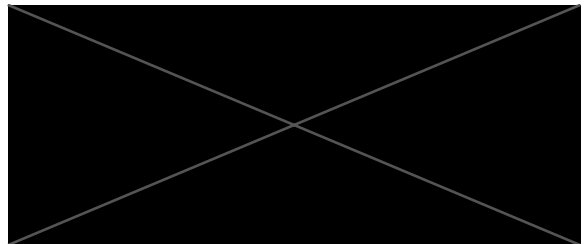


BY THE RIVER RIVANNA
(Working Title)

A Play in Two Acts

by
G. Bruce Smith



Cast of Characters

Grady Davis - 28. Black. Lawyer/Author/Law Professor/MSNBC legal analyst. Very smart. A rising star in academia and media. Living in NYC, makes good money. Grew up in upper middle-class family in Boston. His parents were both academics at Harvard and Boston College.

Adrian Armstrong - late 20s/early 30s. White. Journalist living in NYC, writes for the NY Times, makes decent money though not nearly as much as Grady. He comes from a blue-collar family, went to Columbia University on a scholarship. Friend of Grady.

Jackson Miller - late 20s/early 30s. Black slave of George and Hannah Miller. A stable hand on the plantation. He loves horses. He is a quiet man, sensitive.

Charlotte Miller - 20s. Wife of Jackson Miller. GGGG-grandmother of Grady. Black slave of George and Hannah Miller. She is smart and literate.

George Miller - late 20s/early 30s. GGGG-grandfather of Adrian. White plantation and slave owner. Married to Hannah Miller and has three young children. Doesn't particularly like running the plantation but was born into it. Loves horses and riding. Sensitive, loves poetry and sonnets.

Hannah Miller - 20s. GGGG-grandmother of Adrian. White, wife of George. Has three young children. Obedient wife, often passive, but can show a different side.

Rebecca Miller - 50s, mother of George Miller. Nasty, the epitome of the evil slave owner. Entitled. Bored with her life, she vents her anger on the slaves.

Betsy Miller - 18, younger sister of Charlotte Miller. She is a field hand.

Abigail, Ben and Jacob - 16-18, field hands.

Lucy - 16, field hand.

Chorus - 3 West African/Yoruban women of indeterminate age.

Time: Now and 1850.

Place: Most of the action takes place on the Hope Plantation near Charlottesville, Virginia, but one scene takes place in New York City.

LIGHTS UP. GRADY is sleeping, somewhat restlessly. A Yoruba/West African chorus of 3 women, dressed in white African robes and white turbans, enters. As they move, they chant a traditional Yoruba Ifa religious chant, in call-and-response style, so that one says one line of the the chant in Yoruba, another translates each line of the chant in English. Each Chorus Member speaks with a Yoruba/West African accent.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Egúngún kiki egúngún...

CHORUS MEMBER 2

Praise to da mediums of da Ancestors...

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Egún ikú ranran feawo ku opipi.

CHORUS MEMBER 3

Ancestors who have preserved da mystery of federless flight.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

O da so bo fun lewo. Egún ikú bata bango egún de.

SOUND of drums.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

You create da words of reverence and power. Da drums of da Ancestors announce da arrival of da Ancestors.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Bi aba f'atori na leegún a sede.

CHORUS MEMBER 3

On da strong mat you spread your power; da Ancestors are here.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Ase.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

May it be so.

A beat. The CHORUS MEMBERS look upon GRADY.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Look at da boy, sleeping.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

He is lost.

CHORUS MEMBER 3

We enter his dream to bring him a message.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

Da boy does not listen.

CHORUS MEMBER 3

Da boy *tries* to understand.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

Can he not hear us! Can he not hear his ancestors!

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Can he not feel us in his heart?

CHORUS MEMBER 3

Perhaps he does not want to hear us or feel us.

ADRIAN enters quietly. Stands very still, looking at GRADY.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Da white boy comes again into his dreams. Why does he come?

CHORUS MEMBER 2

Does it bespeak some bad t'ings?

