

THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC

A play by Koffi Kwahulé

translated and adapted by
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PLACE

New York City.

CHARACTERS

SHORTY..... African American. In his thirties.
A boxer.

SHADOW..... African American. In his forties.
Shorty's manager. Puts on the
intellectual airs of a dandy.

ANGIE..... African American. Late twenties.
Shorty's sister and a jazz singer.

MICKY..... Caucasian. In his forties.
A journalist.

TODD KETCHEL..... Caucasian. Same age as Shorty. Boxer
and former "Great White Hope."

SUSIE..... Caucasian. Late twenties. Ketchel's
wife.

CHUCK..... African American. In his forties.
Ketchel's manager.

A JAZZ QUARTET

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The passages in *italics* in scenes 1, 2 and 5 indicate the moments when Shorty is doing theatre. They are paraphrased excerpts from Goethe's *Faust*.

The musical pieces are mentioned as guides only. However, it would be appropriate to stay within the realm of the Coltrane universe.

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1.

A boxing ring. In the center, standing in a pool of light: Shorty, a fighter. Shadowboxing. Shorty is not happy with himself--with his jabs, his bobs and weaves, his legwork, his hooks, his uppercuts... Shorty is simply not happy with his boxing. Yet he keeps working, accompanied by jazz music with Coltrane inflections (played by a jazz quartet we will discover later). Shorty fights tirelessly until, out of breath, he collapses on a corner stool and undoes the wraps around his left hand with infinite grace. Following the movement of the wraps, the light expands to reveal Shadow, at the foot of the ring, holding a red robe and a pair of red gloves. He climbs slowly up to the ring, signals the quartet (which we discover now that the light has expanded) and the music stops.

SHADOW

Stop playing with your sorrow; it is a vulture that gnaws at your mind. Even in the worst company, you should feel a man among men. Not that I mean to count you among the common herd. I am not one of the greats but if you make your path through life by my side, I will happily help you as we go. I shall be your companion and, if it suits you, your servant and your valet.

SHORTY

And what must I do in return?

SHADOW

There will be plenty of time to repay your debt.

SHORTY

No, the devil is selfish. He does nothing solely for Heaven's sake. State your conditions clearly. Servants such as you are dangerous in one's home.

SHADOW

In this world, I want to be of service to you, obey your every desire without rest or delay. But when we meet again on the other side, you shall do the same for me.

SHORTY

The other side does not worry me. Once this world is shattered and destroyed, the next one can replace it. From this earth springs my joy; this sun shines upon my sorrows. Once I am free from them, let come what may! It does not matter in the future whether men hate or love. Whether there is a below or an above, I do not care to know.

SHADOW

In that case, you may accept my offer. Commit yourself and you will immediately reap the benefits of my art. I will give you what no man has seen.

SHORTY

Foolish devil, what can you give me? Has the human spirit in its highest aspirations ever been understood by one such as you? Perhaps yours is food that satisfies no hunger, red gold that slips through fingers like quicksilver, a game that can never be won, a girl who from my arms flirts with the neighbor, the divine pleasure of fame which disappears like a meteor? Show me the fruit that rots before being plucked and the tree that grows green again every day!

SHADOW

Such a request does not frighten me. I am prepared to provide all those treasures. So it is time, dear friend, to sink our teeth into life's pleasures.

SHORTY

I accept your bargain. But I do not take this commitment lightly. As I am, am I not a slave? No matter whose! Yours or someone else's!

SHADOW

From this very day, I will carry out my duties as a valet. But one more word! Just in case, I ask for a signature from your hand.

SHORTY

You stickler! You demand this in writing? Do you not know the value of a man and of a man's word? Is the word that binds me forever not good enough?

SHADOW

Why this anger? Any scrap of paper will do. You will sign with a drop of blood.

SHORTY

Very well then. If that satisfies you.

Shadow pulls out a piece of paper and a needle. He pricks Shorty. Shorty marks the paper with his blood.

Lights up on Micky. While the quartet plays a Webster-like ballad, he speaks directly to the audience in a low, confidential tone.

