

SOLEDAD

A Play in Two Acts

“How is this a good fit for the Lift Ev’ry Voice Festival?”

This play presents Americans of West African descent, from a time and from a place
in such a way that Americans of West African descent can see themselves
in this story.

SOLEDAD

I. Cast of Characters

- “Queenie” Herbie, a homosexual Death Row prisoner in Angola State Prison, Louisiana.
- “Brother” Marcus, a Death Row Prisoner in Angola State Prison, Louisiana. Portrays an Angel in Act II.
- “Floyd” Eustace, a Death Row Prisoner in Angola State Prison, Louisiana.
- “Father” A Catholic priest. Portrays Steward in Act II.

NB: In composition, the Playwright envisioned male African American actors in these roles; nevertheless, this play does not preclude “nontraditional” casting.

II. Setting

Act I takes place in the colored chapel, Angola State Prison, Louisiana, on Maundy Thursday, during Holy Week, 1934.

Act II takes place in Heaven, time to be determined, in Eternity.

NB: Dialogue in Act II specifies serving “poke salad.” If not available, creamed spinach is an acceptable alternative, for dining purposes.

III. Synopsis

Brother and Queenie wait in the colored chapel at Angola State Prison, Louisiana, for a Maundy Thursday foot washing during Holy Week 1934, their last before their death sentence. Floyd, another prisoner, kills Queenie in the chapel, and, in the second act, Queenie finds himself dining in the kitchen in Heaven with Floyd, posing as David, the New Orleans police officer who had Queenie sent to prison.

IV. Development

SOLEDAD received a staged reading as part of Theater for the New City’s Dream Up Festival, 2022.

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Act One

SETTING: The colored chapel of Angola Prison Farm, Louisiana, near Baton Rouge, Maundy Thursday, 1934, sometime in the late evening, as an insistent rain falls outside. The audience enjoys the perspective as if from the pulpit of the chapel. A door, the exit into the rain, stands at the back of the stage. Odd folding chairs sit haphazardly on the stage, facing the audience, and provide a claustrophobic feel, as if in the middle of the prison. A lone Crucifix sits in a chair.

After curtain, from the door, QUEENIE and BROTHER ENTER, dressed in white shirts and dark dungarees. Together, they carry a card table, which had sheltered them from the rain. Clearing a space at the center of the stage, they set up the card table. Brother sits at the card table. Brother closes his eyes, as if meditating. Queenie stands at the open door and watches the rain. Brother removes his shoes, as if to dry his feet.

QUEENIE

Queenie say, now, this what Queenie say. Queenie say, Lord, please, Lord, don't let it rain another day! "Well, it rained five days, sky black as night! Rained five days, sky black as night! Trouble in the lowlands—" What a sight! Yes, sir! Cold, too.

(to Brother)

Queenie say that, Queenie say, now, betcha, we get rain Good Friday. At three o'clock, too! Cats, dogs, Queenie say that, and Queenie say, Tweetie, and more cats and dogs! Ain't never seen no holy week when it didn't rain at three o'clock Good Friday, cats and dogs...and Easter Sunday, and each and every Sunday 'till Pentecost, too! You?

BROTHER

Brother say, it rain when it rain when it rain, when it rain! Each and every man know. That what Brother say.

QUEENIE

Queenie say, now, Queenie say, hear what my aunties got to say. My aunties say "that just the Good Lord weeping over His Son." Take a month of Sundays to do that—month and a half, if it rain 'till Pentecost. Stop raining for the Sun to jump Easter morning.

BROTHER

Brother say, that Sun not some fool: it get on out of anyone's way, anyway. That what Brother say.

QUEENIE

Queenie say, that Sun, now, now, that there Sun, Queenie say, The Sun decide to leap, and that rain sure will get out of the way. Betcha, they put the chain gang on sandbag duty

BROTHER

Brother say, yeah, bet! Brother say, they put that whole line out
At the river, sandbagging away. Here, New Orleans—Brother say,
they want that chain gang seen in New Orleans. Brother say, they
say, show Treme, if they don't keep the noise down. Brother say,
Huey Long and they, they praying for all kind of rain to show up
Treme. Brother say, put that message out from your great-granddaddy
for your great-grandchildren to hear, and hear it loud and clear!
This rain, it got to be delaying that priest a bit.

