

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, early 20's, forensics science student, African American

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

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

CHIKU HOLMES, mid 20's, cousin 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

1979

SETTING

Most of the action of the play takes place in the living room/kitchen of Serena's and Josh's small apartment in the Allston/Brighton section of 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

That was it.

WHITE MALE STUDENT

You mean—?

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT

By the 1790’s, Jefferson had stopped talking about emancipation.

WHITE MALE STUDENT

The four percent discovery.

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT

Four percent profit on the birth of slave children. He was making more money from slaves than tobacco or wheat.

KELLETT

Okay. But what values informed his economic calculation?

WHITE MALE STUDENT

He was a racist.

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT

Well, yeah, but –

WHITE MALE STUDENT

He owned six hundred slaves in his lifetime. He had ten-year-old boys whipped.

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT

(To KELLETT)

But you're talking about ideology, right? His rationale? I mean, look at the American Colonization Society –

WHITE MALE STUDENT

Exactly –

Exactly

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT

Thomas Jefferson supported that whole project. Let's set up a new colony in Africa and send all the free blacks there because they're inferior. They don't belong in this white Christian nation.

KELLETT

Serena, any thoughts?

SERENA FOX shakes her head.

Are you okay?

SERENA nods, unconvincingly.

KELLETT

Look, what happened in Charlestown yesterday was tragic and heartbreaking. We can only hope that it doesn't.... trigger another cycle.

WHITE MALE STUDENT

I'm sorry, what are we talking about?

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT

A black kid was shot by a white sniper from a rooftop in the projects. He was playing football.

WHITE MALE STUDENT

Jesus. Did he...?

SERENA

His name is Darryl Williams. He's in the hospital. He's fifteen. He may never walk again.

(Beat.)

KELLETT

This is not a good place to end, but I'm afraid we are out of time. We'll come back to this when we look at the busing crisis in historical context. But next week we are going to turn our attention to a gentleman by the name of David Walker. Who was....? Anyone?

BLACK FEMALE STUDENT

A quarterback for Texas A&M.

KELLETT

And I thought I was the king of sports trivia. No, this David Walker did not hurl pigskin, he did not drive racing cars, he did not play guitar with Fleetwood Mac. Although he was kind of a rock star of his time for black folks. He was born a free black man in North Carolina in about 1797 but spent his most influential years in...?

WHITE MALE STUDENT

Boston?

KELLETT

Right here in Boston. He was quite a guy—abolitionist, community leader, public intellectual, political visionary, Christian millennialist. And he wrote this.

He picks up three copies of a book from the table and hands one to each student.

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 – he even calls out our friend Thomas Jefferson in no uncertain terms. And now belatedly recognized as one of the most important social and political documents of the nineteenth century. This little pamphlet was a spark. A spark that fired and radicalized the abolitionist movement. And its words and its author have 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. Read, digest, and ponder. See you next week.

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

Lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE 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.

She hesitates, looks around, as if she's heard something. She continues.

"Do any of you say that you and your family are free and happy and what have you to do with the wretched slaves and other people?"

Beat. Again, she listens, uncertain, then resumes reading aloud.

"—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

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

JOSH

Likewise.

SERENA

You didn't say that?

JOSH

No. Are you okay?

SERENA

Fine. I just, er...

JOSH

What?

SERENA

Nothing.

JOSH

No, what?

SERENA

It's...part of a prayer we used to say in church when I was a kid. I was thinking about my Mom. Loose association.

JOSH

Hey.

SERENA

Hey.

They kiss.

JOSH

I am starving.

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.

SERENA

Who?

JOSH

Paulius The Genius. The Lithuanian maestro?

SERENA

Oh, your director.

JOSH

(As he eats and drinks)

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

SERENA

Al Pacino?

JOSH

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

SERENA

I don't think so.

JOSH

I did. Anyway, so 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

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

(He pulls items from the fridge)

We got romaine, we got tomatoes, we got cukes, we got peppers, we got ...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 last five years. 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

Right.

SERENA

Well—

JOSH

That kid last week. Just so random. And the three guys they arrested said they were shooting pigeons?

(Seeing her emotional reaction)

Oh God, I'm sorry, I —

SERENA

So you haven't heard of him?

JOSH

Who?

SERENA

David Walker.

Obviously I should have.

JOSH

SERENA

You have got to read this.

JOSH

What is it?

SERENA

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

JOSH

A modest title.

SERENA

It’s amazing, I mean...Okay, it’s 1829, in Boston. Walker is this abolitionist leader, this community leader, and he comes out and says that slavery should end immediately. Right now. It’d be like saying, no more cars, no more telephones, boom, that’s it.