CHORUS MEMBER 3

Perhaps it bodes good t'ings.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Perhaps bot' bad and good.

ADRIAN exits slowly. GRADY becomes a bit more agitated.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Look at da boy sleeping. He is of troubled mind and heart.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

He must listen to his ancestors!

GRADY wakes suddenly, clearly agitated. He does not see the CHORUS MEMBERS. Collecting himself for a beat or two, he exits.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

He awakens. . . To begin his journey.

CHORUS MEMBER 3

To follow his destiny.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

Let us call upon da Spirit of Destiny!

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Spirit of Destiny, da word and rebounding force.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

We call you by your names of power!

CHORUS MEMBER 3

Da power of Transformation is wit' da Spirit of Destiny. Dere are no strangers on da road of Mystery.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

Our road to salvation is da Spirit of Destiny.

CHORUS MEMBERS exit.

SCENE SHIFT. Grady's Manhattan apartment. GRADY is facing ADRIAN.

GRADY

You came.

ADRIAN

Of course.

GRADY paces.

GRADY

I probably sounded crazy on the phone.

ADRIAN

No. You sounded. . . Disturbed.

GRADY

I was. I am.

ADRIAN

You have something to tell me.

GRADY

Yes. Yes. I do.

ADRIAN

I'm listening.

GRADY

That profile you wrote about me. It was a puff piece.

ADRIAN

No. You're extraordinary. You **are** a rising star.

GRADY

Because I'm Black and because the New York Times is "woke."

ADRIAN

No. Because you're a brilliant constitutional lawyer, a prolific writer, an articulate -

GRADY

MSNBC legal analyst, blah blah blah. You know, Forbes is including me in their "30 under 30" issue. Probably because of your Times article.

ADRIAN

Well deserved.

GRADY

It's bullshit.

ADRIAN

Talk to me. What's going on? I'm your friend.

GRADY

Should reporters become friends with people they've profiled?

ADRIAN

It happens.

(a beat)

Look, you know this. We have a lot in common. Tennis, theatre, The Mets. We hang out, we have a good time. I think it's safe to say, we just clicked.

GRADY

Yeah.

ADRIAN

So, talk to me. What's going on?

A beat.

GRADY

I've been having dreams.

ADRIAN

About?

GRADY

I think my ancestors. Yoruba, West African. It seems they're trying to tell me something. . .

ADRIAN

What?

GRADY

I don't know. I never cared about that stuff. . . dreams or. . . 23 and Me, Ancestry-dot-com, you know. Except now I think maybe I do care. You see. . . There's this journal. My grandmother recently died and she willed it to me.

ADRIAN

It's her journal?

GRADY

No. If you can believe it, it's the journal of my great-great-great-great grandmother, Charlotte Miller. A slave on a Virginia plantation. A rare slave who could read and write.

ADRIAN

Wow. How did your grandmother get the journal?

GRADY

Apparently, it was passed down, generation to generation. I never knew about it.

ADRIAN

What did you learn?

GRADY

A lot. Too much. I never wanted to learn. . .

ADRIAN

About your heritage.

GRADY

(nods yes)

You know me, Adrian. Sometimes I feel I'm whiter than you are. Even my name is white - Grady Davis, for Christ's sake. Sounds like a fucking prep school boy. Which I was. In an almost all white school. I even date white -

ADRIAN

Come on, Grady, you've worked hard to get to where you are.

GRADY

And parents in academia who took me to the Boston symphony and the Louvre and the Acropolis and sent me to fucking Princeton and Yale Law School. The only black thing my parents let me watch when I was a kid were their favorite movies - "Mahogany" and "The Wiz."

ADRIAN

I love Diana Ross.

GRADY

Oh my god, are you kidding me?

ADRIAN

Okay, I get it.

GRADY

Sure, my dad had "the talk" with me. You know, about being a Black man in America. But I ignored it, and except for a couple of minor incidents of racism, I've had a very privileged life. And yet. . . Sometimes I feel kind of lost. Like there's something missing, like a phantom limb, and sometimes it throbs, but there's nothing there.