QUEENIE

(looking out at the rain)

Rain, rain, rain...rain, I just wish you go away! "Well, it rained
five days, sky black as night!"

BROTHER

Queenie, Brother say, now, you know that ain't nothing but
"Back Water Blues?"

QUEENIE

Brother, Queenie say, I'm a small-"c" creole from Treme,
New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, United States of
America, nineteen and thirty-four, no window at all, but in
my door, all I see is Mister Westinghouse's electric chair!
Brother, don't know about you—

BROTHER

Brother say, Brother see that electric chair, too, but Brother see
that Mister Edison's outside that door.

QUEENIE

Huey P. Long fixing to cook hisself some fried chicken, when he
cook you! Don't know about you, Brother, but Queenie, he know
them blues, "Back Water" or otherwise. Like my aunties say,
"sing them a little, scurvy them old blues away." Scat! Ain't that!

BROTHER

Then, Brother say, keep singing them blues, Queenie. Keep singing
them blues. Keep Queenie from seeing what he got to see. That what
Brother say. Brother say, scat, blues! Brother say, scat! Brother say,
Brother can meet you. "I'se just a poor boy, a long ways from home."

QUEENIE

(laughing, sitting in a chair near the door)

Queenie sees you! There you go, Brother, there you go!

BROTHER

(laughing, singing, as Queenie keeps time)

Brother say, "I'se just a poor boy, a long ways from home." Brother say, Pap sing that, up in Shreveport, each and every night and day, and Pap knew the song he sing!—that what Brother say! Now, Brother say, Queenie back water it, but Brother say, "I'se just a poor boy, a long ways from home." Brother say, Shreveport, Angola Prison Farm, other end of the state, other side of this man's world—

QUEENIE

(laughing)

Queenie say, Queenie hear Brother! Hear that! Queenie hear Brother!

BROTHER

Brother say, that just what Brother say! Brother say, just that, but Nothing more! Brother say—

QUEENIE

Queenie say—

BROTHER

(singing simultaneously with Queenie, also keeping beat with hands)

"I'se just a poor boy, just a long ways from home—" Brother say, "I'se a poor boy, just a long ways from home—"

QUEENIE

(singing simultaneously with Brother)

"Rained five days, the sky black as night. Rained five day, sky dark as night—"

BROTHER

Now, listen, listen now, Brother say, "rain five day—"

QUEENIE

(laughing, clapping time)

Yes sir! Queenie say, yes sir! Yes sir!

BROTHER

"Sky black as night!" Brother say, Queenie, hear what Brother say, "rain five day, sky black as night!"

QUEENIE

My aunties, those down in Treme, they say "Hear, Herbie, you a poor boy, a long ways from home!" Hear that, now? Hear that, say, "you a poor boy, just a long, long way from home!"

BROTHER

Brother say, Marcus say, Pap up in Shreveport say, hear that, Herbie! Hear that!" Now, say, "rain five day, sky black as night!" Now, now, Poor Boy: in Shreveport, Pap say, "Herbie, you hear what Marcus say?" "Rain five day, on me, Poor Boy, that sky black as night!" Ma Rainey let out on that, Pap say, "shush, boy, Ma hit it, high and low!"

QUEENIE

Yes sir! Yes sir!

BROTHER

Brother say, Pap say, high and low! Brother say, in Shreveport, Pap say,
“Trouble coming ‘round our door—“

QUEENIE

And, Lord know, can’t live on that block no more!

BROTHER

No sir. No sir. Hear, now, what Brother say: Charlie move you around,
Charlie move you away! In Shreveport, now, Pap say, “good luck to
to you, if you want to stay!” Now, hear that.

QUEENIE

Brother, we was having ourselves a good old time, and there you go, you
got to spit.

BROTHER

(feet dried, now putting on shoes)

Brother say, sorry about that, Queenie. Brother say, sorry about that.