JOSH

Radical.

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. 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 – thousands – get exposed to this stuff.

JOSH

Far out.

SERENA

And what he says in here! I mean, imagine the scene, okay? You're a slave. One night you go to this secret gathering outside of the plantation.

JOSH

(Motioning to her to hand him a bowl)

Can you, er...?

SERENA

(Handing him the bowl)

The only light is a couple of flickering torches, and you sit there in the dark and 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 yourself, and it's a crime for you to learn or for anyone to teach you, but a black man, a free black man, wrote this!

(Thrusting the book at him)

Read it.

JOSH

I will.

SERENA

Now.

JOSH

Babe, I'm kind of—

SERENA

Now. Please.

JOSH

Okay, I guess I could make a start—

SERENA

Out loud.

JOSH

Out loud?

SERENA

He wrote it to be read aloud.

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

“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.

What?

SERENA

Did you hear that?

JOSH

What?

SERENA

That scuffling sound.

JOSH

An existential mouse from Lithuania?

SERENA

Never mind.

JOSH

What? What is it?

SERENA

Go ahead.

(Beat. He hesitates, puzzled)

Read!

JOSH

“But against all accusations...” You know what, my blood sugar is just—

SERENA

“...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!”

A-men.

SERENA

Go on.

JOSH

Baby, I gotta eat, okay? I’ll get back to it later.

He hands her back the book. He returns to food prep, she to the Appeal. 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

Yeah.

JOSH

You're really into this Walker dude.

SERENA

(Putting aside the Appeal, and delving into her bookbag)
Oh God, I can't do this. I have got way too much work to do.

JOSH

When do I get to meet him?

She gives him a look. He starts playfully caressing her. She offers token resistance.

SERENA

What are you doing? Get outta here...Josh...I thought you said you were starving.

JOSH

I am.

SERENA

Josh...

She giggles and surrenders. They kiss lustily. He takes her hand and they exit, headed for the bedroom.

The lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE THREE

The same. That night. A darkened stage. The distant sound of a police siren. SERENA enters dressed 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—

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

WALKER (V.O.)

“....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. He’s in his PJ’s.

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

That was Walker, right? That speech?

SERENA

Yes.

JOSH

You have it down.

SERENA

I wasn't...I was just messing around.

JOSH

Human beings need sleep in order to function.

SERENA

I know, but I'm kind of on a roll right now, and I have this paper due, so...

JOSH

On Walker?

SERENA

On the early history of forensics.

JOSH

Serena—

SERENA

I have to do this.

JOSH

O-kay. But watch out.

SERENA

What?

JOSH

(Making a mouse face and a running motion with his fingers)
Rodentus Lithuanus.

He 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.

DAVID WALKER (V.O.)

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 1820's 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 cool. You think it's
cutting-edge to invade someone's house and freak them out?

WALKER

Young lady, you invited me.

SERENA

Sure I did.

WALKER

I am here at your invitation.

SERENA

Get the fuck out of here right now.

WALKER

I beg you, profanity is more than an insult to God –

SERENA

(Grabbing a kitchen knife and wielding it menacingly)
NOW!

WALKER does not move.

I'm going to count to three and then I'm calling 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. He studies her. A moment.

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. I did not ask to see you.

WALKER smiles and advances towards her. She backs away.

Get away from me!

WALKER stops.

WALKER

I can assure you, Miss Fox, I mean you no harm.

SERENA

How do you know my name?

WALKER

What do you think of it?

SERENA

What?

WALKER

(Holding up the Appeal)

My Appeal.

SERENA

I don't know.

WALKER

But you have read it?

SERENA

Yes.

WALKER

So you must have formed an opinion.

SERENA

It's good, it's...it's strong.

WALKER

Strong?

SERENA

Powerful.

WALKER

What about the style? I understand that style counts for a great deal these days.

SERENA

I guess.

WALKER

I must say it does strike me now as somewhat pedantic. All that rhetorical flourish.

SERENA

That was how you talked back then.

WALKER

Even so.

SERENA

It still packs a punch.

WALKER

I beg your pardon?

SERENA

Impact, it has a strong....Oh God.

She turns away. A slight pause.

WALKER

Miss Fox, you possess an inquiring mind, and you are engaged in a most important field of study.

SERENA

Please leave.

WALKER

Forensic science.

SERENA

Please!

WALKER

The science of truth.

A moment. She covers her eyes, as if willing him to disappear. When she removes her hands, he's gone.

The lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE FIVE

The scruffy campus office of TOM KELLETT. Three days later. KELLETT enters hurriedly with a briefcase, which he lays on his desk. He opens it and – in what is obviously a regular ritual – takes out, one by one, a small radio, a bottle of beer, and a small bag of corn chips. He switches on the radio, and we hear the voice of a news reader.

