

2002 PULITZER PRIZE FOR DRAMA



WRITTEN BY

TOPDOG UNDERDOG



SUZAN-LORI PARKS

TOPDOG / GODYEDNO

SUZAN-LORI PARKS

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藏书章

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In January 1999 I was thinking about a play I'd written seven years earlier called *The America Play*. In that play's first act we watch a black man who has fashioned a career for himself: he sits in an arcade impersonating Abraham Lincoln and letting people come and play at shooting him dead—like John Wilkes Booth shot our sixteenth president in 1865 during a performance at Ford's Theatre. So I was thinking about my old play when another black Lincoln impersonator, unrelated to the first guy, came to mind: a new character for a new play. This time I would just focus on his home life. This new Lincoln impersonator's real name would be Lincoln. He would be a former 3-card monte hustler. He would live with his brother, a man named Booth.

My interest in 3-card monte began one day when my husband Paul and I were walking along Canal Street and saw some guys doing the shell game. I was fascinated because, while I'd seen the scam before, this time I had someone whispering a running commentary in my ear, a kind of play-by-play, explaining the ins and outs of the scam, what was really going down. Sure enough the commentator was my husband. Turns out that, back in the days when he played in the Muddy Waters Blues Band, Paul would, for fun, hustle 3-card monte between sets. So when we got home that day he sat me down and showed me how to throw the cards.

This is a play about family wounds and healing. Welcome to the family.

Suzan-Lori Parks

April 2002

Production History

Topdog/Underdog had its world premiere on July 22, 2001, at The Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival (George C. Wolfe, Producer) with support from AT&T:OnStage. The director was George C. Wolfe. The scenic design was by Riccardo Hernández, costume design was by Emilio Sosa, lighting design was by Scott Zielinski, sound design was by Dan Moses Schreier, the production stage manager was Rick Steiger and the stage manager was Gwendolyn M. Gilliam. The cast was:

Booth
Lincoln

Don Cheadle
Jeffrey Wright

Topdog/Underdog opened on Broadway at the Ambassador Theatre on April 7, 2002. The director was George C. Wolfe. The scenic design was by Riccardo Hernández, costume design was by Emilio Sosa, lighting design was by Scott Zielinski, sound design was by Dan Moses Schreier, the production stage manager was Rick Steiger and the stage manager was Gwendolyn M. Gilliam. The cast was:

Booth
Lincoln

Mos Def
Jeffrey Wright

UNDERDOG / GODPOT

The Players

Lincoln

the topdog

Booth

(aka 3-Card), the underdog

Place

here

Time

now

Author's Notes: From the “Elements of Style”

I'm continuing the use of my slightly unconventional theatrical elements. Here's a road map.

■ *(Rest)*

Take a little time, a pause, a breather; make a transition.

■ A Spell

An elongated and heightened (*Rest*). Denoted by repetition of figures' names with no dialogue. Has sort of an architectural look:

Lincoln

Booth

Lincoln

Booth

This is a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state. While no action or stage business is necessary, directors should fill this moment as they best see fit.

■ [Brackets in the text indicate optional cuts for production.]

■ (Parentheses around dialogue indicate softly spoken passages (asides; sotto voce)).

I am God in nature;
I am a weed by the wall.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson
From “Circles”
Essays: First Series (1841)

Scene One

Thursday evening.

A seedily furnished rooming house room.

A bed, a reclining chair, a small wooden chair,
some other stuff but not much else.

Booth, a black man in his early 30s, practices his
3-card monte scam on the classic setup:
3 playing cards and the cardboard playing board
atop 2 mismatched milk crates.

His moves and accompanying patter are,
for the most part, studied and awkward.

Booth

Watch me close watch me close now: who-see-thuh-red-card-who-see-thuh-red-card? I-see-thuh-red-card. Thuh-red-card-is-thuh-winner. Pick-thuh-red-card-you-pick-uh-winner. Pick-uh-black-card-you-pick-uh-loser. Theres-thuh-loser, yeah, theres-thuh-black-card, theres-thuh-other-loser-and-theres-thuh-red-card, thuh-winner.

(Rest)

Watch me close watch me close now: 3-Card-throws-thuh-cards-lightning-fast. 3-Card-thats-me-and-Ima-last. Watch-me-throw-cause-here-I-go. One-good-pickll-get-you-in, 2-good-picks-and-you-gone-win. See-thuh-red-card-see-thuh-red-card-who-see-thuh-red-card?

(Rest)

Dont touch my cards, man, just point to thuh one you want. You-pick-that-card-you-pick-a-loser, yeah, that-cards-a-loser. You-pick-that-card-thats-thuh-other-loser. You-pick-that-card-you-pick-a-winner. Follow that card. You gotta chase that card. You-pick-thuh-dark-deuce-thats-a-loser-

other-dark-deuces-thuh-other-loser, red-deuce, thuh-deuce-of-heartsll-win-it-all. Follow thuh red card.

(Rest)

Ima show you thuh cards: 2 black cards but only one heart. Now watch me now. Who-sees-thuh-red-card-who-knows-where-its-at? Go on, man, point to thuh card. Put yr money down cause you aint no clown. No? Ah you had thuh card, but you didnt have thuh heart.

(Rest)

You wanna bet? 500 dollars? Shoot. You musta been watching 3-Card real close. Ok. Lay the cash in my hand cause 3-Cards thuh man. Thank you, mister. This card you say?

