, psychological as well as physical. An excoriation of white Christian hypocrites – Mister Walker even calls out our friend Thomas Jefferson in no uncertain terms. And one of the most important social and political documents of the nineteenth century. Not just in my humble opinion: I’m glad to say that many of my fellow historians have now finally seen the light. This little pamphlet was a spark that fired the abolitionist movement. And radicalized it. It’s also been a powerful source of inspiration for generations of black leaders – Frederick Douglass, Maria Stewart, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and on and on. And today? Well...see what you think. Until next week.

KELLETT and the two STUDENTS pack up their things. They exit. SERENA lingers, reading the book.

Lights fade.

ACT ONESCENE TWO

Several days later. Evening. The living room and adjacent open kitchen area of Serena's and Josh's small apartment. SERENA enters slowly. She's engrossed in reading Walker's "Appeal". A book bag is slung across her shoulder.

SERENA

Josh?

There's no response. She lets the bag fall to the floor and tosses her house keys onto the coffee table. She sits on the couch and continues reading. After a long moment, she gets up, puts down the book, and crosses to the refrigerator. She pulls out a carton of eggs, which she sets on the counter, alongside a mixing bowl. She hesitates. Despite herself, she feels compelled to return to the couch and the Appeal, which she does. She reads aloud, as if to an audience.

SERENA

"Men of colour, who are also of sense, for you particularly is my Appeal designed. Our more ignorant brethren are not able to penetrate its value. I call upon you therefore to cast your eyes upon the wretchedness of your brethren, and to do your utmost to enlighten them—"

She pauses and looks around, as if she's heard a noise; then continues.

"Do any of you say that you and your family are free and happy and what have you—?"

Again, she pauses, listens, resumes reading.

"—What have you to do with the wretched slaves and other people? Look into our freedom and happiness, and see of what kind they are composed!! They are of the very lowest kind, they are the very dregs!—they are the most servile and abject kind, that ever a people was in possession of!"

VOICE OF DAVID WALKER

“May God have mercy on your freedom and happiness!”

Startled, SERENA looks around her. At the same moment, JOSH McCAFFREY enters.

JOSH

Hey.

SERENA

Right on cue.

JOSH

What?

SERENA

That line.

JOSH

What line?

SERENA

What you just said.

JOSH

Hey?

SERENA

“May God have mercy on your freedom and happiness.”

JOSH

Likewise.

SERENA

You didn't say that?

JOSH

No, but you heard it?

SERENA

In my head. I guess. It's a prayer – part of a prayer. Something we used say in church when I was a kid. I was thinking about my Mom. Loose association.

Are you okay?
JOSH

Yeah, I'm fine.
SERENA

You sure?
JOSH

Yes.
SERENA

Hey.
JOSH

Hey.
SERENA

They kiss.

I am starving.
JOSH

He goes to the kitchen area and grabs a jar of peanuts from a closet and a beer from the refrigerator. SERENA returns to reading the Appeal.

You won't believe what he did today.

Who?
SERENA

Paulius The Genius.
JOSH

Oh, your director.
SERENA

JOSH
(As he eats and drinks)
The Lithuanian maestro. We yelled nursery rhymes at each other for forty minutes – well, it felt like forty minutes. Be loud, be angry, be joyful. Be obtuse. Be existential. It was like we were in some kind of Meisner kindergarten. He calls it “emotional kundalini”. Talk about an insult to

JOSH (CONT.)

yoga. And then he wants us to use it in the gravedigger scene. We all look at each other, like: Al Pacino!

SERENA

Pacino?

JOSH

In Boston, in his early days, I told you about this.

SERENA

I don't think so.

JOSH

Okay, well, Pacino is in *Mother Courage* playing multiple minor parts—Spear Carrier Number Two, Citizen Number Six, whatever—and he's backstage, waiting to go on, and it's Brecht, right, and he turns to one of the other actors, and he says: "Do you have any idea what the fuck you're doing?" That was us today. We didn't have a clue and we were freaked. For no good reason, I mean, we've barely touched the text, we open in three weeks, and it's only Hamlet, it's only a showcase, it's only our future as theatre "artistes" on the line. What's this?