NEWS READER (V.O.)

Leaders of Boston's black community appealed for calm again today while Mayor Kevin White—

KELLETT spins the dial to tune into the live broadcast of a Boston Red Sox game. He finds the station and, munching chips, starts to listen with rapt attention to the game.

RADIO COMMENTATOR (V.O.)

We're in the eighth, a tied game. A great chance for the Red Sox here. They have runners at the corners, nobody out.

There's a knock on the door.

Gossage sets....

Another knock. Reluctantly, KELLETT turns off the radio and stashes the chips and beer out of sight.

KELLETT

Come!

SERENA enters.

SERENA

Professor Kellett?

KELLETT

Yes?

SERENA

I'm Serena Fox. Your History of Racism class?

KELLETT

Yes Serena.

SERENA

Could I speak to you for a moment?

KELLETT

Sure. Come in, take a seat.

SERENA hesitates. The chair in front of her is covered with stacks of papers.

Move that stuff anywhere. On the floor is fine.

SERENA shifts the papers onto the floor and sits down.

What can I do for you?

SERENA

It's about David Walker.

KELLETT

You read the Appeal.

SERENA

Yes.

KELLETT

And?

SERENA

Well, at first I couldn't get into it. I mean, to be honest, it seemed kind of a mess – no real structure, repetitive, kind of all over the place, and then, I realized: it's a speech. The whole thing is a speech!

(Beat)

KELLETT

And?

SERENA

And the stuff he says! Things that black people back then must have been thinking and feeling all their lives and would have been killed for saying in public. I mean, he's just, you know, out there, I mean, he lays it all out – the barbarity, the evil, the hypocrisy—

KELLETT

Yes.

SERENA

—And in historical context! How slavery in America is worse than ancient Rome or Egypt or Sparta...And his charisma, I mean, my God, you can feel it, you can...! He's like some Old Testament prophet up there on the mountaintop booming away with all this rage and righteous certainty, because he knows and you had better listen up because...I'm sorry, I...

KELLETT

No, no, it's fine. People have strong reactions to Walker.

SERENA

You know what? I'll come back another time. You're busy and... I'll call, make an appointment.

KELLETT

As you wish.

SERENA

Thank you. Thanks.

SERENA exits. KELLETT pulls out the chips and beer and reaches to switch the radio back on. SERENA reappears. He hastily conceals his goodies again.

SERENA

I'm sorry. I really have to talk to you.

KELLETT

Fire away.

SERENA

Okay, well, er...it's just that...This is kind of embarrassing.

KELLETT

Serena, I've been teaching this course for thirteen years. I think I've pretty much heard it all.

SERENA

Have you ever seen David Walker's ghost?

KELLETT

That is a first.

SERENA

So you haven't?

KELLETT

No.

SERENA

What about your students?

KELLETT

Not that I'm aware.

SERENA

It's just that when you're reading him, he's this presence. You know? Like he's right there speaking directly to you.

KELLETT

I know what you mean.

SERENA

And the fact that he's this giant, this hero.

KELLETT

He's certainly one of my heroes.

SERENA

Right.

KELLETT

Have you seen him?

SERENA

Have I seen David Walker? Do I look like someone who believes in ghosts?

KELLETT

I believe in ghosts.

SERENA

You do?

KELLETT

Metaphorical ghosts.

SERENA

Yeah, but I mean, what would David Walker's metaphorical ghost be doing here anyway?

KELLETT

Good question. We'll discuss it in class on Tuesday.

SERENA

Great. That'd be great.

SERENA starts to exit.

I'll see you then. Bye.

She pivots back.

Unfinished business!

KELLETT

Excuse me?

SERENA

What David Walker has come back for, or never left because of. Metaphorically speaking.

KELLETT

I'm not sure I follow.

SERENA

They say that ghosts haunt houses because there's something unresolved that they have to take care of before they can move on or cross over or whatever.

KELLETT

Slavery?

SERENA

No, no, because then we'd have Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass and all the others running around scaring the shit out of everyone.

KELLETT

Of course.

SERENA

Excuse my language.

KELLETT

Serena—

SERENA

It's a personal thing, it has to be. Something that connects him—metaphorically—to other people. Oh God, I'm sorry, you must think I'm a total wacko. It's just that he's so...so....

KELLETT

Real.

SERENA

Yes!

KELLETT

An iconic figure, larger than life, we'll explore that, too.

SERENA

How did he die?

KELLETT

What?

SERENA

I mean, he was only thirty-four.