ADRIAN

But you've achieved so many amazing -

GRADY

I hardly knew my grandmother. My dad barely spoke to her. But in a letter to me, she made it very clear that it was high time I learned to be Black, to be proud, to understand my heritage.

ADRIAN

I see.

GRADY

I gotta tell you, the journal. . . It shook me, Adrian. It shook me up real bad. After reading it, I needed to learn more. I became, you could say, obsessed. I traced my roots back to Charlotte Miller. I found the plantation where she lived and. . . I bought it.

ADRIAN

What?! You bought the plantation?!

GRADY

Believe it or not, I'm not the first African American to have bought a plantation. Anyway, I think I need to know what my ancestors went through. What it was like.

ADRIAN

You're not going to move there, are you? I mean, your whole life, your career, is here in New York.

GRADY

I know. Besides, it's pretty dilapidated. Maybe I'll sell it eventually, or turn it into a hotel, I don't know. I just know I need to spend time there.

(a beat)

With you.

ADRIAN

With me?!

GRADY

(nods yes)

You keep appearing in my dreams. With these ghosts. I can't believe I'm talking about ghosts but. . . I don't know what these so-called "spirits" are trying to tell me. I don't know why you're part of these dreams. You never speak in them, you just. . . look at me.

(a beat)

There's this man, Joseph McGill, a descendant of slaves who made it his mission to sleep in as many slave cabins as he could. He knew it was strange and upsetting to re-inhabit places of bondage, but he believes that if we lose these dwellings, it's that much easier to forget the slaves themselves.

ADRIAN

Interesting.

GRADY

I want you to come with me to the plantation and spend a few nights in the slave cabin with me.

ADRIAN

Oh. Wow.

GRADY

I know it sounds crazy, but I need to read to you Charlotte Miller's journal. Where she slept. I need to understand my dreams and why you are in them.

(a beat)

Will you come with me? Just for a few days.

ADRIAN

I don't know. . .

GRADY

It's in a pretty area. Near Charlottesville. Lots of history.

ADRIAN

Not sure if I could get the time off.

GRADY

Yeah, yeah, I understand.

A long beat.

ADRIAN

Yes. Yes, I'll come with you.

GRADY

Thank you. Can I ask why?

ADRIAN

I'm your friend. And it sounds intriguing.

GRADY

I don't want you writing a story for The Times.

ADRIAN

Ok. But you might change your mind.

They exit.

SCENE SHIFT. Three CHORUS MEMBERS enter.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

Is da boy wit' da mad fever? Takin' dat white boy wit' him!

CHORUS MEMBER 1

'Tis strange, but destiny compels him.

CHORUS MEMBER 3

'Tis what we wanted, for da boy to listen to his ancestors.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

I fear for our boy. If he is wit' a white boy, it cannot be good.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Da white boy is his friend.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

Pffft! Dat is what da white boy says.

CHORUS MEMBER 3

Our boy go back to his roots, he will see us, feel us, honor us. He will know dat we love him and watch over him and his soul will be complete.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

Ha! Da boy's roots have been ripped from him, so dat he will be forever lost.

CHORUS MEMBER 3

Have fait', sister, dat he will unite wit' us and find da true road.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Have fait', sister, dat he will follow da Spirit of Destiny.

They exit.

SCENE SHIFT, evening. Slave Cabin at GRADY'S plantation. It is bare, just a dirt floor and rotting wooden walls.

GRADY and ADRIAN enter, carrying sleeping bags and electric camping lanterns. GRADY also carries a satchel and ADRIAN a backpack.

ADRIAN

So, this is it. Not exactly a luxury Airbnb.

GRADY

I warned you.

ADRIAN

Well, at least we can spend our days in the main house, though that's not a whole lot better.

GRADY

You can spend your days where you want. I just need you here at night. 8 p.m.

