KHADIJAH

A SHORT PLAY

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Accra
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KHADIJA

Book cover design by Isaac Aboah

BE KIND TO YOUR MIND

CHARACTERS

KHADIJAH — A restless twenty-four-year-old eye-turning beauty armed with a silky voice. Deep within her resides the peculiar solitude of someone who has begun to experience an alternative reality she finds difficult to rationalize.
HAJIA MARIAMA — Her mother, in her late fifties. A widow chiselled by decades of poverty, Islam and ceaseless disappointment. Her tongue is sharper than her heart.
DZIFA — A queer photographer in his early thirties. He's intellectual, intuitive and emotionally intelligent.
SADE — Early thirties, a psychiatrist. Wealthy, characteristically composed and cultured.
THE THREE WOMEN IN RED — Silent for most of the play.
THE CHICKEN — A living presence in the opening vision and an instrument of ritual.
VOICES OF ACCRA — The city made audible.

KHADIJAH is conceived as a stage work in which the boundaries between dream, memory, ritual and waking life remain deliberately porous.

The sea, the chicken, the colour red and the three women cannot be reduced to a single explanation. They belong to the uncertain territory where psychological experience and the metaphysical occupy the same space.

The play is written for a flexible stage.

PROLOGUE

BLACKNESS.

Absolute.

Then — the sea.

The muffled, uninterrupted breathing of sea water.

A wave,

another

and another.

Then, from far far away — a chicken shriek.

The sound cuts through the sea.

Silence.

The sea returns.

A woman's velvet-soft voice is heard. She does not sound frightened. She sounds as though she is reminiscing.

MAMI WATA

I do not knock before entering.

Silence.

MAMI WATA

I enter through your window

Through your eye

Through your mouth

Through the place where the heart forgot to lock the door.

The sea grows louder.

SCENE ONE

LABADI BEACH — DAWN

A strip of beach. The sea is endless. Plastic empty Muscatella bottle containers lie along the sun-kissed shore. They float in the shallow water like dead fish.

At the center lies Khadijah. Naked and motionless, as though the tide had forgotten her.

Three women surround her — barefoot touching the earth like five quiet poems — clothed in burgundy Kete and blood-red hijabs.

One holds a squeaky-clean white chicken. The second kneels beside Khadijah, carrying a small brown pot of white clay.

The third woman stands facing the ocean.

Khadijah's eyes are closed.

The woman with the clay draws a Yamevu symbol on Khadijah's stomach.

Khadijah trembles but does not wake up.

The woman facing the sea raises one hand. The other two stop.

A long silence.

The sea withdraws, then returns.

KHADIJAH

Where is my mother?

No response.

KHADIJAH

Mama?

The three women remain silent.

KHADIJAH

I am cold.

The woman with the clay touches Khadijah's forehead. Khadijah shudders.

KHADIJAH

Who are you?

The woman facing the ocean finally turns. She looks directly at Khadijah. Still no answer.

The chicken begins to struggle. Its wings beat.

Khadijah opens her eyes. She sees it.

KHADIJAH

No.

KHADIJAH

No.

The woman raises the chicken.

KHADIJAH

Please.

The blade flashes. The chicken is slit. Blood pours across Khadijah's chest.

KHADIJAH

Mama!

The red spreads. It fills the stage.

Blackout.

HAJIA MARIAMA

KHADIJAH!

SCENE TWO

A SINGLE ROOM — NIMA — MORNING

Khadijah wakes violently. She sits upright, breathing hard. VTH2 by Omar Sterling is playing, subtly, from her Bose speakers. Her hands fly instinctively to her chest. Nothing. She touches her stomach. Nothing. She looks at her palms. Nothing.

The room is cramped. A corrugated roof. Peeling walls. Quranic verses carefully taped to the walls. A mattress. A bucket. A tin cup.

HAJIA MARIAMA stands over her.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Sleeping again?

Khadijah rolls her eyes and does not respond.