KELLETT

He died of consumption. Tuberculosis. Officially.

SERENA

Officially?

KELLETT

Yes.

SERENA

So what, there was some unofficial...? I mean—

KELLETT

There was a belief in the black community that Walker was murdered.

SERENA

Murdered?

KELLETT

Poisoned. It is entirely unsubstantiated.

SERENA

Who by?

KELLETT

An urban myth.

SERENA

But who do they say did it?

KELLETT

Southern planters. Walker was dangerous, he was inciting slaves to revolt, so they had him killed. Serena—

SERENA

It makes sense.

KELLETT

Except that, inconveniently, there is nothing in the historical record to suggest foul play.

SERENA

But you said a lot of people believed it —

KELLETT

(Overlapping)

And consumption as a cause of death is quite plausible. It was rampant in Boston at that time, and Walker's infant daughter had succumbed to it only a few days before. I'm afraid I have to cut this short.

SERENA

Of course, I'm sorry. Do you have anything I can read?

She exits. KELLETT quickly returns to the game and his corn chips. WALKER, curious, listens with him.

RADIO COMMENTATOR (V.O.)

Bottom of the ninth, bases empty, two out. Here it is, the three-two pitch. And Rice hits a long fly ball to deep center... That ball is.... gone! A walk-off homer for Jim Rice! Sox win!

KELLETT

(Jumping up, fists pumping)
YES!! YES!!

WALKER observes this ebullient behavior with puzzled calm.

The lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE SIX

The living room/kitchen of the apartment.
Two weeks later. Evening. SERENA and
JOSH are in tense conversation.

SERENA

I'm a little stressed, that's all.

JOSH

You've been talking to a dead man.

SERENA

I had an imaginary encounter.

JOSH

Three. Three encounters in the last ten days. That's what you told me.

SERENA

Look, it wasn't like—

JOSH

And you talked with him, you had conversations.

SERENA

So?

JOSH

So it's weird.

SERENA

It is not weird.

JOSH

It's weird.

SERENA

It's all in my head, okay?

JOSH

Okay, but it's still weird.

SERENA

Look, it's not like I'm going crazy. What? You think I'm going crazy?

JOSH

No, but we can't just...we can't ignore it.

SERENA

What do you mean? All kinds of shit happens when you're stressed – nightmares, visions. Hallucinations. You're an actor, you imagine stuff all the time.

JOSH

I don't confuse acting with real life.

SERENA

Oh right.

JOSH

Okay, fine, but let's say I told you that I'd just had a beer with Hamlet? That we'd discussed, I don't know, remodeling the kitchen at Elsinore?

SERENA

I'd say, go with bright colors.

JOSH

Of course you would. Look—

SERENA

Baby, this is not complicated, okay? My schedule's insane, I'm totally fried, and my overloaded brain has strayed into some weird other reality. That's it, it's not...I'm fine. Really. I'm fine.

(Beat)

JOSH

You're obsessed with him.

SERENA

What?

JOSH

David Walker. It's twenty-four-seven.

SERENA

Oh please—

JOSH

It's true. You're either reading the Appeal for the twentieth time, or some book about him, or you're doing research in the library—

SERENA

Look, I know—

JOSH

(Overlapping)

You don't do anything else. You don't work out anymore, you don't see friends, you don't answer the phone, and we don't...I mean, when did we last go to the movies? When did we last...? I mean....

SERENA

I'm sorry. I'm sorry if it's hard for you.

JOSH

It's like nothing else matters.

SERENA

Baby, I'm fascinated, okay? I'm excited. I've just discovered this whole piece of history that I knew nothing about.

JOSH

No, I know—

SERENA

This extraordinary guy who no one's heard of who wrote this amazing stuff, and this vibrant and dynamic black community that existed on Beacon Hill. I mean, people walk through there every day, and they don't have a clue. I didn't. And I want to know. I want know about Walker and the Appeal and what he did and...and...what it all meant. What is wrong with that?

JOSH

Nothing. It's great.

SERENA

Yeah?

JOSH

Yeah. It's cool.

SERENA

You are so sweet.

She kisses him lightly and sits down with her book. JOSH tidies the room. She offers him a bite of her Snickers bar. He shakes his head. She takes a bite.

JOSH

Your Mom called again.

SERENA

Oh yeah?

JOSH

She really needs to talk to you.

SERENA

Huh-huh.

(Beat.)

JOSH

Did he say why he'd come to see you?

SERENA

Jesus!

JOSH

Did he?

SERENA

I don't want to talk about it, okay?

JOSH

Even though it's no big deal.

The phone rings. SERENA answers it.