ADRIAN

(as both spread their sleeping bags on the floor)

So, when do we start?

GRADY

Now. The first few pages of Charlotte Miller's journal.

GRADY pulls out CHARLOTTE's journal from his satchel. He opens it to the first page and reads from it.

GRADY

Sunday, the 7th of April, 1850. It's a right pretty day here
. . .

LIGHTS UP on Charlotte. LIGHTS DOWN on GRADY and ADRIAN. They can exit or stay on stage in dark.

CHARLOTTE

(overlapping)

. . . a right pretty day here on the Hope Plantation in what they call the Commonwealth of Virginia. I think it be mighty amusing they call it the Hope Plantation, when us slaves have no hope at all. 'cept maybe some damn fool field hands here think they gonna get free some day.

(a beat)

My Christian name is Charlotte, given to me by my mistress, Hannah Miller. She mostly a good woman - she teach me to read and write.

HANNAH enters, carrying a journal.
CHARLOTTE moves to her.

HANNAH

You're a good student, Charlotte. You've learned to read and write very quickly. You still talk like a common field hand, but perhaps some day you will speak as well as Master Miller and I do.

CHARLOTTE

Thank you, Miss Hannah.

HANNAH

I have a gift for you.

HANNAH hands her a journal and charcoal.

CHARLOTTE

This for me?

HANNAH

Yes, Charlotte. It would be best if you copy verses from the Bible I gave you, but you can write what you like. However, you must keep it hidden, just as we have hidden from everyone the reading and writing lessons I'm giving you. As I've told you, the Commonwealth of Virginia has made it illegal for anyone to teach a slave to read and write. So we must be careful.

CHARLOTTE

Yes, Miss Hannah.

HANNAH

Good. That is all for today.

HANNAH exits, CHARLOTTE crosses stage.

CHARLOTTE

I be born on this here plantation, but my mama and daddy die some time ago from the cholera. We work hard, sunrise to sunset, pickin' tobacco, choppin' wood, tendin' to the animals.

We see in SHADOW, possibly behind a scrim, field hands picking tobacco, etc.

I work in the main house, takin' care of the master's children. But that don't mean that all of us don't see a sunrise without the threat of the lash taken to our backs.

We see in SHADOW a man whipping a slave, silently.

CHARLOTTE

For no reason, other than the overseer, Mr. Tom Murdoch, woke with somethin' foul in his heart cause maybe he done drink too much whiskey the night before. And that be true for our children, too. Sometimes I get the fire in my belly so hot I wanna take that burnin' and say things I shouldn't be sayin'. But I hold my tongue.

The SHADOW whipping ends.

CHARLOTTE

But we do got the Lord's day, Sunday, to do what we please, most of the time.

Offstage we hear the noise of several excited people talking and laughing. CHARLOTTE hastily puts away her journal.

BETSY, BEN, ABIGAIL and JACOB all enter, laughing.

CHARLOTTE

Hush! What you all carryin' on that way for?

BETSY

Sister, don't scold us. We practicin' the cakewalk, and we just imaginin' the look on them white people's faces when they be judgin' it all serious like.

JACOB

Don't they know we be makin' fun of 'em, steppin' all high and mighty? I guess they just ignorant.

BETSY and JACOB do a few steps of the cakewalk dance, exaggerated. That elicits laughter from everyone, including CHARLOTTE.

CHARLOTTE

Well, now, you all watch yourselves, so you don't get the lash taken to you.

BETSY

We gonna have a grand time, and who them white judges think is the best dancers will win the most beautiful cake in the county!

BEN

That gonna be me!

ABIGAIL

And me, Ben's partner!

CHARLOTTE

We'll see. Now, you all listened to preacher man's sermon this morning?

JACOB

Yes ma'am.

CHARLOTTE

Well, that be good but I don't pay too much mind to the Bible cause it don't make much sense to me. But I got good stories to tell you. You all is new here, so you need to know that I am the Treasure Keeper.

ABIGAIL

What be a Treasure Keeper?

