



# KING JAMES

BY RAJIV JOSEPH



**DPS**

DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE

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*This play is dedicated to The Brothers Pice  
Matthew Aufdenspring  
Dan Herbst  
Gym Hinderer  
Dan Strauss*

KING JAMES was co-commissioned by Steppenwolf Theatre Company (Anna D. Shapiro, Artistic Director; David Schmitz, Executive Director) and Center Theatre Group (Michael Ritchie, Artistic Director; Douglas C. Baker, Producing Director), and received its world premiere in 2022 in co-productions at Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago, and Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles. It was directed by Kenny Leon, the scenic design was by Todd Rosenthal, the costume design was by Samantha C. Jones, the lighting design was by Lee Fiskness, the sound design was by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen, the production stage manager at Steppenwolf was Laura D. Glenn, and the production stage manager at Center Theatre Group was David S. Franklin. The cast was as follows:

SHAWN .....	Glenn Davis
MATT .....	Chris Perfetti
DJ .....	Khloe Janel

## **SPECIAL THANKS TO**

The Lark Play Development Center, SPACE on Ryder Farm, and  
The New Harmony Project.

## **CHARACTERS**

SHAWN, Black, ages 21, 27, 31, and 33

MATT, white, same

## **TIME**

2004, 2010, 2014, 2016

## **PLACE**

Cleveland Heights, Ohio

# KING JAMES

1ST QUARTER

February 2004

Rookie of the Year

*Matt, twenty-one, an inexperienced bartender, sits on the bar at La Cave du Vin, a wine bar on the east side of Cleveland. He's a sloppy guy trying to look semi-professional...and not succeeding.*

*The place is empty except for him.*

*The bar is partially underground. The walls are old stone. It resembles more a chapel than a bar. Stained glass in the archway over the front door.*

*It's late afternoon. Shafts of golden light stream through the windows. As the scene progresses, the sun will set.*

*Matt reads the sports section of a local newspaper. Reading this seems to fill him with increasing angst and then he abruptly crumples the newspaper into a ball.*

*Then he shoots for a trash can across the room.*

*He misses terribly. He sighs.*

*Gets off the bar, makes his way to the balled up paper...but then instead of just tossing it away, he's engaged in an imagined game of one-on-one...*

**MATT.** My board! Ahh... Ahh...

*He tries a turnaround fadeaway jump shot. Misses badly again.*

Foul! Where's the foul! Come on ref...

*He lunges for the ball, scoops it up, and tries a quick shot to the waste can...*

*Misses badly.*

Goddamnit!

*Another furious rebound. Fake dribble... Fake dribble.*

Ahh...ahhh...

*A fake turnaround, then a very fake crossover...*

*As he does all this nonsense, he doesn't notice Shawn enter the bar.*

*Shawn is meticulously dressed, almost preppy.*

*He watches Matt.*

Five! Four! Three! Two...!

*His counting is not equal in rhythm...the distance between Two and One is a longer time...*

For the GAME...!

*Steps back... Shoots...*

*Terrible miss.*

Mother fucking shit...

*Another rebound... Easy shot. Misses.*

*(Freaks out.) Yaaggggh!*

*He picks up the ball. Now he notices Shawn.*

Hey.

*Matt stares at him. Then, because he's standing next to the trash bin, just slams the ball into the bin.*

And One.

*Beat.*

Hey. Welcome.

You can sit anywhere.

**SHAWN.** Are you Matt?



**MATT.** Oh! Yeah...are you...are you Shawn?

**SHAWN.** Yeah.

**MATT.** What's up?

**SHAWN.** Hey.

*Awkward beat. The weirdness of Matt's imaginary game hangs in the air.*

**MATT.** You ball?

**SHAWN.** What?

**MATT.** Do You Ball.

**SHAWN.** Do I play basketball?

**MATT.** I played point in Middle School.

**SHAWN.** Cool.

**MATT.** Can I get you a drink? We have wine.

**SHAWN.** I'm good, man.

**MATT.** You don't like wine?

**SHAWN.** I don't drink.

**MATT.** This is a wine bar. *La Cave du Vin.*

**SHAWN.** *The Cave of Wine.*

**MATT.** Whoa, you speak French?

**SHAWN.** Nah.

**MATT.** Yeah, me neither.

I've been trying to cultivate a taste in wine.

**SHAWN.** Cool.

**MATT.** This place used to be a chapel.

**SHAWN.** I thought it was a Baskin-Robbins.

**MATT.** Before that. Look: stained glass.

**SHAWN.** Yeah, nice.

So I'm here about your um...season ticket package?