Hey Mom. I'm good. Look, I'm in the middle of something right now, can I...? Great. I'll call you then. Love you, bye.

(She ends the call. A pause.)

He said I'd asked to see him.

JOSH

Why?

SERENA

How would I know?

Revenge!

JOSH

What?

SERENA

When the ghost of Hamlet's father appears on the castle wall—

JOSH

Oh God—

SERENA

(Overlapping)
He says to Hamlet:

JOSH

(Overlapping)
Josh—

SERENA

Your uncle poisoned me to steal my crown, and you are going to avenge me.

JOSH

(Overlapping)
Josh—

SERENA

If Walker was poisoned, maybe he wants you—

JOSH

STOP!

SERENA

Okay! It was just an idea.

JOSH

Well it's stupid.
(Beat.)
I'm sorry, I didn't mean....

SERENA

It's okay.

JOSH

SERENA

No, it's not okay—

JOSH

It's okay. How about we do something Friday night? Like dinner?

SERENA

Sure.

JOSH

Maybe that new Vietnamese place.

SERENA

Sounds good.

JOSH

(Glancing at his watch)

Speaking of restaurants, I gotta go. Got a shift before rehearsal. I love you.

He kisses her.

SERENA

Love you, too.

He exits. SERENA reaches for the last of her Snickers bar, but thinks better of it. WALKER appears. He watches her for a moment, unseen. She looks at the candy bar again. She capitulates and takes a large bite.

WALKER

So good and so bad.

SERENA

(Moving away from him)

Oh God.

WALKER

I had a weakness for candy, too.

SERENA

Why are you here?

WALKER

Mister McCaffrey is a charming young man.

SERENA

Why?

WALKER

With a very fertile imagination.

SERENA

Why do you keep showing up?

(Beat. He does not respond.)

I did not ask to see you. You know that.

WALKER

Miss Fox, allow me to explain something to you. In my time, our faith was unshakeable—those of us who believed. We believed that if all white Americans were to renounce and make heartfelt repentance for the sin of slavery, and if all black Americans were to work with courage and persistence to cast off their degradation and oppression, then the promise of America—liberty, equality, learning, boundless opportunity—might finally be realized, and together we could yet be the Almighty's righteous instruments and inaugurate His blessed Kingdom here on Earth. Now is that still possible?

SERENA

You're asking me? What do I know?

WALKER

More than you think. More than you imagine.

SERENA

What do you want from me?

WALKER

Miss Fox, it is what you want that is important.

SERENA

What do you mean?

WALKER

What you value, what you are willing to fight for, in His holy name, regardless of the personal cost – that is what is important. Would you not agree?

SERENA

I guess. In principle.

WALKER

So what is it that you want?

SERENA

What do I want?

WALKER

In your life?

SERENA

Mister Walker, with all due respect, I...I don't know, I want what everybody wants – love, happiness, kids, security, peace, harmony.

WALKER

Justice?

SERENA

Sure.

WALKER

Anything else?

SERENA

I want to take care of my Mom. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her.

WALKER

Most commendable. Anything else?

(Beat.)

Come now, Miss Fox, I know you to be a person of ambition.

SERENA

Skydiving.

WALKER

Skydiving?

SERENA

It's a sport. I've always wanted to try it. You jump out of a plane – an airplane? – with a parachute, which is... It's like flying. You fly.

WALKER

Fly?

SERENA

Free as a bird.

WALKER

As a bird?

SERENA

It's a figure of speech.

WALKER

And professionally?

SERENA

Professionally?

WALKER

What do you hope to accomplish in your chosen profession?

SERENA

Well, I want to be successful. Obviously.

WALKER

A brilliant forensics investigator who exposes the truth and brings thieves and tyrants and murderers to justice before God.

SERENA

Is this about your death?

(He does not respond.)

Were you assassinated?

Again, no response. SERENA sits down on the couch and covers her eyes. WALKER observes her for a moment, and then disappears.

That's okay, because I don't really want to know.

CHIKU HOLMES enters with a traveling bag.

And you've got the wrong person, trust me, I'm not who you think I am. I mean, I'm honored to meet you and everything, but whatever it is you want, I can't help you, okay? Please leave me alone. Please.

A slight pause. SERENA slowly uncovers her eyes. She looks up. She's relieved that WALKER is gone and surprised to see CHIKU. Her face lights up with pleasure.

Chiku!

SERENA

She falls into her cousin's arms.

CHIKU

Hey, hey, hey, what's going on?

SERENA

How did you get in?

CHIKU

You sent me a key.

SERENA

I did?

CHIKU

Come visit any time, cuz, that's what you said.

SERENA

Yeah, I did, didn't I? And here you are. Oh my God, girl, it is so good to see you. What happened? Did something happen?

