



SOJOURNERS

BY MFONISO
UDOFIA



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

SOJOURNERS
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Dedicated to Enyeneama and Paul Udofia

SOJOURNERS was developed at the 2013 Sundance Institute Theatre Lab at the Sundance Resort; as part of the Martha Heasley Cox Virgin Play Series 2014 at the Magic Theatre (Loretta Greco, Producing Artistic Director; Jaimie Mayer, Managing Director) in San Francisco, California; and through The Playwrights Realm Writing Fellowship and Page One Residency.

The Off-Broadway premiere of SOJOURNERS was produced by The Playwrights Realm (Katherine Kovner, Artistic Director; Roberta Pereira, Producing Director) on January 21, 2016. It was directed by Ed Sylvanus Iskandar, the scenic design was by Jason Sherwood, the costume design was by Loren Shaw, the lighting design was by Jiyoun Chang, the sound design was by Jeremy S. Bloom, the dialect coach was Jane Guyer Fujita, the Ibibio language coach was Ebbe Bassey Manczuk, the puppet design was by Stefano Brancato, the props design was by Samantha Shoffner, and the production stage manager was Kara Kaufman. The cast was as follows:

ABASIAMA EKPEYONG Chinasa Ogbuagu
MOXIE WILIS Lakisha Michelle May
UKPONG EKPEYONG Hubert Point-Du Jour
DISCIPLE UFOT Chinaza Uche

SOJOURNERS was further developed and produced by New York Theatre Workshop (Jim Nicola, Artistic Director; Jeremy Blocker, Managing Director) in association with The Playwrights Realm in 2017. It was produced with the same cast and crew as The Playwrights Realm, with the exception of Janice Paran as the dramaturg and Dawn-Elin Fraser as the dialect and text coach.

SOJOURNERS received its West Coast premiere at the Magic Theatre in 2016. It was directed by Ryan Guzzo Purcell, the scenic designer was Eric Flatmo, the costume designer was Karina Chavarin, the lighting designer was York Kennedy, the composer and sound designer was David Molina, the dialect coach was Jessica Berman, and the stage manager was Justin Schelgel. The cast was as follows:

ABASIAMA EKPEYONG Katherine Renee Turner
MOXIE WILIS Jamella Cross
UKPONG EKPEYONG Jarrod Smith
DISCIPLE UFOT Rotimi Agbabiaka

The playwright would like to especially thank Mr. Essien E. Idiong and Ebbe Bassey Manczuk for their work on Ibibio translations.

CHARACTERS

ABASIAMA EKPEYONG, early 20s. Privileged. Paragon of Nigerian femininity. 8 months pregnant. Ibibio accent.

MOXIE WILIS, 15–18 years old. Far younger in age than attitude might belie. Frayed from the harsh realities of street life. Quickwitted and hard-edged. Massachusetts born and Southern bred. Black-American, East Texan accent (inclusive of Houston).

UKPONG EKPEYONG, early – mid-20s. Privileged. High on life and America. A man-child with effortless and magnetic charisma. Ibibio accent.

DISCIPLE UFOT, early – mid-20s. Exceedingly intelligent. Intense and driven. An acute and rabid dreamer without an emotional tether. Ibibio accent.

Note on Nigerian Names and Ibibio Words

Previous drafts from the original productions used a phonetic spelling of Nigerian names and Ibibio words for the clarity of non-Ibibio-speaking actors and critics. This published edition uses the correct/traditional spelling of Nigerian names and other Ibibio words.

The sole exception is the anglicized “ng” in place of the velar nasal letter “ŋ” at the end of names. “Ukponŋ Ekpeyonŋ” would be the traditional spelling, but the pronunciation is comparable to “Ukpong Ekpeyoung,” and native Ibibio speakers have recently begun more readily adopting the anglicized “ng” ending.

However, words in Ibibio (other than proper names) retain the ŋ, and have been so spelled in this acting edition.

Future credits should please reflect the correct spelling herein.

