

THE ODYSSEY OF TYRELL JAMES

A full-length play

Written by
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

TYRELL JAMES - A Black man in his late teens or on the brink of manhood. He is on the verge of losing himself in the harsh streets of Memphis.

EPHRAIM JOHNSON/ THE OLD BEGGAR - Black man in his thirties/ A slave man who is the husband of Miriam.

MIRIAM JOHNSON - A very ferocious African slave woman in her thirties. Wife to Ephraim.

P-DUB/ SAM JOHNSON - Black man in his late teens, early 20s/ African slave man in his late teens, early twenties.

MOOKIE/ CORNBREAD - Black man in his late teens/ African slave who has special abilities. Speaks with a speech impediment.

SILAS JOHNSON - White man. 30s and a plantation owner in the 1800's antebellum.

WINNIE - An African slave girl in her late teens.

SETTING

Memphis, TN. August of **20*current year**/ 1831 Johnson Plantation.

SYNOPSIS

"Tyrell James is one of those hard-headed kids who ain't got no business doing what he's doing. Into the gang life on the harsh streets of Memphis, Tennessee, he's on the verge of losing himself. For him, this is the only way to survive. Before he screws up his life even further and continue down the wrong path, he is mysteriously snatched back to an 1800s antebellum plantation, and he is forced into learning the hardships of slavery, past mistakes, and valuable life lessons that will set him back on the right path that he was destined for all along."

PRODUCTION NOTE

The casting of characters P-Dub and Mookie should be doubled as Sam and Cornbread. Also, there should be a clear distinction of language between Tyrell and the people from the 1800s.

SCENE TWO - WHO ARE YOU?

(Sunlight sifts through the crooked slats of a crude wooden pine boarded shack. It casts a golden light upon a makeshift bed of hay where TYRELL lays motionless.)

(There is a different sound stemming from the outside. Sounds of the hooves of horses pounding thunderously against the dirt. Whips crackle in mid-air. Just like before with the helicopters and police sirens, it is now replaced with soft hums of voices in the distance.)

*(These sounds tell us it is not ***(Current Year)** but a different time.)*

(A very pregnant slave woman named MIRIAM kneels over and dabs TYRELL'S face with a cold, damp rag. She's surrounded by jars of dirt. Rapt in his presence, she sings with a soothing voice.)

MIRIAM

*Now let me fly, now let me fly,
Now let me fly into Mount Zion,
Lawdddd...*

(MIRIAM hovers her hand over TYRELL'S chest as if she's casting a spell. She takes a great pause. Her face twists in anguish and her hands tremble.)

TYRELL

Arrhhgghh...

(Suddenly, TYRELL stirs awake.)

MIRIAM

(Quickly hides the jar of dirt.)

Oh, Lawd. He wakin' up.

TYRELL

Who the hell is you?!

MIRIAM

It's Miriam.

TYRELL

(Looking around.)

Where...the fuck am I?

MIRIAM

You's on the Johnson plantation--

TYRELL

The...what?

(TYRELL struggles to stand up.)

MIRIAM

Hold on, nah. You done took a nasty fall out 'dere. Ya head not in 'da right place.

TYRELL

Whatchu talkin' about I fell? I ain't fall.

(And...he falls.)

MIRIAM

(Snickers to herself.)

Told ya'.

(TYRELL takes stock of the living quarter. A wobbly wooden table, a couple of chairs, a thick pallet, all sit in the middle of the room. Off on the side, is a sun-dried chimney flanking in the center.)

TYRELL

You ain't answer my question. Where the fuck am I?

MIRIAM

You best sit down, 'fore you fall again.

(She attempts to guide him to the chair. He yanks away and glares at her dress.)

TYRELL

Yo, why you dressed and talkin' like that?

MIRIAM

'Dis how I's talk. And 'fuh the way I's dress, 'dis how I's dress.

TYRELL

But you dressed like a...

MIRIAM

Like a what?

TYRELL

Like you about to go out into a field and pull some fuckin' cotton or some shit.