**MATT.** Yeah. Right.

**SHAWN.** Are you still selling it?

**MATT.** *(Moody.)* I mean, I guess.

**SHAWN.** Well are you or aren't you?

**MATT.** (*Weirdly aggressive.*) I'm only selling it as a package. I'm not selling games piecemeal.

**SHAWN.** That's what Cedric said.

**MATT.** Cedric explained that to you?

**SHAWN.** I was wondering about the price. Cedric didn't know, and I tried texting you.

**MATT.** You tried what?

**SHAWN.** On your phone. Do you receive text messages?

**MATT.** You mean email?

**SHAWN.** No text messages.

**MATT.** Isn't that what email is? I have a good phone. Motorola Razr. Shit is slim.

**SHAWN.** How much are you asking for them? For the tickets.

**MATT.** Before I go quoting prices, I want to be clear about what's actually for sale here. Okay?

**SHAWN.** Sure.

**MATT.** The Cavs have nineteen home games left this season. I have season tickets. Which means I have two tickets to every one of them—including premium games against the Lakers, Pistons, and Celtics. Lakers is next week. Shaq and Kobe. You could scalp that pair alone and make half your money back. So for these remaining nineteen home games I want sixty-five hundred. Which is a deal.

**SHAWN.** You want six thousand five hundred dollars?

**MATT.** Which is kind. That is me being kind.

**SHAWN.** Sorry man. No way. I wish you would have just texted me back, you would have saved me the trip over here.

**MATT.** *Texting*, I don't know what that means. What does that mean?

**SHAWN.** Lemme see your phone.

*Beat.*

Yeah, so you have seventy-three unread text messages...

**MATT.** Whaaat?

**SHAWN.** (*Shows him.*) Look, people can text you messages on your phone...

**MATT.** That's crazy. Look at all those people.

*Beat.*

*Amanda texted me?*

*Shawn clicks something, they both read Amanda's salacious text. Shawn hands the phone back.*

**SHAWN.** Yeah, man, so *that's* why you need to check your texts.

*Matt just stands there, clicking through seventy-three texts.*

So can I just buy a couple games off you?

**MATT.** (*Not looking up from phone.*) I'm only selling the whole package. Not piecemeal.

**SHAWN.** Well, sixty-five hundred is steep for me.

**MATT.** Sixty-five hundred is a deal. These tickets will all go up in value closer to game time, and you could probably get a lot more money for them.

**SHAWN.** Then why don't you do that?

**MATT.** I need money now.

Face value on each ticket is one fifty. Two tickets per game, so three hundred for each game. Three hundred times nineteen is fifty-seven hundred. Then, with taxes and handling fees, sixty-five hundred. I can't believe I have all these messages!

**SHAWN.** Wait so that's...eight hundred bucks for handling fees? What's handling fees?

**MATT.** Me, handling this shit, right now.

**SHAWN.** I can give you two thousand.

**MATT.** No way. I could sell these online for what I'm asking.

**SHAWN.** Then why don't you do that?

**MATT.** I don't trust the internet.

**SHAWN.** Okay.

**MATT.** It's not just that! I need to know the person buying this! It has to be someone who's going to appreciate these seats! Section C-126. That's midcourt.

**SHAWN.** Like I said I can give you two thousand.

**MATT.** No way, I can't do that.

*Beat.*

You're never gonna get to see LeBron's Rookie Year again.

No matter what happens, this is the first time.

Rookie of the year.

**SHAWN.** I dunno. Maybe Carmelo.

**MATT.** Absolutely no disrespect to Carmelo, I love Carmelo, but it's not even close. Have you ever seen LeBron? You seen him live yet?

**SHAWN.** No.

**MATT.** He's insane.

**SHAWN.** I know.

**MATT.** No, you don't know. You don't know nothin' till you see him in person. He is insane. He can run the length of the court in four steps. I saw him do it, rim to rim.

Believe me, sixty-five hundred is worth every penny. Shit, I'll waive the handling fees. Face value: fifty-seven hundred. For you, right now.

**SHAWN.** I can't do it man. Sorry.

**MATT.** That's a great deal, man, it's a great deal.

**SHAWN.** I'm sure it is, but I can't do it.

**MATT.** Oh I get it. Right. *Bandwagon fan.*

**SHAWN.** What? No, I'm / not.

**MATT.** / Lot of people never went to a game before LeBron came here. Lot of / bandwagon fans.

**SHAWN.** (*Defensive.*) / I've always been a fan. My whole life. Ask me anything. About the Cavs, ask me anything.

**MATT.** I don't care, dude.

**SHAWN.** Obviously you care. I know my shit, okay? That team saved my life. So don't tell me I'm a bandwagon fan. I'm not.