QUEENIE

Like my aunties down in Treme say—

BROTHER

Brother say, catch Pap in Shreveport—

QUEENIE

Out of sight, out of sight.

BROTHER

(closing eyes)

Brother say, get thee behind my behind. He don’t mind. Brother say, he
blind. Brother say, he can’t see nothing, not-a-thing, no more.

QUEENIE

(covering eyes)

Queenie say, Queenie, too! No folk out there worth nothing!

BROTHER

(opening eyes)

Brother say, talk ‘bout that! Chain gang tomorrow?

QUEENIE

(looking out the door, then closing it)

Saturday more likely, that what Queenie say. Nothing Saturday before
Easter. Nothing but more rain, and more rain...cats, dogs, Tweetie, too.
They work us Saturday, we sleep for service Easter Sunday. That what
Queenie say.

BROTHER

Brother say to Queenie, chain gang Good Friday. Brother say to Queenie,
they say, “Good Friday?—Crucify! Work them like old Hebrew slaves!”
Flood water don’t take no Holy Week.

(Together, Brother and Queenie move the card table to the middle of the floor. Queenie sets the
Crucifix on the card table. Taking the Crucifix in response, Brother places the Crucifix over the
door, its back to the audience.)

QUEENIE

(dumbfounded by Brother's boldness, temporarily)

Queenie say, you one hardcore one, my, Brother. One hardcore one.

(Laughing, Brother claps his hands. Sitting at the card table, Queenie puts his feet up.)

QUEENIE

Down in Treme, my aunties say, one thing good about flood waters:
catfishing easy. Catfish, big as this, big as a man arm, they go swimming
in a man back yard. Don't need no pole, now. Man just open his back
door, and take them on up, by the hand, in the hand!

(Brother claps his hands again, again laughing. Brother sits at the card table as well, also with
feet up.)

BROTHER

Brother say, that good. Brother say, good eats. Brother say, Pap say
catfish in Treme got nothing on catfish in Shreveport. Brother say,
Pap say, not a thing at all.

QUEENIE

Down in Treme, my aunties say, two them catfish, skillet of hot water
cornbread, feed your whole generation. Good, good eats! Down in
Treme, my aunties call Queenie up and say, "now, Herbie—" that
just what they say, "now, Herbie, come on over and get some food."
Hear this, Brother: triangle clanging. Greasing time!

(Brother suppresses a belch.)

QUEENIE

(hearing the belch, and laughing because of it)

Queenie do that, too.

(Laughing once more, Brother claps his hands again.)

QUEENIE

That that apple they gave you, Brother?

BROTHER

Probably sour.

QUEENIE

(deadpan humor)

Most likely. And stale.

BROTHER

(laughing)

Brother say, Queenie, Brother say, Queenie know apples don't
stale.

QUEENIE

Now, Queenie say, now, Brother, don't get Queenie spitting, too.
Free apple? Stale apple! Good Lord know that! Now, call
Queenie a lie! Hear Queenie, Brother? Queenie say, call Queenie a
lie! "Probably sour?" Free apple? Hm.

BROTHER

Brother say, free apple?—stale apple?—sour apple?—worm in apple!
Queenie spitting?—Brother spitting, too! Get the behind my behind!
Brother say, like Pap say in Shreveport, leave it be. Leave it be.
Colored chapel in Angola Prison Farm no place for no spitting.

QUEENIE

“Leave it be...” Queenie hears, those aunties down in Treme say the same thing, but “keep that mouth clean.” Queenie hears them, too.
Down in Treme, my aunties say, go back to that catfish and hot water cornbread, if you want to mess your mouth up about something, Herbie. That worth talking about. Don’t go messing your mouth up; Father might hear you. Alright then. Queenie hears Brother. Queenie hears. “Leave it be.” Leave it be, leave it be.

BROTHER

(looking around the chapel, a bit sarcastically)

Brother say, in Shreveport, Maundy Thursday, they needs twelve.
They gots Brother and you. Where that ten more? Can’t they count?
That what Brother say.

QUEENIE

Queenie say, down in Treme, the same. Good Lord washed His twelve;
in Treme, Queenie say, we do the same.

BROTHER

Now, if that don’t beat all!