PUNCTUATION & LANGUAGE

(“.”)

The play is written in the language of thought, there is no need to wait for the thought to come to you. The next thought is simply right there. That said, periods should not stop the flow. Move through the language with ease.

(“—”)

A dash is a hard shift in thought/flow. Do not smooth these over. Instead, collide into the dash, and turn quick into the next thought.

(“..”)

An ellipsis is a thought-breath. It is not overlong. Collect yourself during this slight break and then pick up again.

(“?”)

Questions are *never* rhetorical. Please do not ask questions as if the answer is known. Dare to upward inflect and be vulnerable.

(“[]”)

Nothing in brackets is ever said. Brackets are there to aid the actors’ emotional scaffolding within swallowed moments.

(SILENCE)

A silence is a filled sac of time where the characters nonverbally confront someone/thing. Silences are pregnant and almost uncomfortable in length. Talking restarts after a silence only when absolutely necessary.

(DOUBLE-STACKING)

A double-stacked word (i.e.: thatthat, finefine, etc.) denotes the Nigerian/Ibibio way of adding extra emphasis and color. The double-stacked word means exponentially more than a singular use of the word. Triple, quadruple, etc. stacking can and does occur.

Translations for Ibibio songs, words, and phrases used in the play can be found on page 81.

STAGE DIRECTIONS

Read all stage directions carefully, including parentheticals. Stage directions are not merely suggestion. They are there to support the story. Implement the action of the stage directions to the best of your ability.

CHARACTER NOTES

Abasiama:

Abasiama's pregnancy pain and her ferocious emotional life are to be demonstrated through the strategic use of breath. Abasiama *swallows* emotion until all remaining internal space is overfull. The danger is to give the pain too much sound. Play in her breath, in the silence, and how things move across her face. And remember, a voice, even in the throes of abject sorrow and/or incandescent rage, can be achingly sweet.

Please swallow the bitter pill of Act One in order to discover the release of Act Two.

Also note that Abasiama does not go into active labor until sometime after Ukpong leaves in Act One.

The Nigerian Men:

These men are charming; however, *never* conflate charm with politesse. Take up space. Do not apologize.

DESIGNER NOTES

Please keep in mind the energy of the piece. The world of *Sojourners* is isolated and remote. Design/production should never foster comfort. Keep the world, inclusive of transitions, jagged, unpredictable, and fleet.

SOJOURNERS

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Houston, Texas, April 30, 1978, almost 10 P.M.

Lights up on a tiny apartment. Rooms meld into each other without barrier; both the living room and the kitchen are effectively one and the same. The most prominent piece of furniture is a 1970s striped fabric couch centering the designated living room space.

A young, striking, unadorned woman (except for plain head/sleep scarf), Abasiama, stands in a small corner of the kitchen. She stares into middle distance.

Vacant.

Vacant.

Vacant.

A pain hits her stomach. Her gaze suddenly narrows.

Alive.

Abasiama, in response to the pain, closes her eyes, cocks her head against the wall and hums "Canoe." She snuggles into her nook, seeking an embrace. Her humming soars while tears well behind her eyelids. Her closed-eye gaze is downward, focusing the song towards the swell of her belly; a smile is even possible. The humming, after a while, coalesces into a fully formed song.

Her voice is mighty fine. It is the most encouraging, uplifting pick-me-up Abasiama offers herself.

ABASIAMA.

mme nti usen atimme edi
afit nti njkpọ atimme edi
menie owo se ɲdọɲ esit
nwat ubom mi ye afo¹

(*Spoken, on the exhale, eyes still closed.*) Abasi, sọsọɲọ.

Abasiama opens her eyes, water runs down her cheeks.

(*Release, wiping it away.*) No more purposeless water.²

Another dull deep pain strikes Abasiama's midsection. She closes her eyes, effectively chomping back the pain. Visually, nothing extraordinary occurs during this moment, and almost nothing is audible. But something IS happening. A release of breath marks the end.