(Rest)

Wrong! Sucker! Fool! Asshole! Bastard! I bet yr daddy heard how stupid you was and drank himself to death just cause he didnt wanna have nothing to do witchu! I bet yr mama seen you when you was born and she wished she was dead, sucker! Ha Ha Ha! And 3-Card, once again, wins all thuh money!!

(Rest)

What? Cops looking my way? Fold up thuh game, and walk away. Sneak outa sight. Set up on another corner.

(Rest)

Yeah.

(Rest)

Having won the imaginary loot and dodged the imaginary cops, Booth sets up his equipment and starts practicing his scam all over again.

Lincoln comes in quietly. He is a black man in his later 30s.

He is dressed in an antique frock coat and wears a top hat and fake beard, that is, he is dressed to look like Abraham Lincoln. He surreptitiously walks into the room to stand right behind Booth, who, engrossed in his cards, does not notice Lincoln right away.

Booth

Watch me close watch me close now: who-see-thuh-red-card-who-see-thuh-red-card? I-see-thuh-red-card. Thuh-

red-card-is-thuh-winner. Pick-thuh-red-card-you-pick-uh-winner. Pick-uh-black-card-you-pick-uh-loser. Theres-thuh-loser-yeah-theres-thuh-black-card, theres-thuh-other-loser-and-theres-thuh-red-card, thuh-winner. Don't touch my cards, man, don't—

(*Rest*)

Dont do that shit. Dont do that shit. Dont do that shit!

Booth, sensing someone behind him, whirls around, pulling a gun from his pants. While the presence of Lincoln doesnt surprise him, the Lincoln costume does.

Booth

And woah, man dont *ever* be doing that shit! Who thuh fuck you think you is coming in my shit all spooked out and shit. You pull that one more time I'll shoot you!

Lincoln

I only had a minute to make the bus.

Booth

Bullshit.

Lincoln

Not completely. I mean, its either bull or shit, but not a complete lie so it aint bullshit, right?

(*Rest*)

Put yr gun away.

Booth

Take off the damn hat at least.

Lincoln takes off the stovepipe hat.

Booth puts his gun away.

Lincoln

Its cold out there. This thing kept my head warm.

Booth

I dont like you wearing that bullshit, that shit that bull that disguise that getup that motherdisfuckingise anywhere in the daddy-dicksticking vicinity of my humble abode.

Lincoln takes off the beard.

Lincoln
Better?

Booth
Take off the damn coat too. Damn, man. Bad enough you got to wear that shit all day you come up in here wearing it. What my women gonna say?

Lincoln
What women?

Booth
I got a date with Grace tomorrow. Shes in love with me again but she dont know it yet. Aint no man can love her the way I can. She sees you in that getup its gonna reflect bad on me. She coulda seen you coming down the street. Shit. Could be standing outside right now taking her ring off and throwing it on the sidewalk.

Booth takes a peek out the window.

Booth
I got her this ring today. Diamond. Well, diamond-esque, but it looks just as good as the real thing. Asked her what size she wore. She say 7 so I go boost a size 6 and a half, right? Show it to her and she loves it and I shove it on her finger and its a tight fit right, so she cant just take it off on a whim, like she did the last one I gave her. Smooth, right?

Booth takes another peek out the window.

Lincoln
She out there?

Booth
Nope. Coast is clear.

Lincoln
You boosted a ring?

Booth

Yeah. I thought about spending my inheritance on it but—take off that damn coat, man, you make me nervous standing there looking like a spook, and that damn face paint, take it off. You should take all of it off at work and leave it there.

Lincoln

I dont bring it home someone might steal it.

Booth

At least *take it off* there, then.

Lincoln

Yeah.
(*Rest*)

Lincoln takes off the frock coat and applies cold cream, removing the whiteface.

Lincoln

I was riding the bus. Really I only had a minute to make my bus and I was sitting in the arcade thinking, should I change into my street clothes or should I make the bus? Nobody was in there today anyway. Middle of the week middle of winter. Not like on weekends. Weekends the place is packed. So Im riding the bus home. And this kid asked me for my autograph. I pretended I didnt hear him at first. I'd had a long day. But he kept asking. Theyd just done Lincoln in history class and he knew all about him, he'd been to the arcade but, I dunno, for some reason he was tripping cause there was Honest Abe right beside him on the bus. I wanted to tell him to go fuck hisself. But then I got a look at him. A little rich kid. Born on easy street, you know the type. So I waited until I could tell he really wanted it, the autograph, and I told him he could have it for 10 bucks. I was gonna say 5, cause of the Lincoln connection but something in me made me ask for 10.

Booth

But he didnt have a 10. All he had was a penny. So you took the penny.

Lincoln

All he had was a 20. So I took the 20 and told him to meet me on the bus tomorrow and Honest Abe would give him the change.

Booth

Shit.

Lincoln

Shit is right.

(Rest)

Booth

Whatd you do with thuh 20?

Lincoln

Bought drinks at Luckys. A round for everybody. They got a kick out of the getup.

Booth

You shoulda called me down.

Lincoln

Next time, bro.

(Rest)

You making bookshelves? With the milk crates, you making bookshelves?

Booth

Yeah, big bro, Im making bookshelves.

Lincoln

Whats the cardboard part for?

Booth

Versatility.

Lincoln

Oh.