(Beat. She is absorbed in her reading)

Hello? Earth to Serena.

SERENA

I'm sorry, what?

JOSH

These eggs?

SERENA

What about them?

JOSH

You have a plan for them?

SERENA

I thought maybe a Spanish omelet.

JOSH

Great. And a monster salad. Let's see...

(He pulls items from the fridge)

We got romaine, we got tomatoes, we got cukes....Where's the feta? Did we finish the feta?

SERENA
David Walker.

JOSH
What?

SERENA
Does that name mean anything to you?

JOSH
(Searching the fridge, finding the cheese)
David... Walker... Yes! I knew we had some left.

SERENA
What do you know about him?

JOSH
A legend in his own time.

SERENA
And?

JOSH
(Starting to prepare the salad)
Did his best stuff with Savoy Brown, one of the great underrated British blues bands of the nineteen seventies. And that was *before* he joined Fleetwood Mac.

SERENA
I'm talking about the abolitionist.

JOSH
Oh this is your elective, right? What's it called again?

SERENA
The History and Development of Racism.

JOSH
How is it?

SERENA
Good. So you haven't heard of him?

JOSH
Nope. And of course I should have, right?

SERENA

You have got to read this. “Walker’s Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World”.

JOSH

A modest title.

SERENA

It’s like, it’s amazing, I mean...Okay, it’s 1829, in Boston. Walker is this community leader, and he comes out and says that slavery should end immediately. Like right now. It’d be like saying, no more cars or computers, we’re done. That’s how crazy radical it was.

JOSH

No shit.

SERENA

And this was a black man saying this, in public, in the 1820’s.

JOSH

Olives?

SERENA

(Brandishing the book)

And you know what he did? This is so cool.

JOSH

You want olives or no?

SERENA

Sure. Okay, so Walker runs a used clothing store in Boston, that’s how he makes his living. A lot of his customers are black sailors who work on ships going south down the coast. He sews copies of this thing into the lining of the clothes he sells to them. When they reach port – in North Carolina or Georgia or wherever – these guys smuggle the pamphlets ashore and pass them to other blacks who distribute them through their own underground networks all across the South. That way thousands of slaves get exposed to this stuff.

JOSH

That is cool. Wow.

SERENA

And what he says in here! It’s like...I mean, imagine the scene, okay: you’re a slave. One night you come to this secret gathering outside of the plantation, the only light is a couple of flickering torches, and you sit there

SERENA (CONT.)

in the dark and you listen to these words for the very first time – words that take your breath away and make your blood boil and your heart sing. And they're written by a black man. You can't read or write, it's a crime for you to learn or for anyone to teach you, but a black man, a free black man, wrote this.

JOSH

Yeah, I mean—

SERENA

(Suddenly thrusting the book at him)

Read it.

JOSH

I will.

SERENA

No, now.

JOSH

(In the middle of chopping vegetables)

Sweetie...

SERENA

Please.

JOSH

Okay.

SERENA

(Handing him a paper towel)

Out loud.

JOSH

Out loud?

SERENA

He wrote it to be read out loud.

JOSH

Oh right, because —

SERENA

(Handing him the book)

Top of the page.

JOSH

(Reading)

“I will ask one question here: Can our condition be any worse?—

SERENA

Bigger, you’re speaking to a crowd.

JOSH

(Orating)

“Can our condition be any worse? Can it be more mean and abject? If there are any changes, will they not be for the better though they may appear for the worst at first? Can they get us any lower? Where can they get us? They are afraid to treat us worse, for they know well, the day they do it, they are gone.”

SERENA holds up her hand. He stops.
She glances around, listening.

SERENA

Did you hear that?