MIRIAM

(Tightly.)

I'ont work in no fiel'. I work in de house with Missus and Massa Silas. And you talkin' 'bout me-- *(Looks at his long red shirt and baggy pants and shirt.)* Whatchu got on?

TYRELL

Hol' up, what I got on is fire.

MIRIAM

Fiyahhh?! Where?!

TYRELL

No, the fuck? *(Shakes his head. Then throws up his gang sign with his hands.)* I rep the muhfuckin' Fifty-Nine Brim crew. We bloods. *(Sees the confusion on MIRIAM'S face.)* You don't know what the Bloods are?

MIRIAM

No, blood is what keeps ya' alive, keeps ya' livin'--

TYRELL

Not that kind of blood, lady. You know what, never mind.

MIRIAM

Now you talkin' funny.

(Chuckling at his frustration, she grabs the sage broom that's by the door. She sweeps around the shack, humming to herself.)

TYRELL

Shit...

MIRIAM

*I got a mother in de Promise Lan'
Ain't gonna stop till I shake her han'
Not so partic'lar 'bout shakin' her han'
But I jes' wanta get up in de Promise Lan'...*

TYRELL

You must be one of them actress or somethin'?

MIRIAM

What's a ac-tress?

TYRELL

Like one of them actresses from that racist ass field trip we had to take in the Sixth Grade. Yo, them niggas was reenactin' the Civil War and everythin'. Had them brothas out there pickin' cotton and singin' and shit. But you...lady, it seems like you're goin' all out.

MIRIAM

Civil War? Ac-tress? Whew, chile.

(She continues to sweep around the shack with much pride.)

TYRELL

So wait, you ain't no actress?

MIRIAM

I's Miriam. How many times I's got to tell ya'?

TYRELL

Mane, chill the fuck out, lady. Fuck wrong with you? *(Pats his pockets.)* Shit, I gotta let Kingpin know about P Dub. *(Pulls out his phone and holds it in the air.)* What the...? No signal?

(MIRIAM looks at the phone keenly. She smiles with glee. As if she's holding in a secret.)

MIRIAM

Where's ya from?

TYRELL

I'm from Hyde Park. *(Shift.)* Oh, shit! The money!

(TYRELL ransacks the room.)

MIRIAM

Money?

TYRELL

Yeah, where my bag at?

MIRIAM

Bag...?

TYRELL

Yeah, the bag full of money! Where the fuck is it at?

(TYRELL beelines the whole shack, turning it upside down. MIRIAM quickly cleans up behind him.)

MIRIAM

I's ain't got no bag of money. Chile, why 'ya keep tearin' up my house?

TYRELL

Stop fuckin' playin'.

MIRIAM

I's ain't...playin'.

TYRELL

Stop talkin' like that.

MIRIAM

Dis how I's talk.

TYRELL

Look, I know you got my muhfuckin' bag. You better give it to me or I-- *(Checks phone.)*
C'mon, bruh, gotta be a fuckin' signal. *(Notices MIRIAM circling him and stares.)* 'Da fuck is
you lookin' at?

MIRIAM

What's yo' name?

TYRELL

Tyrell.

MIRIAM

Tyrell...My Lawd, 'das a funny name. I like it.

TYRELL

On God, I don't know why the fuck you dressin' like you played on the movie Amastad or
some shit. Dressin' like it's the damn eighteen hundred's--

MIRIAM

(Nonchalantly.)

Well, it *is* eighteen thirty-one.

(TYRELL absorbs what she just said and burst out in a raucous laugh. His laugh is obnoxiously long MIRIAM just...stares.)

TYRELL

Get the fuck outta here...It ain't no damn eighteen-hundred's. It's twenty--

MIRIAM

(A hoot.)

Chile, twenty, no...It's eighteen thirty-one.

TYRELL

Yo, stop playin', lady. You playin', right? *Wayment*, so you tellin' me that it's eighteen thirty-one? Aight. Y'all might as well bring out the cameras. Nigga just got the fresh fade and er'thing.