QUEENIE

(nodding, sullen)

Sure do.

BROTHER

Now, to work inside Angola Prison Farm, Brother know them guards don’t need to read and write, just mark the name—can’t they count?
Brother say, Brother see why they make us count off every now and then. They can’t do that they selves. Brother say, warden did it. Brother say, Lord know, warden in Angola Prison Farm too thick to know numbers. Come in for ten, Warden let you go at twenty. Brother say, Queenie, you know that warden can’t count.

QUEENIE

(laughing, sarcastically)

Queenie say, warden missed numbers in school.

BROTHER

In Shreveport, Brother say, they learn that on the second day. Queenie, you say they didn’t let the warden come back for the second day? Brother say, that sorry, that sorry. That all Brother got to say! Shush Brother mouth.

(Clamping his mouth shut, Brother nods his head enthusiastically.)

QUEENIE

Queenie say, that the way warden got the job.

(Again, Brother nods his head enthusiastically. Turning to the Crucifix over the door, Brother zips his mouth closed and nods once more, also enthusiastically. Queenie laughs and applauds.)

QUEENIE

Get thee behind my behind, please! Queenie say, Queenie say.

(The men sit in silence, generally. Queenie removes his shoes and shakes them, upside down, as if ridding them of a pebble. In pantomime, Brother compares his feet's size to Queenie's. Brother laughs. Queenie laughs. Queenie puts his shoes on. Brother pretends to shuffle a deck of cards, again in pantomime.)

BROTHER

("shuffling cards")

Brother say, those things Angola Prison Farm drive men to do,
and men prepare to die!

(Brother pauses from "shuffling" to "play" a harmonica chord, again in pantomime. Afterward, Brother resumes "shuffling." Queenie seems to doze off.)

BROTHER

Queenie—

QUEENIE

(snapping to attention, as if waking wide awake)

Queenie here, yessir!

(In pantomime, Brother pretends to set a deck of cards before Queenie. In pantomime, Queenie pretends to cut the deck. In pantomime, Brother takes the cards in hand, preparing to deal.)

BROTHER

Brother got hisself a question—

QUEENIE

Brother got hisself a question?

BROTHER

Yessir!

(Brother begins to deal cards in pantomime, but the cards become a real deck, which Brother deals to himself and to Queenie, as if for poker. Queenie looks furtively to the door, and orders his hand. Queenie crosses himself at the end of the deal.)

QUEENIE

(discarding)

Queenie here for Brother question, again. Hit me!

(Brother deals Queenie another card.)

BROTHER

Brother say, Brother serve hisself up some powerful question.

(Brother discards. Brother claims Queenie's card. Brother orders his hand.)

QUEENIE

(studying hand, momentarily)

Then, hit up Queenie, Brother! Hit up Queenie! Queenie know how mean
Brother questions can be.

BROTHER

They tells Queenie when?

(Opening the bidding, Brother pretends to flip chips into a kitty, again, in pantomime.)

QUEENIE

They tells Brother?

BROTHER

“They tells Brother?” Hm! Brother say, they done told Brother!

QUEENIE

(chuckling, moderately)

Then, Queenie say, they done told Queenie, too!

BROTHER

Brother say, they done told Brother, they done told Queenie—

QUEENIE

Yes sir, they sure did. Queenie say, they say, “Sister, you one dead, deader-than-a-doornail sicka-you!” That just what David say they say.

BROTHER

(studying his hand of cards)

Brother say, Queenie don’t say they say?

(Having studied his hand, Brother flips real poker chips into a kitty at the center of the table.)

BROTHER

(setting hand down)

Then, why nobody say nothing about no noon? That what Brother want to know. That warden, he don’t know nothing about no numbers. That little boy, he can’t count, and Brother and Queenie both know—hand on a stack this high—that warden, he can’t tell time. Ain’t that man know, we supposed to go at noon?

Now, that Brother question—what answer Queenie got?

Brother want to know.

(Retrieving his hand, Brother studies his cards. Queenie studies his cards. Queenie tosses real poker chips into the kitty, meeting and raising Brother’s bet.)