JOSH

What?

SERENA

That scuffling sound.

JOSH

An existential mouse from Lithuania. What? What is it?

SERENA

Nothing, go ahead.

(Beat. He hesitates)

Read.

JOSH

“But against all accusations...” Sweetie, my blood sugar is like so—

SERENA

(Motioning him to continue)

“...which may or can be preferred against me...”

JOSH

“...I appeal to Heaven for my motive in writing—who knows that my object is, if possible, to awaken in the breasts of my afflicted, degraded and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness in this Republican Land of Liberty!”
Amen.

SERENA

Go on.

JOSH

(Handing the book back to her).
I gotta eat, I'm sorry. It's awesome, I mean, I can see why, you know...I'll take a look at it later.

He goes back to food prep, she to the book.
He chops, she reads.

Now that would be a great part.

SERENA

What?

JOSH

David Walker. Too bad I'm not right for it.

SERENA

(Absently)
Yeah.

JOSH

You're really into this Walker dude.

SERENA

(Putting aside the Appeal)
Oh God, I can't do this. I have got way too much stuff to do.

JOSH

When do I get to meet him?

She gives him a look. He crosses to her, and playfully tries pushing a stick of cucumber into her mouth. She turns away.

SERENA

No! Get outta here!

JOSH

Come on, you know you want it.

SERENA

Josh, stop! No! Josh.

JOSH persists until she concedes and grasps the cucumber between her teeth. He munches from the other end until his lips meet. They giggle. They kiss. They embrace lustily. The lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE THREE

The same. That night. A darkened stage. The distant sound of a police siren. SERENA enters in a robe. She switches on a lamp next to the couch. She picks up the Appeal, which is lying on the coffee table. She looks at it, hesitates, puts it back on the table. She takes a course book out of her book bag and settles herself on the couch. She starts to study. We hear her reading to herself from the course book.

SERENA (V.O.)

“...This gruesome identification epitomized the early work of forensic anthropologists: giving names to the dead through the study of variations in physical traits, especially the bones and teeth, which persisted long after the flesh fell away....”

The powerful voice of DAVID WALKER, speaking a passage from the Appeal, takes over in her head. She looks up, alarmed and confused.

THE VOICE OF DAVID WALKER

“....I pray that the Lord may undeceive my ignorant brethren, and permit them to throw away pretensions, and seek after the substance of learning. I would crawl on my hands and knees through mud and mire...

She determinedly drowns out WALKER by completing the passage out loud in her own voice. She surprises herself because she recites it as if from memory. As she speaks, JOSH enters, unseen, in his underpants and a T-shirt.

SERENA

“...To the feet of a learned man, where I would sit and humbly supplicate him to instill into me, that which neither devils nor tyrants could remove, only with my life. For coloured people to acquire learning in this country makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation.”

JOSH

What are you doing?

SERENA

Oh God! You scared me.

JOSH

I'm sorry. Sweetie, it's two o'clock in the morning.

SERENA

I know. I couldn't sleep. I thought I'd just, you know....

JOSH

How come you memorized that speech?

SERENA

I didn't.

JOSH

It sure sounded like it.

SERENA

I don't know, I've said it out loud a few times, I guess it stuck.

JOSH

You need to sleep.

SERENA

I know, but I'm kind of in the zone right now, and I have this paper due, so...

JOSH

On Walker?

SERENA

On the early history of forensics. I was just taking a break. I should get back to it.

JOSH

(Discouraging her)
Really?

SERENA

Yeah.

JOSH

O-kay.

He kisses her on the top of her head and exits to the bedroom. She sits still for a few moments, her eyes shifting from her course book to the Appeal and back. She can't resist. She picks up the Appeal and is instantly re-engaged. Again, as she reads, she hears WALKER in her head, speaking the words of the Appeal. This time she surrenders, and listens attentively.