CHARLOTTE

I tell stories of our ancestors, and our ancestors are the treasure.

BEN

How you know these stories?

CHARLOTTE

They's told to me by my mama, and before her, her mama, and so on.

ABIGAIL

Miss Charlotte, how come you work in the big house?

BETSY

The mistress saw that Charlotte was smart, and so she took her out of the fields where we be and into the main house to watch Miss Hannah children.

ABIGAIL

Tell us a story, then.

CHARLOTTE

I come from the Yoruba people in Africa.

BEN

Where Africa be?

CHARLOTTE

Across the ocean, far away.

BEN

An ocean?

CHARLOTTE

Boy, you askin' too many questions. Just hush up and listen to my story.

(a beat)

Now, we all come from different places in Africa, but most of us here come from the Yoruba. They is a mighty people with a divine king and fortresses and -

JACOB

What be fortresses?

CHARLOTTE

Like mighty villages with big walls to protect the Yoruba people. And they make fine things like you might see in the master's house, only these fine things be African things, and they be beautiful, things made from bronze, or ivory, or glass...

ABIGAIL

What be those things? What be bronze and -

BETSY

Child, hush! Just use your mind to see the beauty of these things.

CHARLOTTE

My sister is right. If you use your mind, your i-mag-i-nation, you can see the beauty of bronze and ivory and glass. And many more things. Just you close your eyes and see them in your mind's eye.

BETSY, BEN, ABIGAIL and JACOB all close their eyes.

ABIGAIL

I see them! They be shinin' so bright, like the sun!

BEN

Abigail, you got the fever on your brain. Maybe you be taken over by some spirits!

CHARLOTTE

No, Ben, she see the bright shinin' light of the Yoruba people. And the Yoruba's, they's streets be paved with gold and -

BETSY

Charlotte, they ain't no people's with gold streets.

CHARLOTTE

You speak true, sister. Sometimes I get carried away.

ABIGAIL

I like your stories, Miss Charlotte, but my feet wanna move. Can we please dance to the Ring Shout?

BETSY

Yes, let's dance to the Ring Shout!

CHARLOTTE

Well, all right, then.

BEN grabs a washboard and starts the rhythm. CHARLOTTE, who plays the tambourine, is the main shout singer, while JACOB, BEN, BETSY and ABIGAIL perform the dance while clapping intermittently.

SONG - "RAISE A RUCKUS TONIGHT"

My old master promised me,
 Raise a ruckus tonight,
 That when he died he'd set me free,
 Raise a ruckus tonight,
 He lived so long his head got bald,
 Raise a ruckus tonight,
 He got out the notion of dyin' at all,
 Raise a ruckus tonight.

(CHORUS)

Come along, little children, come along,
 Come while the moon is shining bright.
 Get on board, little children, get on board,
 We're gonna raise a ruckus tonight.

My old mistress promised me,
 Raise a ruckus tonight,
 Charlotte, I'm gonna set you free,
 Raise a ruckus tonight,
 She lived till her head got slick and bald,
 Raise a ruckus tonight,
 And the Lord wouldn't kill her with a big green maul,
 Raise a ruckus tonight.

(CHORUS)

Come along little children, come along,
 Come while the moon is shining bright.
 Get on board, little children, get on board,
 We're gonna raise a ruckus tonight.

SONG and DANCE end. All clap and laugh,
 happy with their dance.

BETSY

We done raised a good ruckus!

Amen!

JACOB

Offstage, there's a commotion. BETSY, BEN, ABIGAIL and JACOB all exit to see what the commotion is about. After a beat or two, they enter, supporting LUCY, a 16-year-old slave who has been whipped. The back of her dress is torn. LUCY whimpers in pain.

CHARLOTTE

Bring this child to me!

They lay LUCY down gently on the ground. She moans.

CHARLOTTE

Oh my sweet child.

LUCY

I just come here. . . They done sold me, from a place, not far from here. And that man, that man. . .

JACOB

Must be Tom Murdoch. . .