QUEENIE

That Brother question for Queenie?

BROTHER

That Brother question for Queenie...now, what David say to Queenie, to say about that?

QUEENIE

(in thought)

Come now, David...talk to me...talk to me!

(after thought)

David say, say, Queenie, that some raggedy table you got there—

(Brother throws down his hand as if having lost the poker hand. Queenie claims the kitty, fondling the chips. Brother and Queenie laugh. Chips in hand, Queenie examines the table’s legs.)

QUEENIE

Queenie say David say, say, Queenie, that warden got that bandy leg table, and David say, say, Queenie, you lucky the warden got one with four legs; he give most with three, and them legs got rickets.

(Brother and Queenie laugh. Gathering the cards, Brother shuffles them for another hand.)

BROTHER

(while shuffling cards)

Brother say, if warden could count past two, and set time after dawn, then—Brother say—he know how to bring out a table that ain't bandy leg. Brother say, since warden only letting priest wash feet for two for Maundy Thursday, then, Brother say, warden say that table needn't be nothing but bandy leg! That what Brother say!

(Brother sets the deck before Queenie. Daintily, Queenie cuts the deck. Taking the cards, Brother deals himself and Queenie another hand of poker.)

BROTHER

Brother say, Queenie say to David, David, you right: Brother say this sure is one raggedy table the warden got here! That what Brother say!

QUEENIE

Queenie say, Queenie tell David, and tell him not to get a big head—

BROTHER

Brother say, please no!

QUEENIE

(ordering hand)

No, sir!

BROTHER

(ordering hand)

Brother say, enough New Orleans cops with big heads!

QUEENIE

(as if suggesting something intimate)

Yes, sir!

(Realizing a suggestive double entendre, Brother taps the table, urging Queenie to mind himself. Brother and Queenie study their hands. Brother taps the table again, reminding Queenie to place the first bet. Queenie tosses a poker chip into a kitty.)

QUEENIE

Queenie tell Brother, maybe Governor Huey give warden some money, so he can buy them peckerwoods some new table, so them peckerwoods give rastus they table!

BROTHER

Brother say that, too. Brother say, Queenie, Queenie right on the ball!

QUEENIE

Queenie say, Queenie say, Governor Huey did that with the electric chair. Now, Governor Huey, he give warden money for a new electric chair, them peckerwoods, they get it. And rastus, we get they chair—

BROTHER

(interrupting)

Brother don't like that—

QUEENIE

Queenie say, Queenie say, now Brother, why Brother don't like that? Queenie say, Queenie say, what that supposed to be about?

BROTHER

Brother say, them peckerwoods in that chair, they might be poor white trash like the warden and Governor Huey; no telling what they was doing when that switch let go!

(Both men laugh)

QUEENIE

Queenie say, Queenie say, them biscuits and gravy, most likely.

BROTHER

Brother say, "biscuits and gravy?" Brother say, this is the Depression—them poor white trash ain't got no milk or nothing for that gravy!—you know that!

(Both men laugh again.)

QUEENIE

Queenie say, Queenie say, when they takes you to the chair next month—

BROTHER

You, too, Queenie! When they puts us in that chair, only one thing we got to do!

(The men spit in their hands and shake an agreement, conventionally. Then, they slap each other's hands and shake hands again. They sit quietly, arms folded and drumming their fingers as they read their cards. Brother looks toward the door, anticipating an entrance.)

BROTHER

Brother say, Queenie, wonder what it like?

QUEENIE

Queenie say, Queenie say, Brother, Brother wonder what what like?

(Brother pantomimes flipping the electric chair's switch against the table, and he pantomimes receiving an electric shock, then folds his arms. Queenie shrugs.)

QUEENIE

Queenie say, Queenie guess we fixing to find out soon enough.

BROTHER

(counting poker chips)

Brother say, Pap say, the hard way for you, Marcus. The hard way for you. Brother say, Pap say, no need washing your feet about that, no need.

QUEENIE

(counting poker chips as well)

Queenie say, my aunties say, same for you, Herbie. Same. Queenie say, Queenie say, aunties say, see ya! Wouldn't want to be ya!