

Script Analysis

David K. Warfel, Lighting Designer

January 2, 2009

A Song for Coretta

Pearl Cleage

SN:Script Notes

I. Location

What is the location(s) of the show, and how is it described?

- Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta
- Sidewalk (SN)
- Low brick wall (SN)
- Neon sign (SN)
- Thirty of forty people in line (Helen, 12)

II. Time & Conditions

What season, day, year, and time of day is it? What kind of “age” are we in?

- February 6, 2006 (SN)
- 11:30 P.M. (SN)
- “cold and rainy night” (Zora, 7)
- Helen has been there two hours (Helen, 12)

III. Pre-Story

Is there anything we should know about our characters that happened before the play began?

- Each character has a backstory- see their individual analysis. Each one has a story to tell, though Zora shares little of her own background. They have all gathered, mostly spur of the moment, to view Coretta Scott King lying in state.

IV. Characters

What makes these characters tick? How are they related, and what do they say about each other?

- Helen (Brown) Richards
 - Black Woman, age 56 (SN)
 - Met Coretta, Montgomery Bus Boycott, 5 years old (Helen, 9)
 - Whole family participated in boycott (Helen, 9)
 - Mother was on the Maids Committee (Helen, 9)
 - “I don’t understand young people anymore.” (Helen, 12)
 - “The older I get, the crankier I get.” (Helen, 12)

- “When you’ve been in the presence of goodness, it’s important to acknowledge it.” (Helen, 14)
- Sent money & clothes to New Orleans (Helen, 15)
- “It’s your choice. Her story or mine.” (Helen, 22)
- Is ashamed of Keisha (28) and Gwen (35)
- “Black women used to stand for something.” (Helen, 35)
- *Summary: Helen serves as the respectable elder in the group, reflecting stereotypical sentiments about the younger generation. Through their stories, she learns to respect the younger.*
- Mona Lisa Martin
 - Black Woman, age 40 (SN)
 - Wears oversized pea coat & Doc Martens, messy, unkempt. (SN, 12)
 - “I hate rain.” (Mona Lisa, 13)
 - Lives in New Orleans, hitchhiked (Mona Lisa, 13)
 - “Why do I get the feeling you’re [Helen] not the kind of person who drinks cheap burbon at a time like this?” (Mona Lisa, 14)
 - Lives in her car, parked where her house used to be (Mona Lisa, 15)
 - “I’m an artist.” (Mona Lisa, 16)
 - “She’s from New Orleans. They all believe in spirits.” (Zora, 20)
 - “Laughing to keep from crying.” (Mona Lisa, 21)
 - “I didn’t have any tears left.” (Mona Lisa, 38)
 - “We’re all out here together, aren’t we?” (Mona Lisa, 39)
 - *Summary: Mona Lisa is a Katrina Refugee still living in a car with the horrors of the Superdome haunting her. She is an artist, and helps keep the group from splintering.*
- Zora Evans
 - Black Woman, age 22 (SN)
 - Zora, caught up in her narrative, is oblivious (SN, 7)
 - “You’re not much of a journalist, are you?” (Helen, 7)
 - “I’m not really a journalist...I’m a senior at Spelman...” (Zora, 8)
 - “I was born after the civil rights movement, but I always wished I had been there.... We’ve never really been tested.” (Zora, 8)
 - “All of us aren’t like that.” (Zora, 12)
 - “I belong to ... African American Students Against the War.” (Zora, 34)
 - *Summary: Zora is the educated liberal college student who dreams of the Civil Rights Movement in idealized ways. It is her interviews that pull stories from the characters.*
- Keisha Cameron
 - Black Woman, age 17 (SN)
 - Thin and pretty, wearing too much makeup, tight jeans (SN)
 - Brings babydoll in stroller for school (Keisha, 18)
 - “I’m a sophomore. I should be junior, but I got left back twice.” (Keisha, 18)