LUCY

He take the lash to me for no reason. Just cause I new here?

CHARLOTTE

Oh, child, that's what they do with the new slaves. So we don't get no ideas in our head.

LUCY

But I ain't done nuthin' wrong. Nuthin' at all.

CHARLOTTE

I know, child.

LUCY

(crying)

I want my mama! They tell me I never see her again.

CHARLOTTE

(stroking LUCY's forehead and hair)

Lie here, and I will wash the wounds on your back.

The slaves bring CHARLOTTE a pan of water and a wash cloth. She gently washes the wounds on LUCY's back.

CHARLOTTE

What is your name, child?

LUCY

Lucy.

CHARLOTTE

(as she continues to wash
LUCY's wounds)

We will take care of you, Lucy. You gonna have to work hard here, but me and my sister Betsy, we gonna look out for you best as we can.

LIGHTS DIM. All exit.

SCENE SHIFT. Back to GRADY and ADRIAN.
GRADY is pacing.

GRADY

So?

ADRIAN

So... what?

GRADY

(unsettled)

Don't you have something to say?

ADRIAN

What? What can I say?

GRADY

Say SOMETHING! Anything! I need to hear SOMETHING from you!

ADRIAN

Grady. OK. Let's take a beat. I can see. . . There's more in Charlotte's journal. Much more to the story. . .

GRADY

(still pacing)

Yes. Yes. A lot more.

ADRIAN

Okay, Grady. Okay. I'm listening. I followed you to this piece of shit cabin -

GRADY

Good for you. Acknowledging that this is a shit cabin. Where Charlotte Miller lived.

ADRIAN

I'm sorry.

GRADY

No, you're right. We are both just finding out what it might have been like to have to live in this. . . Hell hole.

ADRIAN

Read more of the journal.

GRADY stops pacing. Looks at ADRIAN for a beat or two. He opens the journal.

GRADY

Sunday, the 14th of April, 1850. . .

SCENE SHIFT, night. CHARLOTTE is reading from her journal. BETSY is sleeping, snoring, next to her.

CHARLOTTE

(overlapping)

. . . The 14th of April, 1850. It is late, and my sister Betsy, she done sleep-breathin' so loud through her nose and throat it hurt my ears.

(she shoves BETSY who rolls over and stops snoring)

But somehow I feel an urge to keep writin', and make my spellin' good cause I don't spell so good. . . But Lord, I just wanna sleep now.

JACKSON MILLER enters.

CHARLOTTE

(as she hides the journal and charcoal)

Where you be this late, Jackson?

JACKSON

You know where I be.

CHARLOTTE

With the horses?

JACKSON

Yes, with the horses.

CHARLOTTE

You smell like them horses.

JACKSON

It's an honest smell, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE

It don't smell good. I hate it.

JACKSON

Why you hate it, Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE

You smell like horse shit.

JACKSON

(smiling)

Well, now, I take that as a good thing. Horse shit smell a whole lot better than people shit.

CHARLOTTE

What kinda husband is you?

JACKSON

Not a very good one, Charlotte. And I'm mighty sorry for that.

CHARLOTTE

So then why you marry me?

JACKSON

Cause folks marry. That's what they do. And as you know, the master and mistress say it be good that we marry.

CHARLOTTE

How come you give me no babies? Why you not lay next to me, like all husband do on Sundays?

JACKSON

You wanna bring babies into this world of slaves?

CHARLOTTE

We need. . . We need our babies. . . To honor our African ancestors. To keep our blood strong and proud.

JACKSON

What good that be? Woman, they will be slaves!

CHARLOTTE

I need hope, and babies, maybe they give us hope. And this I know: A woman need some lovin'. Can you give that to me, Jackson? Can you give me some lovin'?

A long beat.

JACKSON

You a good woman, Charlotte. You strong. You our Treasure Keeper. All the slaves here, they keep you in their prayers because they hold you in the highest regard. But I don't know what I can give you. I be just a slave. Just like you.

(a beat)