



MLIMA'S TALE

BY LYNN
NOTTAGE



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



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MLIMA'S TALE was originally developed and produced by the Public Theater (Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director; Patrick Willingham, Executive Director) on April 15, 2018. It was directed by Jo Bonney, the scenic design was by Riccardo Hernandez, the costume design was by Jennifer Moeller, the lighting design was by Lap Chi Chu, the sound design was by Darron L West, the original music was composed by Justin Hicks, and the production stage managers were Linda Marvel and Michael Wilhoite. The cast was as follows:

MLIMA Sahr Ngaujah
PLAYER 1 Kevin Mambo
PLAYER 2 Jojo Gonzalez
PLAYER 3 Ito Aghayere

MLIMA'S TALE is based on the article "The Ivory Highway," by Damon Tabor.

CHARACTERS

MLIMA

RAHMAN

GEEDI

GITHINJI

WAMWARA

ANDREW GRAVES

GUOXI FU

PATIENCE

HASSAN ABDULLA

AZIZ MUHAMMED

CAPTAIN RAMAAKER

CHIEF MATE

HUA HUYNH

THUY FAN

ANGIE

MASTER YEE

ALICE

MR. CHEUNG

HONG FENG

LI JUN

NOTES

Four actors play all of the roles. *Mlima must play Mlima only, and it is highly preferable that a man of African descent be cast in the role.* All other roles may be distributed among the Three Players as works for your production.

If possible, a live musician should be present to augment the sounds of Mlima and the world at large.

The stage is a space that invites transformation, sparse and open. Perhaps projections and media can be used to give us a sense of place. Scenes should fluidly collapse into each other.

There should be a breathless quality to the flow of the action and, as such, no pure blackout until the end of the play.

MLIMA'S TALE

I

Thunder is not yet rain.

A wilderness where a big tusker might seek refuge.

The savannah. Full moon.

An elephant sensing danger calls out to his fellow travelers.

MLIMA. (*With intensity and urgency.*) When I was young I was taught by my grandmother to listen to the night. Really listen...for the rains in the distance...listen to the rustling of the brush...for the cries of friend or foe. She'd say you must listen with your entire body, feel how the earth shifts when there's the slightest disruption, because how you listen can mean the difference between life and death. It's the truth of the savannah, something we all learn at a very young age. Sacred words passed from generation to generation, like stories of the verdant time before the violent crackle, before the drought and the madness... A time of plenty, when the plains and rivers were owned by all, a time recalled by my grandmother with such alacrity that one needn't be nostalgic. She'd say if you really listen, our entire history is on the wind.

He listens and feels the night with his entire body, feet, ears, nose. Movement.

Slowly, layers of sounds of the savannah fill the space.

The crickets, the orchestra of wild animals, cowbells, whistles, and the faraway voices of the Maasai.

Even now, I hear the remnants of stories told by Long Ears, the elder, who knew where to find the sweetest acacia trees or the cool dark mud that was said to keep him ageless.

When pushed he'd tell of how, once, he roamed so far across the

land that it took him one year to find his way back home through the thorny thicket.

He returned with stories of rivers so wide they couldn't be crossed, trees so tall they did battle with the sky, and a sea of bobbing beasts and men. He'd walked across a world with no fences, no roads or resistance. We listened, though no one here believed such a far-fetched tale.

Listens. Enjoying.

I can hear the remnants of laughter, happiness that comes with the rains and reunions around the watering holes. Each hole a memory, a meeting, a sweet encounter, a fight and a friendship.

I hear my dear mother calling me handsome, but it was a WARNING that I'd come to understand as my tusks grew longer and more perfect than my brothers' and sisters'. I hear the first thunder that awakened me to fear. My first sneeze that accompanied the acrid stench of men. I hear the angry words exchanged before fighting Koko Mkimbiaji, we fought until we grew so tired that our only recourse was to become good friends. He made me laugh harder than any creature, even that gossipy egret who for a season clung to my back like a blemish.

He listens with his body.

Still now, I hear Koko Mkimbiaji wailing as his mother and sister died at the end of a poison spear, and anger became his guiding spirit. It took a year of wandering to calm him.

And I hear the song of beautiful Mumbi by the deep river, Mumbi elegant and quiet, brown liquid eyes, I chased her smell for a week before she succumbed to my charm. Mumbi. Mumbi. Mumbi. I was not prepared for the first time we rubbed bodies, touched and committed. If you're listening, I could tell you of all of the wounds I've endured for love. I would share memories of the children we've sired and seen grow.

His body begins to contort with pain. He grows restless.

Mumbi, I'm sorry...so sorry that I haven't made myself known to you lately. I run more than I walk, and I can never catch my breath. They are watching me. Watching always. I hear them all around me.

And I run, more than I walk.

Know I stay away from you and the children because I'm protecting you. My distance is my weapon.

I'm a shadow warrior all around you, listening to the sounds of the night. I hear everything. I hear you. I hear you.

He charges across the stage. A warrior.

(A battle cry.) Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

He collapses and writhes in pain. He gets up and charges again.

(A battle cry.) Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

II Even the night has ears.

Savannah. Moonlight.

From a short distance, two Somali poachers chewing khat watch Mlima die. One man clutches a bow and arrow.