CHIKU

He left.

SERENA

Oh no, really? I am so sorry.

CHIKU

Big surprise, right? I mean, you know my pattern. Three good years, and then it all goes to shit in a hurricane.

SERENA

How's Rashida doing?

CHIKU

Fine. I mean, you know, but she's good, she's busy, doing well in school. You got my pictures, right?

SERENA

I did. She's beautiful. And she's gotten so tall, my God.

CHIKU

Yeah, before you know it. She's with her Aunt Lily right now. I needed a break. Thought I'd take me a few days' vacation time and come see my favorite cousin.

SERENA

And check up on me.

CHIKU

Your Mom did ask me, since I was coming. What's going on with you anyways?

SERENA

Oh, I'm sorry. You want something? Tea? Coffee?

CHIKU

I'll take a beer if you got one.

SERENA

(Crossing to the fridge to get the beer)
Someone is on vacation.

CHIKU

It's that white boy ain't it.

SERENA

His name is Josh, and we're fine.

CHIKU

Yeah? So who was you just talking to, The Invisible Man?

SERENA

(Handing her the beer)
David Walker.

CHIKU

The David Walker?

SERENA

Not the Fleetwood Mac guy.

CHIKU

Who? I thought you was talking about the abolitionist. Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World?

SERENA

You've heard of him?

CHIKU

You was just talking to David Walker?

SERENA

Maybe. I don't know.

CHIKU

You was talking to someone.

SERENA

We had a chat.

CHIKU

A chat?

SERENA

We've had a few chats.

CHIKU

You and David Walker?

SERENA

Yes.

CHIKU

Praise the Lord and pass the bourbon!

SERENA

The thing is—

CHIKU

What's he like?

SERENA

He's...well, he's...

CHIKU

Is he big tall and handsome with a voice like Paul Robeson? 'Cos that's how Grandma Ruby saw him. And she saw him, I mean, he was right there in the house with her every single day.

SERENA

Really?

CHIKU

You kidding me? He was the Man. Crusader! Fighter! True soldier of the Lord! Tell the truth and shame the devil!

SERENA

David Walker died in 1830.

CHIKU

Wait a minute. You just told him to get lost.

SERENA

Not exactly—

CHIKU

What's the matter with you, girl? Are you out of your mind?

SERENA

Possibly.

CHIKU

Oh Mister Walker, sir, you'll have to excuse me, sir, I'm kinda busy, I got class, I gotta do my laundry, I gotta watch The Incredible Hulk.

SERENA

He's dead!

CHIKU

So? I talk to Derek every day. Says the same damn fool thing he used to say to me every morning when we was kids. What's it like out? Like he still has to worry about the weather. David Walker! Damn! What's he want?

SERENA

I don't know.

CHIKU

You don't know?

SERENA

He said I asked to see him, but I didn't, how could I? How could I ask a dead man to do anything?

CHIKU

He's got a plan for you.

SERENA

What?

CHIKU

Oh yeah, David Walker got a plan for you, girl. And we gonna find out what it is.

Lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE SEVEN

A cemetery in South Boston. Several days later. Afternoon. Three or four headstones are visible. SERENA, JOSH and CHIKU enter. JOSH is nervous. SERENA holds a hand-drawn map.

JOSH

(Looking around nervously)
Five minutes, okay?

SERENA

So this is it. The Hawes Burying Ground.

CHIKU

It's real small.

JOSH

Where is it?

SERENA

(Consulting the map)
It's in the black section, which is...

JOSH

Can I see that?

SERENA

Hold on a minute, okay?

She moves to a spot a few feet away and indicates the ground in front of her.

This is it. This is plot number thirteen.

CHIKU

What do you mean? There's nothing here.

JOSH grabs the map from SERENA.

SERENA

Excuse me!

JOSH

(Scanning the map)
We don't have time, okay?

SERENA

Speak for yourself.

JOSH

We're in South Boston, for fuck's sake.
(Confirming the map location)
Yep, this is it. If it's right, I mean—

CHIKU

It's wrong, it's gotta be.

SERENA

He said I'd be disappointed.

CHIKU

Who?

SERENA

Professor Kellett. He made the map. He and some folks from the African Heritage Museum. They researched the whole thing.

JOSH

(Reading the inscriptions on the headstones)
We got a Kennedy here – surprise....Kirkpatrick ...Croston
...Costello....

CHIKU

No David Walker.

JOSH

No.

CHIKU

No, all he got is a raggedy-ass patch of grass and a pile of dog-do.

JOSH

It's not surprising.

CHIKU

What?