THE VOICE OF DAVID WALKER

What can the American preachers and people take God to be? Did not God make us all as it seemed best to himself? What right, then, has one of us to despise another, and to treat him cruel, on account of his colour, which none but the God who made it can alter? Can there be a greater absurdity in nature, and particularly in a free republican country?

The lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE FOUR

The same. The next morning. Lights up on DAVID WALKER who sits on the couch reading the Appeal. He's wearing clothes typical of what he was: the owner of a small-time used clothing store in early nineteenth century Boston. JOSH enters, half-dressed, with the script of "Hamlet" in hand. He's running late and is full of nervous energy. As he finishes dressing, he recites lines rapidly to himself. WALKER is invisible to him.

JOSH

"Fie upon't! foh!—About, my brain! I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul, that presently...

He scans the floor for his shoes. He spots them beneath the coffee table, and stretches past the unseen WALKER to retrieve them.

They have proclaim'd their malefactions;
For murder...for murder...Shit!

He checks the script.

Though it have no tongue will speak with most miraculous organ.

Continuing to recite lines, JOSH goes to the kitchen and opens the fridge. He pulls out a carton of orange juice and takes a swig.

For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these
Players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle."

(He glances at his watch)

Oh God.

JOSH grabs a banana from a basket on the kitchen counter and exits hurriedly.
WALKER returns to reading the Appeal.
SERENA, dressed in her robe, shuffles in.
She starts to make coffee. She doesn't immediately see WALKER, although, unlike JOSH, she can. Finally, she turns and sees him.

SERENA

Jesus!

WALKER

Please do not take the Lord's name in vain.

SERENA

Who are you?

WALKER

Forgive me, my name is David Walker. I am delighted to make your acquaintance.

SERENA

(Ignoring his outstretched hand)

Let me guess. Another stupid Lithuanian game.

WALKER

I beg your pardon?

SERENA

Josh!

WALKER

He just left.

SERENA

JOSH!

(To WALKER)

Why do you people do this shit? You think it's like cutting-edge to invade someone's house and freak them out?

WALKER

Young lady, you invited me.

SERENA

What are you talking about?

WALKER

I have come here at your invitation.

(Beat.)

SERENA

Get the fuck out of here right now.

WALKER

I beg you. Profanity is more than an insult to God—

SERENA

Now!

WALKER doesn't move. SERENA grabs a kitchen knife and wields it menacingly.

I'm going to count to three and then I'm going to call the cops. One...

WALKER

(In full orator mode, quoting from the Appeal)

"They know that their infernal deeds of cruelty will be made known to the world.

SERENA

Two....

WALKER

"Do you suppose one man of good sense and learning would submit himself, his father, mother, wife, and children, to be slaves to a wretched man like himself, who, instead of compensating him for his labours, chains, hand-cuffs and beats him and his family almost to death, leaving life enough in them, however, to work for, and call him master? No! no! he would cut his devilish throat from ear to ear, and well do slave-holders know it. The bare name of educating the coloured people scares our cruel oppressors almost to death."

(Beat.)

SERENA

You certainly know your lines.

WALKER

(Indicating his copy of the Appeal)

I should, I wrote them.

SERENA

So you... what? You do this in schools and libraries and stuff?

WALKER

Let's just say that I try to be true to myself whenever I make an appearance.

(He gestures to her to put down the knife)

Would you mind...?

SERENA hesitates. She places the knife on the counter.

SERENA

Who are you?

WALKER

I told you. My name is David Walker.

She stares at him, unsure of her reality.

SERENA

You have to leave.

WALKER

You asked to see me.

SERENA

Just go, okay?

He doesn't move. A pause. He studies her.

What do you want with me?

(Beat, still no response)

Look, the Appeal is a reading assignment for this class I'm taking. That's all.

(Beat. She struggles to hold it together)

I did not ask to see you.

WALKER smiles and advances towards her, as if to comfort her. She backs away.

Don't touch me!

WALKER stops.