(*A subtle cajole.*) I think we're hungry. Usun?³

Listening for pain. No pain.

(*Gentle smile.*) OK. Usun.

Abasiama opens a cupboard and pulls down a yellow Bisquick Pancake box. Abasiama dips in one finger and retrieves a coat of white. She inserts this finger into her mouth.

Fufu America. Wow.

Abasiama takes a small pot from the fridge and warms this pot (containing soup) on the stove. She then retrieves another, different pot and boils water. Abasiama pours Bisquick into the boiling water and starts pounding fufu.

That same dull pain strikes again. Abasiama's gaze narrows and shutters.

(*Soft, firm.*) Stop. We will like it!

1 Ukpong first sang this lullaby to Abasiama when they were both still in Cross River State, before Abasiama came to America. In this play the song functions as Abasiama's way to calm the baby by conjuring the father. Always take note of which verse is being sung. The first verse of the song is a tale of loss, while the second verse is a tale of healing. (See translations on page 81.)

2 Abasiama is having a biological response to stress. These tears are not expressed as active/intentional crying. The tears are more an involuntary leaking of the eyes.

3 Usun is made from root vegetables that were not yet shipped or grown in the States. This is a critically different word than "fufu," which the playwright is using as an all-encompassing term for any variation of a starch product made to be eaten with Nigerian soup.

Abasiama quickly finishes, washes her hands, and eats standing. She deftly molds and scoops food from pot to pot.

Better?

Listening for pain. No pain.

(*Conspiratorially.*) You know, I have to read now.

Another dull pain. Abasiama forges ahead—

(*Rising up.*) Hm. OK. Fine. We'll sing it one more time. Then? We read—

Abasiama goes to her corner. Sings:

mme nti usen atimme edi
afit nti njkpọ atimme edi /
menie owo se ɲdọŋ—

UKPONG. (*Offstage patter.*) mpah pah pah
cross the river
mpah pah pah

Abasiama registers the percussive chanting and freezes.

ford the stream
mpah pah pah
conquer land
mpah pah pah
round again

Abasiama, recognizing the owner of the voice, readjusts her head wrap, trying to restrain her thick plaits. She almost succeeds. Ukpong enters. He's a wildly attractive man in a jaunty hat and bongos.⁴ His singlet⁵ showcases the strong lines of his body and also carries the look of partying long and enjoying much. Though slightly tipsy, he is cogent.

...Wo-man. Womanwomanwoman.⁶ Beautiful womanwomanwoman.
Ama, idem fo? Idem afon? Because eke mmi afon!

4 Bongos are flare jeans.

5 A singlet is a sleeveless men's undershirt.

6 Please refer to the notes at the beginning of the script for an explanation of stacking.

(*Playful.*) Ah! Your hair. (*Pidgin.*⁷) Wettin be this? Come. Come! Kiss me.

...

Not yet time for that? Cool. Search me then. I never fail to bring you things. I promise, you have never ever experienced something like this—

...

(*Switch, childish-contrite.*) OK. I know. I've been very—See! It's done. Pah. I've been spanked.

Ukpong drops to his knees before Abasiama. Abasiama deals, as best she can, with the sudden unexpected sight of her husband. Perhaps the lullaby finally worked...?

Hey, don't look that way. Say something. Anything. No? (*Threat.*) I can call your father. Tell him you're ignoring me.

ABASIAMA. Ukpong...

Ukpong latches onto the sound, and joyfully spins Abasiama around.

UKPONG. Eh-heh! Softsoft. Hey now, my softsoft, look my way. (*Kiss.*) Let me tell you what happen. After you hear, you will totally forgive this your husband. First. I am sorry. Believe. I am.

Ukpong marshals Abasiama to the couch.