HAJIA MARIAMA

I called you three times.

Nothing.

HAJIA MARIAMA

I thought perhaps our ancestors had finally come for your soul.

Khadijah looks at her.

KHADIJAH

Mama —

HAJIA MARIAMA

What?

KHADIJAH

Nothing.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Exactly. Nothing. That is what you have become. Nothing!

Mariama opens a tin cup.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Twenty-four years.

A pause.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Twenty-four. No husband. No proper work. No money. No plan. Only camera. Only walking. Only sleeping.

She turns.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Your mates are nurses. Your mates are married. Your mates have children calling them Mummy.

She points towards Khadijah.

HAJIA MARIAMA

You?

Khadijah remains silent.

HAJIA MARIAMA

You take photographs like an *ashawo*.

KHADIJAH

Maa, I am not an *ashawo*.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Then what are you?

Khadijah searches for an answer. Nothing comes.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Exactly. A woman cannot live on beauty. Beauty does not cook *abunuabunu*. Beauty does not pay rent. Your beauty will not bury me.

KHADIJAH

I had a dream.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Again?

KHADIJAH

There were women.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Women?

KHADIJAH

Three.

HAJIA MARIAMA

And what were they doing?

KHADIJAH

They slaughtered a chicken.

Mariama looks at her.

HAJIA MARIAMA

So?

KHADIJAH

On me.

Silence.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Ah, you want me to become afraid of chickens now?

KHADIJAH

They were wearing red.

Mariama's expression changes almost imperceptibly.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Herh, enough.

KHADIJAH

Mama —

HAJIA MARIAMA

Enough!

A beat.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Dreams are what poor people call the things they cannot afford to understand.

Khadijah absorbs this.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Get a job.

From outside: goats, trotro horns, a distant call to prayer. Mariama exits.

Khadijah looks at the Qur'an 3:185 — which reads ***"Every soul shall taste death."***

—

then at the door, then at herself.

KHADIJAH

What did I see?

Blackout.

SCENE THREE

THE BATHING AREA — MORNING

Khadijah pours cold water over herself. Once. Twice. Again.

She scrubs her sculpted arms, her elongated neck, her taut stomach. Harder. Harder.

She stops. Her breathing is loud.

She washes again.

She presses her palm against her stomach.

A distant female voice sings. Khadijah freezes. The song is indistinct.

The singing stops.

KHADIJAH

Hello?

No answer. She resumes washing.

A faint red reflection appears in the water. Khadijah sees it. She recoils. The water becomes ordinary again.

Blackout.

SCENE FOUR

NIMA MOSQUE — MORNING

Women kneel. Muted colours. Prayer. Khadijah prays among them.

A RED HIJAB passes behind her. She stops.

She turns. Nothing.

The women continue.

KHADIJAH

Did you see —

WOMAN

Pray.

Khadijah lowers her head.

The sea is heard faintly. Her eyes open. The sea stops.

Blackout.

SCENE FIVE

ACCRA

The stage fills with the city. The actors become the city.

VOICES

Pure water!

Massa, move!

Madam!

Circ, circ!

Aliha!

Last price!

Commot for there!

Chale!

Amaa shele eko!

No change!

Who born dog!

All die be die!

Baboon dey chop!

The noise builds. Khadijah walks through it.

A woman selling waakye wears red.

WAAKYE WOMAN

Sister? You want waakye?

Khadijah looks at her dress.

WAAKYE WOMAN

Sister?

Khadijah backs away.

WAAKYE WOMAN

Ei, mad people are increasing in this Accra o.

She returns to her food.

A child crosses carrying a red balloon.

Three women appear across the stage. Red. Watching.

KHADIJAH

Stop following me.

A trotro horn explodes. The women disappear.

A passer-by looks at her.

PASSER-BY

Madam?

Khadijah says nothing. He leaves.

She walks faster.

