

Partner of —

By Rachael Carnes

CHARACTERS

SALLY (Born Sarah) — 14 years old.

ELIZABETH (Called “Betty”) — Sarah’s mother.

SUSANNA — Sarah’s grandmother, a ghost.

(These three women should be played by African-American performers.)

SETTING

Underneath Monticello, in the mansion’s South wing —
In a cold, windowless room, laid with plaster and brick.

TIME

2018 and 1787

Rachael Carnes, member:
Dramatists Guild, National New Play Network
American Association of Writers and Writer’s Programs
1050 W 17th Ave, Eugene OR 97402, 541-221-5792
www.rachaelcarnes.com
carnes.rachael@gmail.com
© 2018, All Rights Reserved.

At rise, lights up half on a space, cordoned off with string tied to four posts, like an archaeological site, 13.8 feet wide and 14 feet long, the size of Sally Heming's windowless room at Monticello, where she bore six of Thomas Jefferson's children. The space features a twin bed, a small table with a ceramic pitcher and washing bowl and a clipping from a flowering dogwood, the state flower of Virginia. Somewhere within the space sits a fire poker.

SUSANNA stands in a pool of bright light, wearing a dress and head covering in the style of the Hausa people of Nigeria. It should appear as though she has been beaten down with dust.

As SUSANNA's opening monologue develops, SALLY puts on a white apron, washing her hands and face in the water, while her mother ELIZABETH, wrings out and gives her daughter a makeshift washcloth, preening her daughter's clothes.

The three women stay within the confines of the demarcated space.

SUSANNA

(To the audience.) Human beings are not well-adapted to burns. That's why they hurt more than a cut — When you get a burn, at first, you might not notice it — Well, you notice it, but it doesn't bother you, not like a cut does. Cuts hurt right away — So much you can't believe it! But give it a minute to heal, and the blood finds its way together again, starts to knit up, to mend. You put that pressure on and you wait and hold still and maybe you peek to see if the bleeding's stopped — Just a quick peek, but it stops throbbing pretty soon. Burns aren't like that. Think about it — What in the state of nature prepared us for burns? Animals don't have fire — Only we do. They don't have pots and pans. I'm always pulling some pot out of the heat and I forget my mitt. Do you do that? Dogs and pigs and cows and sheep — They don't have to worry! You know why it hurts? You ever wonder why? I'll tell you. It's because as the pain soaks in, spreads, deepening down into your layers of skin — it's going into three-dimensions, not just the surface, it's destroying tissue. And your cells flood with fluid, trying to protect — The water from your body rushes in and the cells in your hand or your face or your back burst and the nerves scream and you lay awake wondering if your hand or your face or your back or whatever part of you is burned might ever feel right again. And you stare at this brick floor —

Lights up full. SUSANNA assumes a role in the preparations.

SALLY

I know each brick on the floor — I've counted every one!

ELIZABETH

And how many are there?

SALLY

748. Is that good?

ELIZABETH

It seems a good round number.

SALLY

But I long to go outside! Please?

ELIZABETH

From the hour of their birth, some men are marked out for subjection, others for rule.

SUSANNA

Something our master says —

SALLY

And the plaster — I know how many beams there are. I'll close my eyes. Ask me!

ELIZABETH

How many beams are there?

SALLY

Seven! See? Big beams! I hear them creak when people come.

ELIZABETH

Sally —

SALLY

Ma'am.

ELIZABETH

The day is fine.

SALLY

I don't have a window. Will you please ask Mr. Jefferson if I could —

ELIZABETH

Master says we must contrive a building in such a manner that the finest and most noble parts of it be exposed to public view, and the less agreeable removed from sight as much as possible.

SUSANNA

Is that the blueprint for a house — Or a country?

ELIZABETH

Take off your shirt — Wash your armpits.

SALLY

Yes, Ma'am. (*She does.*)

SUSANNA

A mansion on a hill — A tunnel within it.

ELIZABETH

I know the tunnel. I don't want to go back there —

SUSANNA

Slaves — unseen —

ELIZABETH

Hurrying back and forth carrying platters of food, fresh tableware, ice, beer, wine —

SALLY

Can I try wine?

ELIZABETH

Where?

SALLY

In Paris!

SUSANNA

While above them 20, 30 or 40 guests listening to Jefferson's dinner-table —

SALLY

It all sounds so exciting!

ELIZABETH

You're too young for wine!

SALLY

But Paris!

ELIZABETH

Now — You'll be a good girl with Miss Mary. You'll help her?

SALLY

Yes, I will.

SUSANNA

At one end of the tunnel is the kitchen — at the other the icehouse.

SALLY

Master says they're building the Arc de Triomphe —

SUSANNA

Hot and cold — The kitchen and icehouse —

SALLY

Master says they're building it at the place where all the streets come together!

ELIZABETH

You will see only what he —

SALLY

Master says they're building a monument to great men at the place of the stars —

SUSANNA

You get a burn and you're walking through that tunnel forever to find —

SALLY

Master says they call it the place of the stars because that's where all the roads to places in Paris reach out — Like this. Will we see it?

ELIZABETH

You won't see anything. Now —

SUSANNA

The tunnel's a hive where enslaved cooks and their helpers produce one course after another —
But you just want a piece of ice for that hand or face or back or whatever body —

SALLY

When he visits, Mr. Jefferson speaks of his revolving doors — And something called a
“dumbwaiter” — He says that the food in his dining room appears as if by magic!