Some days ago, Etuk and I—we went in that his Thunderbird. The one his father just bought him. We were riding, like our normal OK. Testing horsepower, and then something came on network radio. AM. This—a social...I don't recall the correct name. A sort of gathering. A kind of meeting—no—yes—wait—they call it “rally”! A rally where people come to talk about our world. It was advertised! I mean, why not? How do I pass over, Ama? *I* was the one who told Etuk to drive to the concourse, get on that freeway, and—hey! Just like the radio foretold. All of these people. People like you have never ever seen. Houston?! Hm. You couldn't imagine it. Whites. Blacks. Hispanic. Asian. Women. Poor. Rich. Who could have thought all of these sorts of people jam-packed in one room? And we rallied about everything oh. Politics? Economy? Love? No subject

7 Nigerian Pidgin is an English-based creolized language that Nigerians across tribal/ethnic lines can use to hear and understand each other.

taboo! And then. ...This speaker! Sampson. Got up there, round midnight, to light the altar on fire on how we have to live and love and that that is the sole purpose of life. It blew my mind. The whole process blew my mind to shards. This kind of peace. This kind of living. Living initiated from a radio...? Remember radio back home? Ama! An instrument of death. But here?! (*Sucks his teeth.*) Never have I seen anything like it. No guns, no thought of a shot being fired. Watch! Americans have the way of it! They have the human understanding! We didn't stop—didn't think about stopping until 4—no 5 A.M. And then everyone went for some drink and it was cool. Nothing but cool. Listen. Even Etuk, with his impatience? Once there? That man sat entranced.

Silence. Ukpong finally looks at Abasiama.

You heard me?

ABASIAMA. ...Mm.

UKPONG. (*Excited.*) OK. Tell me then!

ABASIAMA. (*Confused wonder.*) Ndiọṅọke. It sounds fine.

UKPONG. Just fine. All of that glory and just... "fine"?

ABASIAMA. Ukpong. What do I say?

UKPONG. Something! Anything! Where is the life in you?!

Silence.

(*Shift.*) So...what have you been doing here.

ABASIAMA. ...Studying. We've exams and—I've been working Fiesta⁸ and—

UKPONG. Throwing your moods at me.

ABASIAMA. Wow. Ukpong...hm. I don't know.

UKPONG. Ama, I was just bringing you joy! A happy story into this dank place and you are—

ABASIAMA. It's nothing. I'm nothing. I...

*Abasiama shifts her body, and props up her legs. Dull pain.
Abasiama exhales and attempts to stabilize.*

⁸ Due to Ukpong's misconduct/irresponsibility, Abasiama has taken a job. This is an abnormality. Ukpong has been spending the money sent from home, by his parents, on entertainment and living.

SOJOURNERS

by Mfoniso Udofia

2M, 2W

SOJOURNERS is Part One of the Ufot Cycle, Udofia's sweeping, nine-part saga which chronicles the triumphs and losses of Abasiama Ufot, a Nigerian immigrant, and her family. Abasiama came to America with high hopes for her arranged marriage and her future, intent on earning a degree and returning to Nigeria. But when her husband is seduced by America, she must choose between the Nigerian or American Dream.

"[SOJOURNERS] offer[s] a moving and powerful corrective to the notion that what immigrants leave behind is always awful, and that what they find is always worth the trip. ...[Udofia] makes the eventful plot run with marvelous ease; Abasiama's troubles weave through each other at right angles so that they mimic the complexity and difficulty of real life."

—**The New York Times**

"Udofia subtly exposes fault lines of class, gender, and upbringing when it comes to Nigerian-Americans... With clear-eyed determination, Udofia has penned an immigrant's tale that is neither triumphal...nor a complete refutation of the American Dream... Rather, it is something distinctly more honest about the tradeoffs and sacrifices one makes to settle in a new land."

—**TheaterMania.com**

"SOJOURNERS is...an incisive exploration of the choices immigrants must make to become Americans (not just to come to America). ...[a] deeply beautiful, complex play... it's a rich piece, looking at how America changes the people who come here, for better and for worse."

—**WNYC**

Also by Mfoniso Udofia
HER PORTMANTEAU

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