RAHMAN. Why won't he die already?

GEEDI. He's a fighter. He knows we've been hunting him.

RAHMAN. How?

GEEDI. He smells you.

RAHMAN. Me?

GEEDI. Yes. Your bush stink! Bulls smell their enemies from afar. Why do you think he's so difficult to track? He...he is an old one. A wanderer. Cleverer than most.

RAHMAN. You think he hears us?

GEEDI. Yes. He do.

Mlima groans. Geedi looks him in the eyes.

MLIMA. *(Shouting/agony.)* If you're listening, remember, I count forty-eight rains from memory, five summers of dried grass. *(Grunts.)*

RAHMAN. Why does he make too big noise?!

GEEDI. He's fighting. Battling death.

Mlima cries out again in agony.

MLIMA. If you can hear me, tell my children that I fought before death.

RAHMAN. Shoot him!

GEEDI. No. Don't want to waste bullets.

Geedi spits.

The gunshot, it'll call out the rangers. And I don't want that trouble tonight.

RAHMAN. Yare say give 'em beer, khat, they'll disappear quick-quick.

GEEDI. For a man that never kill a thing bigger than the caterpillar Yare have much opinions.

MLIMA. (*Agony.*) Koko Mkimbaji, if you're listening. Don't come looking for me, my brother. Remember what I told you the last day of the rains. Let reason rule your anger, and don't come to mourn me! Run! Run!

RAHMAN. Too big noise.

MLIMA. RUN!

RAHMAN. Shoot him Geedi.

GEEDI. No, it won't be long, give me the axe!

Rahman spits and gives Geedi the axe.

RAHMAN. Let's be quick-quick about this. I don't like it here.

GEEDI. Be still. These last breaths don't belong to us.

RAHMAN. I never watch one die, not like this.

GEEDI. Poison better. You'll thank me.

Geedi spits.

RAHMAN. He's so big.

GEEDI. They call him Mlima, the mountain.

RAHMAN. All these nights of quiet.

GEEDI. Yes. He give us a good run.

RAHMAN. I fear we'll go home like beggars, and my wife, she'll go back to her family with an empty belly.

GEEDI. Don't worry Rahman, you family'll be fed.

Geedi squats next to the writhing Mlima.

You hard to find, my friend. You think you is cleverer than me. You rob us of forty good nights spent in the wet bush. But, you make us rich-rich.

MLIMA. (*Shouting/agonny.*) If you're listening, remember, I was once a proud warrior, unafraid to be seen.

GEEDI. Shhh. Don't fight. Don't. Don't fight.

MLIMA. I...AM...I—

GEEDI. Shh.

Mlima groans. The poacher chops the elephant's face with the machete. Blood. Cries of agony. Silence.

RAHMAN. You think it true, what Maasai say?

GEEDI. What that?

RAHMAN. If you not give elephant proper burial he'll haunt you forever.

GEEDI. They infidel. I no believe it.

RAHMAN. But, you...you certain?

GEEDI. Yes. My father took me on my first hunt when I be eleven. He guide White infidel from overseas. This man want to kill bull elephant. He carry a big-big gun, too big, but still he afraid. Afraid of night sound. Afraid of the wind in the high grass. This is back when you kill elephant and no one trouble you.

Geedi imitates a hyena.

My father laugh at this man, but take his good money. He tell me that there be no sport in killing elephant, unless you kill with bow and arrow, spear, like warrior. It is creature to be respected, you must look it in the eye as it die. Give it the honor of knowing the hand that sent him to the other side. Right there. (*Points to the chest of the dying creature.*) That's where my father stick 'em, between the leg and chest. And the poison it take elephant, give it long sleep. He say only infidel or White man kill elephant for sport. He teach me hunger be the only reason to kill.

RAHMAN. So, he no haunt us?

GEEDI. That's up to you, Rahman. I know where I stand, and I will sleep at night.

MLIMA'S TALE

by Lynn Nottage

3 men, 1 woman (doubling)

Mlima is a magnificent elephant trapped by the underground international ivory market. As he follows a trail littered by a history of greed, Mlima takes us on a journey through memory, fear, tradition, and the penumbra between want and need.

"Those of you who don't believe in ghosts are likely to think again after seeing MLIMA'S TALE, Lynn Nottage's beautiful, endlessly echoing portrait of a murder and its afterlife. ... Each character, inhabiting a rung on an ascending ladder of power, is very clearly defined but without grotesque caricature. ... [Nottage] packs a wealth of cultural, political and economic detail into each scene, from Maasai superstitions to the statistics of the illegal ivory trade."

—**The New York Times**

"[MLIMA'S TALE] is yet another towering American drama. While the play bears little relation to The Emperor Jones, it shares the relentless urgency and pulse of O'Neill's 98-year-old masterwork. ... after Ruined and Sweat and MLIMA'S TALE, we might well start to discuss O'Neill and Nottage in tandem."

—**NYStageReview.com**

"The world Nottage has brought to the stage is rich with detail, its characters complex and engaging."

—**Time Out New York**

"Eighty straight minutes of searing brilliance, MLIMA'S TALE makes a strong argument for plausible deniability as a luxury far greater than ivory, afforded to only the most privileged."

—**TheaterMania.com**

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INTIMATE APPAREL
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