JOSH

No, I mean, he was poor, his family probably couldn't afford a headstone. Or maybe there was one and it fell apart or got stolen. It's been a hundred and fifty hundred years.

SERENA

David Walker is an American hero.

CHIKU

He should be.

SERENA

And here he is in an unmarked grave in a locked-up cemetery.

CHIKU

Yeah, what is up with that? You either climb the fence or get some dude from downtown to come open the gate?

JOSH

This is an historic site.

CHIKU

Exactly.

JOSH

No, I mean—

CHIKU

I know what you mean.
(Beat.)

JOSH

Well, we've seen what there is to see—

SERENA

A memorial.

CHIKU

What?

SERENA

We build a public memorial to David Walker right here.

CHIKU

Yeah. Yeah! Oh girl, that is, oh my God...

SERENA

First of its kind in the country.

CHIKU

In the world!

SERENA

Honoring the most important American you've never heard of.

CHIKU

Oh that's good, that's very good, I like that.

SERENA

And education.

CHIKU

You mean—?

SERENA

As part of the campaign. People don't know him. We have to tell his story.

CHIKU

Right.

SERENA

Materials, fact sheets—

CHIKU

And for all ages, not just, you know—

SERENA

A whole curriculum, K through 12, and a study guide for teachers.

CHIKU

Posters! We don't have a photo or nothing, but we can use quotes, you know, stuff he said.

SERENA

How is he relevant? How does David Walker speak to us today?

CHIKU

Oh, and you know what? Oh my God.

SERENA

What?

CHIKU

We make a film and put it out on videocassette. David Walker reading his Appeal.

SERENA

A famous actor.

CHIKU

Why not the man himself? I mean—

SERENA

Sidney Poitier!

CHIKU

You're kidding, right?

SERENA

He's a household name.

CHIKU

Sidney Poitier as David Walker?

SERENA

He's got poise, he's got presence—

CHIKU

He's polite.

JOSH

Can we continue this conversation elsewhere? I mean—

SERENA

Okay, okay, listen up! Here's what we do. Phase One of the David Walker Memorial Campaign: We form a committee, we build support, we develop promotional materials and the curriculum. Phase Two, we raise money and we build the memorial.

CHIKU

Sounds like a plan.

JOSH

Great. Can we go now?

CHIKU

You don't like it.

JOSH

I just want to get out of here before we get the shit beat out of us.

CHIKU

You don't like it.

JOSH

It's a great idea, okay? It's not a plan.

SERENA

You're right. It's not a plan, it's a vision. And we are going for it.

She and Chiku high-five.

JOSH

Fine.

He again starts to leave.

SERENA

Josh!

JOSH

We need to get out of here.

SERENA

I'm serious.

JOSH

I'm sorry, did I miss something here?

CHIKU

Probably.

JOSH

Okay. Just so I have this straight. We're going to build a monument to a radical Black abolitionist in South Boston. And we're going to raise thousands of dollars, and get permits, and organize design and construction, even though we have no time and no money and no connections and we've never done anything like this ever before.

SERENA

We'll get help.

JOSH

With police protection?

SERENA

People will want to be involved.

JOSH

Even if we build it, they'll tear it down, they'll rip it apart. Look, can we please —

CHIKU

What do you think he wants?

SERENA

What?

CHIKU

Mister Walker. What kind of monument? I mean, it could be a sculpture, it could be, you know—

SERENA

We can decide that later—

CHIKU

Ask him. Next time you see him. I mean, there ain't no sense raising a ton of money to build something he don't like, right?

SERENA

No, I guess not.

JOSH

You said—

SERENA

(Overlapping)
I know—

JOSH

It was all in your head.

SERENA

I thought it was, okay?

JOSH

How often? Once a week, twice a week, every day—?

SERENA

He's real.

JOSH

Real?

SERENA

David Walker is as a real to me as you are. I know that sounds strange but—

JOSH

I'm flattered. I think. Or maybe not, I don't know. What does it mean anyway?

CHIKU

(To JOSH)

It's a black thing.

JOSH

(To CHIKU)

Shut the fuck up.

CHIKU

Excuse me?

SERENA

Hey, guys, hey, hey, hey!

CHIKU

No one talks to me that way. No one.

SERENA

Josh, please apologize.
(Beat.)

JOSH

I apologize.

SERENA

(To CHIKU)

I need to talk with Josh for a while.

CHIKU

Yeah, you do. I'm going for ice-cream.

JOSH

You think that's a good idea?

CHIKU

What? You think I don't like ice-cream?

JOSH

No, I—

CHIKU

You listen to me, vanilla, and you listen good. She is not crazy, and you will not make her think she's crazy. You understand?