SUSANNA

When I was a girl, I played in the river. Until —

ELIZABETH

Mr. Jefferson —

SUSANNA

You'll bear his babies in this room.

ELIZABETH

You're so very light skinned —

SALLY

Mama?

SUSANNA

Plantation — A prison camp worked by hundreds of slaves.

SALLY

Can I visit Mulberry Row?

ELIZABETH

You don't belong there. You're refined — A lady!

SALLY

But I don't have a window. Ladies must have windows. Mary has a window!

ELIZABETH

You're going to Paris!

SUSANNA

I came here as a dowry of my missus — Her personal slave —

ELIZABETH

I was eleven when I came here. I know the floor boards — I've counted every one.

SUSANNA

My master met you then. You were 11. I showed you how to —

SALLY

But Paris! I don't speak French.

ELIZABETH

Your master does — He's quite sophisticated.

SUSANNA

Tell her.

ELIZABETH

No —

SALLY

Tell me what?

SUSANNA

She's no innocent.

SALLY

I've been to Mulberry Row! I've seen them punishing the boys —

ELIZABETH

Silly girl —

SUSANNA

Tell her.

ELIZABETH

This is —

SALLY

What?

ELIZABETH

This is what you should do — When you go to Paris.

SALLY

Do what?

SUSANNA

The water — It comes from my home. I carried it here with me in my tears.

ELIZABETH

This bowl of water will —

SUSANNA

Tell her what it's for.

ELIZABETH

It's for you to clean yourself.

SALLY

I know that!

ELIZABETH

To make yourself whole again.

SUSANNA

Cool water — Cool compresses — Cover the burn with a clean cloth. A little honey —

ELIZABETH

He likes it when you put a little honey on your —

SALLY

What do you mean?

ELIZABETH

When he comes to you, you have to be willing. It's better that way.

SUSANNA

I know floor, every wall, every ceiling.

SALLY

Willing?

SUSANNA

Count the bricks.

ELIZABETH

Think of pleasant things — The nice weather outside.

SALLY

But I don't have a window. The place of stars —

ELIZABETH

This flower — See — This little flower? Keep it by the bed, and look at it.

SALLY

When?

ELIZABETH

When he wants you —

SUSANNA

Mr. Jefferson is a good man, fine, upstanding! This is a good, decent family.

ELIZABETH

When you get to Paris wash your arms.

SUSANNA

Your armpits —

ELIZABETH

Wash your groin. The cracks and crevices.

SALLY

Stop! You're embarrassing me.

He likes it that way —
ELIZABETH

Clean yourself.
SUSANNA

Make yourself ready.
ELIZABETH

Be pleasant.
SALLY

He's a great man. And they'll call you his —
SUSANNA

“Partner of” — Partner of Jefferson.
ELIZABETH

Partner?
SALLY

He will want you — Just make it easy for him. It's better that way.
ELIZABETH

And your babies might be free one day! Don't you want that?
SUSANNA

What does that mean?
SALLY

It's the enterprise — The revolving door — He's a busy man. Big undertakings!
ELIZABETH

The water will cool the burn —
SUSANNA

I was eleven — My master said I was pretty.
ELIZABETH

You're so pretty.
SUSANNA

No! I'll run away!
SALLY

SUSANNA

My floor was dirt — The first time the men — Then the ship —

ELIZABETH

Mine was wood — In the house — He came in the night where I slept next to you.

SUSANNA

When he was done with me I went outside — The stars were so bright that night over the ocean —

SALLY

I'll fly!

ELIZABETH

Do what he wants — Or he'll sell you away. We'll never hear from you again —

SUSANNA

My father in chains. My brother. My uncle — Down below in the ship's cracks and crevices.

ELIZABETH

Look at you, Sally. Your very own room!

SUSANNA

I had to make it easy for him — But I was free. I could walk. I could sit. I could see —

SALLY

(Picking up the fire poker.) I'll burn myself — With the fire here — Make myself ugly.

SUSANNA

A room all to your own —

ELIZABETH

You'll be a mistress! Make it easy for him —

SALLY

He won't want me with scars —

SUSANNA

The place of stars — A real little lady! She's so pretty. I'm proud of how fair-skinned you are.

ELIZABETH

The babies you bear might be free one day. Don't you want that?

SUSANNA

The babies you bury —

SALLY

I won't have his babies! I'm going to Paris to be a companion to his daughter —

ELIZABETH

She's your sister.

SUSANNA

When a burn does not heal it leaves a scar.

ELIZABETH

When he comes to you — Make it easy. Laugh at his jokes. Let him kiss you. Try to like it.

SUSANNA

And then when he leaves — There's the water —

ELIZABETH

The water will cool the burn —

SUSANNA

Put a cool compress on your —

SALLY

I won't! I don't want to —

SUSANNA

So pretty.

ELIZABETH

In the morning — Smooth your sheets. Fold your blanket. Tidy up.

SUSANNA

You'll be called his mistress. Concubine — His lover.

ELIZABETH

The 'partner of' the great Thomas Jefferson.

SUSANNA

When I was a girl, we played in the river.

ELIZABETH

I was eleven when we came here —

SALLY

There. All clean.

End of play.