**MATT.** What do you mean they saved your life?

**SHAWN.** Nothing, just that I'm a fan, a legit fan.

**MATT.** But what do you mean the Cavs saved your life?

SHAWN. I dunno. Growing up... You know. They got me through.

MATT. Through what?

SHAWN. Nothing dramatic. Just standard childhood shit.

MATT. You talking Daugherty, Price, and them?

SHAWN. Yeah.

MATT. Who was your favorite player on that team?

SHAWN. Price.

MATT. For me, it was Daugherty. He was our rock. Price was great too.

SHAWN. Best point guard of his era.

MATT. That's a ludicrous claim. Isaiah.

SHAWN. He was better than Isaiah.

MATT. That's a ludicrous claim. Isaiah is the best point guard of all time and he won two rings. Price never even got to a Finals.

SHAWN. I guess we can agree to disagree.

MATT. *No.* You're *wrong*. What you're saying is *stupid*.

SHAWN. That team should have won a Finals, they *could* have.

MATT. I know!

SHAWN. If not for Jordan.

MATT. Yeah. Right. Jordan. I hated Jordan.

SHAWN. You hated him?

MATT. I mean, no—I loved him. But I also kinda hated him.

SHAWN. So like... What about LeBron? You think he can be as good as MJ?

MATT. He already is. He's better.

SHAWN. (*Laughs.*) What? What does that mean?

MATT. Means LeBron has already eclipsed Jordan.

SHAWN. He's a *rookie*, what are you *talking* about?

MATT. Better than Jordan.

SHAWN. He hasn't done anything yet!

MATT. Don't matter. It's *implicational*.

SHAWN. That's crazy.

**MATT.** See, this is the problem with America.

**SHAWN.** What is?

**MATT.** You ever see Jordan play live?

**SHAWN.** No.

**MATT.** Jordan was insane.

**SHAWN.** *That's what I'm saying.* There's no way LeBron is *already* better than him.

**MATT.** Yeah, well, *tomato/tomaato*, this is the problem with America.

**SHAWN.** *What* is the problem with America?

**MATT.** Everything. The Media. The way people talk. My dad's friend owns this bar downtown? It was about to go out of business... and then LeBron comes to town, and now he's opening a second location on the west side.

**SHAWN.** How is that a problem with America?

**MATT.** How is it *not*?!

Is it a good thing that the economic well-being of Cleveland hinges on the talent of a teenager from Akron? Is that good for *America*?

**SHAWN.** Look man, I dunno.

They got the Lakers next week right? Sell me those tickets.

**MATT.** I can't, it's part of the package.

**SHAWN.** I *want* the whole package. Look, Cedric said you were cool, and...

**MATT.** —Cedric said I was cool?

**SHAWN.** Yeah.

**MATT.** Cedric's a good guy.

*Beat.*

How do you know him? You know him from high school?

**SHAWN.** Yeah.

**MATT.** You went to Ignatius?

**SHAWN.** Yeah.

**MATT.** I was gonna go there too, but my dad refused to drop the

ducats on me. He knew I was gonna get like straight C's wherever I went. He told me to fuck off for free at Heights.

*Beat.*

Were you on scholarship or something?

**SHAWN.** Why would you ask me that?

**MATT.** I didn't mean anything by it.

**SHAWN.** Do I look poor to you?

**MATT.** No.

**SHAWN.** Then why'd you ask me that?

**MATT.** Because Saint Ignatius is full of rich Irish Catholic douchebags, and you don't fit that profile. You're not like those guys. You're like me.

**SHAWN.** I'm not like you.

**MATT.** You don't even know me, man, you could be like me.

I feel like I'm like *you*.

I mean, I never thought about it the way you said it, but the Cavs got me through my childhood too. Going to the games was like the best thing in my life when I was a kid. It was the only time my dad was ever nice to me.

**SHAWN.** Look, you want to sell me some tickets or not?

**MATT.** You know Alan D.?

**SHAWN.** Who?

**MATT.** Alan. DiPietra. We call him Alan D. You know him? He went to Ignatius.

**SHAWN.** (*Does not like Alan.*) Yeah, I know Alan.

**MATT.** He's coming over here later tonight. He's gonna give me four grand for the package, so unless you can do better than that, I can't help you out.