CHIKU exits.

SERENA

What are you doing?

JOSH

(Overlapping)

Why didn't you tell me?

SERENA

Because I knew how you'd react. Look, I don't understand what's happening, okay, but you have to trust me on this. Okay? I'm not scared, I'm not freaked out. It feels like...like this is a process—

JOSH

Process? What process?

SERENA

I don't know. But what I do know is that it's real important and we have to see it through.

(Beat.)

JOSH

Is this a religious thing? I mean, is he, you know, risen from the dead? I'm not trying to be cute, I'm just...

SERENA

It's spiritual.

JOSH

Spiritual?

SERENA

Like we share something profound...a sensibility...a...a...kinship.

JOSH

What do you talk about?

SERENA

Random stuff. He asks me about my life, my values. Plans for the future. He thinks you're charming.

JOSH

Really?

SERENA

"A charming young man with a very fertile imagination."

JOSH

Has he explained why he's doing this?

SERENA

No, I mean, I've tried to, you know...but he kind of talks in riddles. Metaphors.

JOSH

Is he physically there?

SERENA

Yes, but it's this dual reality. I'm in the present and the past at the same time.

JOSH

Okay.

SERENA

And the connection.

JOSH

Connection?

SERENA

I feel like I've known him all my life. No, I have. I know it. I have.
(Beat.)

JOSH

You need to see someone.

SERENA

Actually, I don't.

JOSH

Sweetie—

SERENA

This is what I need. This is healthy.

JOSH

Healthy?! How could this possibly be healthy?

SERENA

I don't know but that's not the point. It feels right. And it feels way overdue. Like the campaign.

JOSH

I think we need to take a step back.

SERENA

What do you mean?

JOSH

Let's go, okay? I mean, we are really pushing our luck here.

SERENA

I am not crazy.

JOSH

You have some stuff going on, okay? Can we at least acknowledge that? I mean, what you just told me about Walker, and now this campaign—

SERENA

What's wrong with it? It's ambitious, sure, but it's a kickass idea. I mean, think what we could do with it. Finally, finally, we get to give this man his due and share his story with the world.

JOSH

I can't participate.

SERENA

What?

JOSH

Unless you go see someone.

JOSH (CONT.)

(Beat.)

Serena, please, you need professional help.

SERENA

You've got rehearsal.

JOSH

Fuck rehearsal!

A moment. They both stand there. He turns and exits. She remains still. She collects herself. Then she kneels down and strokes the ground over Walker's grave. She hums a spiritual. The lights go down on her and come up on another part of the stage where DAVID WALKER is speaking words from the Appeal at a public meeting. SERENA continues to hum underneath WALKER's speech.

WALKER

If you are anxious to ascertain who I am, know the world, that I am one of the oppressed, degraded and wretched sons of Africa, rendered so by the avaricious and unmerciful, among the whites. If any wish to plunge me into the wretched incapacity of a slave, or murder me for the truth, know ye, that I am in the hand of God, and at your disposal. I count my life not dear unto me, but I am ready to be offered at any moment. For what is the use of living, when in fact I am dead. But remember, Americans, that as miserable, wretched, degraded and abject as you have made us in preceding, and in this generation, to support you and your families, that some of you whites on the continent of America, will yet curse the day that you ever were born. You want slaves, and you want us for your slaves! My colour will yet root some of you out of the very face of the earth!

The lights go down on WALKER, and come up again on SERENA in the cemetery. WALKER joins her there. She gestures at his bare gravesite.

SERENA

It is insulting.

WALKER

It is immaterial.

SERENA

But nothing, not even a name?

WALKER

Miss Fox, we have no cause to regret anonymity here on Earth. No one is anonymous in the eyes of God.

SERENA

So you don't want a memorial?

WALKER

As I said before, it is what you want that matters.

SERENA

And I want a memorial for you.

WALKER

Why?

SERENA

To honor you, to make people pay attention to what you said, your ideas, your vision, your passion, everything.

WALKER

History is an indispensable teacher.

SERENA

Yes!

WALKER

But whose history is it?

SERENA

What do you mean?

WALKER

The answer is yours to discover, Miss Fox. I will say only this. We must be miners. We must dig. We must claw with our hands. We must uncover the rotting carcasses of lies, the putrid flesh of denial, the foul stink of dissembling and deceit, until all is laid bare before the perfect light of God's truth. Then, and only then, can the true healing begin.

WALKER exits. Music: something African.
SERENA has a moment of understanding.
She kneels beside the gravesite and digs

with her hands. She pulls up two clods of earth. Slowly, she places them like poultices against her cheeks, and then returns them to the ground. She is calm.

The lights fade.