- Litters (19)
- “See? ... They have no respect for anything or anybody.” (Helen, 20)
- Most people call me “Li’l Bit.” (Keisha, 21)
- “*Real* black people listen to hiphop.” (Keisha, 21)
- She has a little attitude, but is largely bravado to cover her vulnerability. (SN, 23)
- Gave birth at 15 years old, put up for adoption (Keisha, 23)
- Went to abort her second pregnancy, “Started thinkin’ maybe my baby could be Coretta King, too.” (Keisha, 24)
- “Mrs. King saved my baby’s life.” (Keisha, 24)
- “I wouldn’t mind being able to sing something that will help me stay strong while I figure out what me and li’l Coretta need to do next.” (Keisha, 25)
- “Hey, most of that stuff happened way before I was born, okay?” (Keisha, 27)
- “Everything coming our of your mouth sounds crazy! People died for your freedom and the best thing you can think of to do is have a bunch of bad babies and get a drug dealer to pay your rent. Coretta King would be ashamed of you!” (Helen, 28)
- “She’s out here all by herself.” (Mona Lisa, 29)
- *Summary: Keisha represents the younger generation and is often at odds with Helen. Our sympathy grows as we hear more of her story, as does Helen’s.*
- Gwen Johnson
 - Black Woman, age 24 (SN)
 - Green Army uniform (SN, 30)
 - “I’m a medic, I’m supposed to save people.” (Gwen, 30)
 - “I wish nobody had to go.” (Gwen, 31)
 - “It’s bad, Miss Helen. Nobody’s saying how bad it is.” (Gwen, 34)
 - “I’m ashamed of you.” (Helen, 35)
 - “I didn’t have any tears left.” (Gwen, 38)
 - *Summary: Gwen, the last to arrive, is on leave from Iraq and is haunted by her involvement in war crimes. Both she and Mona Lisa have seen men who didn’t even seem human anymore, and are not sure how to go on.*
- Coretta Scott King
 - “a great lady” (Zora report, 7)
 - “heart of the civil rights movement” (Zora, report, 7)
 - “one of the most courageous women who ever lived” (Mona Lisa, 20)
 - “You could always count on her to stand up and do what needed to be done.” (Mona Lisa, 30)
 - “I know she’s not a real saint or anything, but sometimes I think she’s as close as we got.” (Gwen, 33)

- *Summary: Although Mrs. King is not in the play, she brings the characters together. Each have a reason for wanting to be there, whether to be a part of history, to pay respects, or to ask for advice. She is the ideal of most of these women- strong, great, courageous, saintly.*

V. Synopsis

What is the action of the play?

- Helen & Zora meet. Helen tells of meeting Mrs. King during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.
- As Zora leaves to get coffee, Mona Lisa enters. She and Helen converse and we find out Mona Lisa is an artist living in her car from New Orleans.
- Zora returns with the coffee as Mona Lisa begins to sketch Helen.
- Keisha enters with her fake baby and we learn that she gave one child to adoption at 15 and chose this morning to keep a baby. Helen is disgusted with Keisha's "type," but softens when Keisha hopes to learn a freedom song.
- Helen begins to teach them "We shall overcome," but her anger towards Keisha returns and they fire insults at each other.
- Gwen Johnson enters after Helen and Zora leave to get coffee and begins to tell her story to Zora. Mona Lisa joins in and we hear their stories overlap.
- Mona Lisa was caught in Katrina with her grandmother and was taken to the Superdome. Gwen was on patrol when her squad, in reaction to an IUD, shot an innocent bystander. Gwen is forced to shoot the man, and Mona Lisa is forced to let a little girl go to the rapists.
- Mona Lisa reveals the group portrait, and they all sing "This little light of mine."

VI. Story

What is the play really about?

- Hmmm. I thought I would be researching Coretta when I started reading this play, but it seems in retrospect that this play is not about a few black women or Coretta, but rather about *every* black woman and her ideal. We are confronted with stereotypes, only to have each stereotype broken down until we see how external circumstances put these women at the end of their proverbial ropes.
- It is a play of both hope and despair. Gwen, Mona Lisa, and Keisha are near despair due to the difficulty of their lives. Helen is in despair regarding the younger generation. Even the rain seems to be fit for despair. Yet, through the struggles, arguments, and stories, there is a bit of hope. The hope comes in the form of Coretta- a saint- and in the freedom songs that unite. *This little light of mine...* the play is about the inexorable little flame in every woman.

- I see this play in some ways as a call to arms- as a bugle call to motivate all black women to stand up for each other. This is not about reliving the civil rights movement, or about teaching the young to respect the old- it is about teaching women to respect themselves and to *live* now.

VII. Questions

- Is there much movement in this show, or only in subtle places?
- Do we “spotlight” each woman as she tells her story?
- Do we stay in “reality” or break from it?
- Will the painting show all the characters, as in the script?
- Will the neon be white?
- Will the stage be wet at the beginning? Or glossy?

VIII. Initial Lighting Ramblings

- Need specialized Light for the brick wall
- Light from the neon sign could be reinforced/motivational
- Rain very important pgs 7-8, 13 (stops)
- Light from windows can lend texture
- Would there be any trees? At perimeter? Check research...