(Goes up to the door and pulls it open. Sounds of Negro slaves outside singing enters the room.)

Oh, shit! You even have people out here pickin' cotton? Oh, they definitely finna give y'all an Oscar. The *fuuuccckkk*?

MIRIAM

You must've really bumped yo' head, chile.

TYRELL

Nah, y'all the ones that bumped your head. It's like what, thousand damn degrees outside and y'all wearin' that? Lady, look at yo' dress. On God, yo shit dirty as *fuuuccckkkk*. Remind me of one of them niggas on Roots *head-ass*. Yo, hol' up, I gotta get this shit for the 'gram later. They gon' clown you.

(Takes out his phone and starts to video record the both of them.)

Ay yo, I'm in this motherfuckin' slave house! They straight playin' with a niggah! I think it's some challenge for the gram or sum shit...I don't know, but--

(MIRIAM throws a bucket of water on him.)

TYRELL

WHAT THE FUCK IS YOU DOIN'?!!!

MIRIAM

Throwin' some water on you, 'cause chile, the devil done had his way witchu. You talkin' and sayin' thangs I ain't neva heard of.

TYRELL

Yo, you crazy bitch!

(Without warning, she slaps the taste out his mouth. TYRELL gets in her face.)

Do that shit again--

(Slap.)

TYRELL

Bitch, on my mama, put yo muhfuckin' hands on me again, I'll fuck yo ass up--

(And again, she slaps him. This time her eyes narrow...a real warning)

MIRIAM

Ain't gon' be too much callin' me names. I done told ya, my name is Miriam, and you gon' respect me in my house, *Tyrell*.

(TYRELL is shook. He rubs his stinging face and retreats to the table.)

TYRELL

You crazy as hell, lady.

(MIRIAM gives him that "you know it" type of look and crosses over to the chimney. She softly hums to herself while stirring the ladle in the pot.)

MIRIAM

Aight now. I's know you's hungry, and supper's gon' be ready in a li'l while, but here's somethin' to hold ya' over. Maybe it'll make ya' feel better, 'cuz chile, you gon' need ya' strength.

TYRELL

Yeah, I could eat.

(MIRIAM makes his plate. It's vegetables all mashed into slop. She places a tin plate in front of him.)

TYRELL

What the fuck is this?

MIRIAM

It's called food, Mr. Tyrell. Ya eat it fuh nourishment.

(He slides the plate away.)

TYRELL

Uh, if you think I'm eatin' that shit, you must be out your mind.

(She slams the ladle on the table and gives him that real warning look again. TYRELL quickly obliges and eats the food.)

MIRIAM

(Puts on that “That’s what I thought” type of smile.)

There’s plenty more of it where it came from.

TYRELL

Uh, ma’am, can you pleaaaassee tell me you got my bag? It’s real important.

MIRIAM

You had a long and hard day, you gotta rest now. Doncha worry ‘bout no bag. Makin’ ya’ mind think crazy things.

TYRELL

What the fuck? Aight, it was me, Mookie...P Dub. Then there was the...Okay, wait a minute. There was the... *(Remembers.)* Ah, shit! It was that old homeless dude! He grabbed me and said...What The hell did he say? And how the fuck did I end up here?

MIRIAM

One rule in this house, you gon’ talk proper and civil. None of that whatchu you talkin’.

(There’s a knock at the door. MIRIAM takes a split second to herself and then opens the door. A young girl, possibly late teens, rushes in with a very demure expression. Her name is WINNIE.)

WINNIE

Evenin’, Ms. Miriam.

MIRIAM

How you doin’ chile?

WINNIE

Came over to bring you some of these.

(WINNIE hands her a basket with a thin sheet covering freshly made biscuits. The smell permeates the whole room.)

MIRIAM

Cooked just right. Ya’ sure the Missus didn’t see ya’?

WINNIE

Yes’m. I was real quick wit it and she didn’t ‘spec a thing. As if she would given she always gots her a cup of brandy in her hand every hour.