SCENE SIX

KA XOXOWO SALON — AFTERNOON

Say Your Love by P-Square is playing softly. The room is elegant, an Eve-style salon of quiet grandeur, furnished with Barcelona chairs in rich leather, a marble-topped console, gilded mirrors and an ornate chandelier casting a warm glow across the room. Tall windows are framed by heavy velvet curtains, while a Persian rug rests beneath a low glass coffee table. Sculptural lamps, antique objets d'art, fresh flowers and carefully placed books lend the space an air of cultivated sophistication. Everything is beautiful without appearing excessive — a room designed for long conversations, good wine and the discreet theatre of refined company. Photographs cover the walls. DZIFA sits smoking, in his black linen shirt and velvet mini-skirt.

DZIFA

You are late.

KHADIJAH

Traffic.

DZIFA

Everybody in Accra blames traffic. Even failures.

Khadijah smiles despite herself.

KHADIJAH

You called me.

DZIFA

I did.

KHADIJAH

Why?

DZIFA

Because I have work.

KHADIJAH

What kind?

DZIFA

The kind that pays.

The camera clicks.

DZIFA

Look at me.

FLASH.

DZIFA

No. Don’t give me your mother’s face.

KHADIJAH

What face?

DZIFA

The face of somebody waiting to be forgiven.

Khadijah looks at him.

DZIFA

You are not here to be forgiven. You are here to be seen.

FLASH.

The session begins.

SCENE SEVEN

THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Light becomes the principal scenery.

FLASH. Darkness. FLASH. Khadija"s sensuous lips. Darkness. FLASH. Her luminous eyes. Darkness. FLASH. Her hands. Pyramids by Frank Ocean plays in the background.

DZIFA

Turn.

FLASH.

DZIFA

Again.

FLASH.

DZIFA

Look into the lens.

FLASH.

DZIFA

No. Look beyond it.

FLASH.

Khadijah becomes freer. The camera adores her¸ but she seems absent from her own body.

DZIFA

There.

KHADIJAH

Like that?

DZIFA

Like you don’t belong to anybody.

KHADIJAH

Not even myself?

DZIFA

Especially not yourself.

A red cloth hangs unnoticed in the background.

FLASH.

Blackout.

SCENE EIGHT

AFTERWARDS

Silence. The work is over. Khadijah lies against the white backdrop. Dzifa sits next to her, takes her shirt off, and kisses on Khadija's bare breast.

DZIFA

You are different today.

KHADIJAH

How?

DZIFA

You keep looking at the door.

KHADIJAH

Someone is following me.

DZIFA

Who?

KHADIJAH

I don't know.

DZIFA

Then how do you know?

KHADIJAH

Because I see them.

DZIFA

Who?

KHADIJAH

Women.

DZIFA

How many?

KHADIJAH

Three.

Dzifa takes another drag.

DZIFA

Maybe they like you.

KHADIJAH

They wear red.

Dzifa goes quiet.

KHADIJAH

You know something.

DZIFA

Everybody thinks somebody knows something.

KHADIJAH

Do you?

DZIFA

I know Accra.

KHADIJAH

That is not the same thing.

DZIFA

No. It isn't.

DZIFA

You should leave Nima.

KHADIJAH

Go where?

DZIFA

Anywhere people look sexier and pretend better.

KHADIJAH

Is that where you live?

DZIFA

I live where nobody asks questions.

Khadijah dresses.

DZIFA

You look frightened today.

KHADIJAH

I saw blood in my dream.

Dzifa's cigarette stops midway to his lips.

DZIFA

Blood?

KHADIJAH

A chicken.

DZIFA

Dreams are strange.

KHADIJAH

It was real.

DZIFA

That is what makes dreams dangerous.

Khadijah exits. Dzifa looks towards the red cloth.

Blackout.

SCENE NINE

ACCRA — EVENING

Orange light. The city is beginning to glow.

Khadijah walks. Red is everywhere.

A red bag. A red dress. A red taxi. A red balloon. A red sign.