**SHAWN.** So you were trying to trick me into paying more.

**MATT.** Man, I'm just trying to pay my debts. I need cash, I need it now.

**SHAWN.** You know Alan?

**MATT.** I know him.

**SHAWN.** How well?

**MATT.** I know him normal. Why, you don't like Alan?

**SHAWN.** Alan's one of those dudes who, like what you said—bandwagon guy. He became a Bulls fan when Jordan was winning titles. He was a Cowboys fan when they were winning. He's a Yankees fan.

I dunno. Alan's awright I guess.

I just don't have a lot of respect for people like that. Especially if you're from Cleveland. Of course, now Alan's wearing his Cavs gear again since LeBron got here.

**MATT.** (*Legit offended.*) I didn't know that. About Alan. I didn't know he was...that kind of person.

**SHAWN.** Look, I'll give you twenty-five hundred for the whole package.

**MATT.** That's way too little! You think I *want* to sell these tickets? This is killing me.

**SHAWN.** Look, man. I'm no Alan DiPietra. I don't have money. I'm out here working three jobs.

**MATT.** You work three jobs? What's your three jobs?

**SHAWN.** (*Sighs.*) I temp at a law firm and I wash dishes at Nighttown.

**MATT.** That's two jobs.

**SHAWN.** My third job is something I do on my own. I write. I'm like...a writer.

**MATT.** What do you write?

**SHAWN.** Nothin', man. Short stories.

**MATT.** You make money doing that?

**SHAWN.** Sometimes.

**MATT.** How much?

**SHAWN.** Okay, look: three thousand for the package. Final offer.

**MATT.** You really make money writing short stories?

**SHAWN.** I made money on one short story.

**MATT.** How much money.

**SHAWN.** None of your business.



**MATT.** I'm just curious. I didn't know normal people could make money writing short stories.

**SHAWN.** They can't. I'm not normal.

**MATT.** (*Impressed.*) Okay! My man! That's solid. I like that.

**SHAWN.** Look...

Three thousand. You good?

**MATT.** You're out of your mind. Four thousand is my absolute minimum. I have debts man, this is what you don't understand. I'm desperate. I need money, I can't be cutting deals with you. Even if Alan D. is traitorous, I gotta go with him.

*Beat.*

You've got three thousand bucks—just go buy tickets.

**SHAWN.** They're hard to come by. Everyone's rolling out to see LeBron.

**MATT.** You can still get tickets.

**SHAWN.** Nosebleeds. That's all that's available. I checked. I want good seats. I just...I...

*Beat.*

I made this deal with myself a while back. The first thing I'd ever do if I ever got some money—like disposable income—I'd buy good tickets to see the Cavs. And it just happened, like...*this week.*

Like, yesterday.

I got a check in the mail. Unexpected. And...

**MATT.** From what? From the story you sold?

**SHAWN.** (*Sighs.*) Yeah.

**MATT.** You wrote something and someone bought it and you got money?

**SHAWN.** Yeah.

**MATT.** Congrats man. That's mad impressive.

**SHAWN.** Thanks.

**MATT.** That musta felt good.

**SHAWN.** It did. And that night I bumped into Cedric and he mentioned you, and how you were trying to unload this season ticket package, and you know, he vouched for you...and it just

seemed like it was meant to be. It's a big deal for me because I've never actually been to a game.

**MATT.** *You've never been to a game?*

**SHAWN.** Not yet.

**MATT.** *Why Not?*

**SHAWN.** It just never happened.

**MATT.** Whatever, man, you are a total bandwagon fan!

**SHAWN.** I told you I'm not! I've just never been to a game!

**MATT.** How is that possible?

**SHAWN.** Tickets are expensive!

**MATT.** I mean...I dunno. It depends.

**SHAWN.** It depends on what you consider to be expensive. It depends on a lot of things! It's not like I never tried to go, I mean, when I was ten years old, I won tickets off the radio. I did. I called into Magic 105.7 and won two tickets to the Cavs–Spurs game. I was even on the radio, all excited that I won, and they mailed me the tickets, but the night of the game, my dad was supposed to take me, but then he had to work late. I just didn't have anyone else to go with, you know? So I watched it alone in our basement. I held the tickets in my hand while I watched. They got damp and soft because I held them so tight the whole time. And that's when I made this oath to myself that I would take myself to a game when I could, when I was grown up and making money. That's the deal I made.

*Beat.*

Daugherty just destroyed David Robinson that night. He scored forty points.