(The two women cackle with laughter. The sight of TYRELL gives WINNIE pause.)

Who dat is?

MIRIAM

Oh, that's uh...Heaven's sake, boy, come on over here and tell her ya' name.

(TYRELL hesitantly walks over to them. And as soon as he takes in her angelic face, he twists his face as if he recognizes her.)

TYRELL

Yo! Keisha?! Girl, what the fuck? *(Off Miriam's scolding look.)* I mean, Keisha...what's--

(He goes up to her but WINNIE quickly hides behind MIRIAM, frightened.)

WINNIE

Ms. Miriam--

TYRELL

What is wrong with you? Yo, Keisha.

(They give chase around the room.)

WINNIE

Keisha? I's Winnie.

TYRELL

Girl, you better stop playin'. It's me, Tyrell. Yo, Keisha-- look, I know I ain't been by to see Amiya, but I told you I would. Yo, Low-key, you takin' that Mr. Clyde's class way too seriously.

WINNIE

(To MIRIAM.)

Amiya...History class? (Pivots back to Tyrell with curiosity:) Why come I ain't neva seen't you before?

MIRIAM

(Stepping in.)

You know Massa Johnson goin' out and buyin' new men every week. He's harmless.

(TYRELL burst out laughing again.)

TYRELL

Y'all be fu--I mean, be for real. Y'all playin'.

WINNIE

He funny, Ms. Miriam.

MIRIAM

Yes, chile...Indeed he is.

WINNIE

Well, *Ty--rell...* (*Holds out the basket of biscuits with a cautious gesture.*) You want one?

TYRELL

(Grabs a biscuit and devours it.)

Hell yeah! Better than what she just tried to feed me. Trynna poison somebody. *(Smacking like hell.)* Dannnnng! You always could cook, girl!

WINNIE

It just a biscuit. Lawd, you act like you ain't never ate before.

TYRELL

My bad...

(He grabs another one. Fawwoking it up.)

WINNIE

(Motions for MIRIAM in secret.)

I's heard talks...

MIRIAM

Talks? Talks 'bout what?

WINNIE

I heard the Missus and Mr. Lowell talkin' in Massa's study. They talkin' about slaves trynna rise up. That man from the Turner plantation.

MIRIAM

I ain't heard nuffin' like that in the kitchen. You certain on these things?

WINNIE

I heard 'em. They talkin' like slave folks marchin' off to war. Sayin' its some kinda... um, I'ont know what the word was, but she said it be a lot of 'em. Like they gots they own secret way to hide from the white folk. I's heard Sam and Cornbread sayin' they saw a fancy slave runnin' by here last night. Gave him some kind of fancy piece of paper.

MIRIAM

What kind of piece of paper?

WINNIE

Sam wouldn't tell me. But he did say he waz gon' talk to ya'.

MIRIAM

(Glances to TYRELL.)

A fancy slave man with a piece of paper? That came by here? Lawd, you heard from Ephraim?

WINNIE

He waz out there in the field. He--

MIRIAM

He what? What is it, chile?

WINNIE

There was some trouble on the field. It was my brother Sam.

(A haunted and knowing glance washes over MIRIAM like a dark cloud.)

MIRIAM

The Missus know?

WINNIE

Mr. Ephraim done took care of it. He should be in here in a bit to tell ya' all 'bout it.

TYRELL

(Sneaks up behind them.)

Who's Ephraim?

MIRIAM

My husband and when he comes in, I's gon' do the talkin', hear? Lawd, I ain't too keen on seein' another whippin' today.

(MIRIAM nervously rubs her belly and goes by the fire pit. She stirs the ladle in the pot. WINNIE continues to stare at TYRELL.)

WINNIE

You from 'round these parts?

TYRELL

Girl, you already know I am. You really trynna pass Mr. Clyde's history class, huh? Yo, check it, I've been a li'l busy with P Dub and 'em, but I'm gonna send some money for some diapers. Cool?