She stops. Three women in red stand across the road.

KHADIJAH

Who are you?

Nothing.

KHADIJAH

Why are you following me?

Nothing.

KHADIJAH

What do you want?

The woman in the center smiles, barely.

A bus passes. When it clears — nothing.

Khadijah spins around.

KHADIJAH

No!

People stare. She is alone. She begins walking, then running.

The city swallows her.

SCENE TEN

HOME — NIGHT

The door is open. Khadijah stands outside.

KHADIJAH

Mama?

Silence.

She enters. A knock. She freezes. Another knock.

KHADIJAH

Mama?

No answer. She approaches the door and opens it.

SADE stands there with medication in a paper bag.

SADE

Hello.

KHADIJAH

What are you doing here?

SADE

Your mother called me.

KHADIJAH

She’s not here.

Sade enters and places the medication on the table.

SADE

Have you been taking them?

KHADIJAH

Sometimes.

SADE

Sometimes is why you see things.

KHADIJAH

Maybe the things are real.

Sade studies her.

SADE

Tell me about the dream.

KHADIJAH

They killed a chicken on me.

SADE

Who?

KHADIJAH

Three women.

SADE

What did they look like?

KHADIJAH

Red.

SADE

What does that mean?

KHADIJAH

I don’t know. I know what I saw.

SADE

Seeing is not knowing.

KHADIJAH

Then why are you afraid?

Sade pauses.

SADE

I'm not.

KHADIJAH

You are.

SADE

I'm your doctor.

KHADIJAH

That is not an answer.

SADE

Dreams are not prophecy.

KHADIJAH

In Nima they are.

Silence.

SADE

No.

KHADIJAH

My grandmother believed them.

SADE

Your grandmother isn't here.

KHADIJAH

Neither is my father.

Outside, Islamic prayers. Khadijah listens. Sade reaches for her hand.

SADE

You are tired.

KHADIJAH

Yes.

SADE

You need rest.

KHADIJAH

I need to know why they are looking at me.

Sade holds her hand. The room softens.

SCENE ELEVEN

THE ROOM — LATER

Darkness. A narrow pool of light. Khadijah and Sade lie together. They kiss and caress. Their intimacy is slow, tender, almost mournful.

The world outside has disappeared. For once, Khadijah is quiet. Her eyes close. Her breathing settles.

A strange peace comes over Khadijah.

Then — a CREAK. The front door.

Khadijah's eyes open. Sade sits upright. Footsteps. Another step. Another.

The door opens.

HAJIA MARIAMA stands there. Groceries in her hands.

She sees them. Stops.

No one speaks.

HAJIA MARIAMA

Khadijah!

Khadijah sits upright.

KHADIJAH

Mama —

Mariama cannot speak. Her eyes move between them.

Then something behind her catches Khadijah's attention.

The corridor.

Three women. Red. Standing together. Still. Watching. Smiling faintly.

KHADIJAH

Mama.

Mariama turns.

Nothing. The corridor is empty.

HAJIA MARIAMA

What?

Khadijah cannot answer.

HAJIA MARIAMA

What are you looking at?

Khadijah keeps staring.

The women have vanished. Or perhaps they were never there.

A long silence.

The sea begins. Very faintly.

Mariama looks towards Khadijah. Khadijah looks towards the darkness.

The sea grows louder.

The same sea. The sea from the beginning.

Then — the CHICKEN SHRIEKS. Once.

The lights go out.

BLACKOUT.

Silence.

WOMAN'S VOICE

Dreams do not knock before entering.

A final wave.

Blackness.

END.



V. L. K. Djokoto (b. 1995) is a forward-thinking Ghanaian cultural theorist, corporate adviser and gallerist. He leads D. K. T. Djokoto & Co — an old-fashioned top-tier multi- family office — established in 1950. Through expertly curated artistic experiences, he seeks to mobilise Ghanaians weaving African music, literature and art. He is the author of *Revolution* and *Afro Gbede*.