*Beat; Matt really feels bad for Shawn.*

**MATT.** You couldn't get anyone to take you?

**SHAWN.** No.

**MATT.** What about your mom?

**SHAWN.** She couldn't.

**MATT.** Why not?

**SHAWN.** My mom doesn't drive.

**MATT.** Oh...yeah...that's right.

Cedric, he um...

He told me your mom was in a wheelchair.

**SHAWN.** Cedric told you that?

**MATT.** Yeah. Sorry. That sucks.

*Beat; Shawn does not like to be known.*

**SHAWN.** She has MS.

**MATT.** Oh. I'm sorry.

**SHAWN.** Don't worry about it.

**MATT.** What's that mean? I mean, I know MS is a bad disease and all...but...

**SHAWN.** It means she doesn't drive.

**MATT.** Yeah.

That sucks, about not going to the game.

*Beat.*

I'm sorry about your mom, man.

**SHAWN.** Don't worry about it.

**MATT.** So what's your story about? The one you sold.

**SHAWN.** It's just a short story.

It's about a kid.

**MATT.** What kind of kid? Like a child? Or a baby goat.

**SHAWN.** A kid. A child. A ten-year-old kid.

*He doesn't want to give in, but does.*

His older sister leaves for college. And it's about how different it is for him to be in the house without her. And so he goes into the attic and he finds this crawl space up there and he crawls into it.

**MATT.** *Nice.* Like Narnia.

**SHAWN.** No, it's not like Narnia.

**MATT.** What's in the crawl space?

**SHAWN.** Nothing.

**MATT.** What does the kid do in there?

**SHAWN.** He watches a mouse.

**MATT.** The mouse talks to him?

**SHAWN.** No, it's just a mouse. The boy has a sandwich and he feeds him crumbs.

**MATT.** He doesn't go into a magical land?

**SHAWN.** No.

*Matt considers that.*

**MATT.** Did you ever think he should, like, go into a magical land?

**SHAWN.** It's not that kind of story.

**MATT.** What kind of story is it?

**SHAWN.** It's just a story.

**MATT.** But what's it *about*?

**SHAWN.** It's about being alone.

**MATT.** But *how*?

**SHAWN.** You have to read it.

**MATT.** But why would anyone want to read about being alone?

**SHAWN.** It's just a story man. People can read it or not, I don't care.

**MATT.** What's the story called?

**SHAWN.** It's called "The Mouse."

**MATT.** Because of the mouse?

**SHAWN.** Yeah.

**MATT.** So, it's about being lonely?

**SHAWN.** No, it's about being alone.

**MATT.** What's the difference?

**SHAWN.** (*Irritated.*) I dunno, it's like, a huge difference I think.

*Beat.*

Can I see the tickets? Do you have them with you?

*Matt takes a manila envelope from a bag and puts it on the bar. Shawn pulls out a bunch of tickets.*

**MATT.** They're all there. It's legit.

**SHAWN.** These tickets are so nice. They're glossy.

**MATT.** These are nothing. Courtside seats? Sometimes they have a hologram on them.

**SHAWN.** I could frame these. Hang them up.

**MATT.** They're good tickets. They were my dad's. He's had them since I was six. We went to basically every game together. They're mine now.

**SHAWN.** Oh. I'm sorry man.

**MATT.** What? No, he didn't *die*. Jesus.

**SHAWN.** Oh.

**MATT.** He can't go to games anymore. He got some inner ear thing, and loud places make him crazy. He can't handle the crowd noise.

*(So bitter.)* So he's giving up his season tickets NOW. *As soon as LeBron comes to town.*

*He sighs, as if this whole situation is killing him.*

And now I'm sitting here selling these tickets for twenty cents on the dollar.

**SHAWN.** What happened?

**MATT.** I dunno, it was an ear infection. He doesn't really talk about it.

**SHAWN.** No I mean—why are you selling them? I mean: Why do you need money so bad?

**MATT.** It's nothing *lurid*. I made a bad investment. That's all. Borrowed some money. *Lost* some money. I just need cash ASAP.

*Beat.*

You're not the only motherfucka round here with a dream, yo. You wanna be a writer, I wanna own an establishment.

**SHAWN.** Okay.

**MATT.** I mean, that's the ultimate goal.

Downtown. Something cool. Like where players go after games.

*(Proud.)* I was part of this investment team. We wanted to create this high-end bowling alley—like with bottle service and DJs and stuff. Exclusive shit. But it fell through, because another bowling alley got put up in there.

And that one, it's more like a regular bowling alley.

Our idea was so much better.

But I lost a lot of money and my parents were pretty pissed, 'cause

**The play doesn't end here...**

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