MICKY

Good evening. I'm pleased to present to you tonight our network's special presentation: "The Strange Destiny of Shorty." Shorty! Just the name... No doubt the oldest among you will remember him, but for our young viewers, Shorty is the man we just saw in the role of the fighter. In reality, Shorty was a fighter... Or rather, he became a fighter because he didn't think he could make it as an actor. The ring was for him a sort of purgatory where he was waiting for the gates of heaven... or hell to open before him. Yes, Shorty wanted to be an actor but became a fighter. And what a fighter! The greatest of all times! They say his legwork was as sensual as Billie Holiday's voice and his jab as thrilling as Monk's piano. They say he was as fast as Charlie Parker's sax and his fists were as powerful as Dizzy Gillespie's horn. They say he would dance very fast around his opponent sometimes, sticking jabs--only jabs--for three or four rounds then abruptly change rhythm and dance in slow motion. They say in those moments, he was floating.

(MORE)

MICKY (CONT'D)

His jabs would slow down to a crawl and the whole fight would become imbued with a kind of languorous joy typical of Lester Young's choruses. Then without warning, straights, hooks and uppercuts would erupt from up, down, left, right, front and sides like a big band of ten thousand Coltranes. Fast fists full of nightmares. Angie, his sister, had nicknamed him--... Angie is that woman over there, see, the singer in the band? That's Angie. Angie was a jazz singer who owned a club in Spanish Harlem. She and Shorty were very close. And Angie had nicknamed him Li'l Jazz...

Rumor had it that to fight this well, Shorty had sold his soul to the Devil... Speaking of the Devil... Shadow! In reality, his name was Buster McCauley but very few people knew. Shadow was Shorty's manager. They say he was his shadow. They also say he had dubious habits; that before meeting Shorty, he was rotting in a Kansas prison, a sex crime of course, little boys. They say at six, he killed his father: he slashed his throat with a razor blade when he discovered he wasn't really his father. The same people also claimed that after that crime he became a minister. They say--... but what didn't they say about Shadow? In reality, we only knew one thing: other than the fact that his name was Buster McCauley, we knew nothing...

Ah, Susie Ketchel, as elegant as ever. And her husband Todd Ketchel, "The Hammer," a fearsome puncher as well. One of Shorty's childhood friends and the only fighter to ever beat him. As an amateur. Long considered "The Great White Hope," Todd Ketchel didn't live up to his promise. Haste, career mistakes, rumors of fixed fights, all of that made his star decline. But anyway... You'll have a chance to get to know everybody better before the evening is out...

The music stops. The scene shifts to a press conference.

MICKY (CONT'D)

Tell us, Shorty. Is it true you're considering giving up the ring for the stage? You're not going to do that to us, are you?

SHORTY

I'm strictly a fighter.

MICKY

Then why is it that lately we've seen you more on the stage than in the ring?

SHORTY

I like it. For me, it's a childhood dream.

MICKY

What's more frightening? Acting or fighting?

SHORTY

I'm not--... I don't really think about these things. Yeah, you're always scared. Before a fight or a performance but during, never. It's like you've thrown the dice and are waiting for them to stop rolling. 'Cause above all, actors and fighters are... gamblers. Actors gamble their most intimate secrets for the love and recognition of others while fighters--and that's the difference--fighters gamble everything, even their own lives, to earn the right not to be scared...

SHADOW

And that's why, I'm sure you'll agree with me, that's why a fighter is first and foremost a black man. But let's talk about his next fight against Eddie Jones.

MICKY

Yes, let's talk about that fight. Don't you think your age might be a handicap against his 27 wins out of 27 fights? And to be clear, 25 of those were by knockout.

SHORTY

That's what they all say. Against Ronnie too, they said the same thing. But I laid Ronnie flat exactly when and how I chose to. It'll be the same with Jones. I'm gonna play with him until the sixth--'cause people should get their money's worth--and in the seventh, I'll beat him to a pulp...

MICKEY

But Jones claims that he won't make the same mistakes as Ronnie. That he has a strategy.

SHADOW

They've all got a strategy. Until they find themselves standing in front of him, between the twelve ropes, and realize with terror that if Shorty's ever beaten, it won't be in a ring...

Todd Ketchel, who wasn't part of the conference, rushes in. He grabs a mike and throws himself in front of the camera.

KETCHEL

I've had enough of this bullshit! You all know--everyone in America knows--that Eddie's never gonna beat Shorty, that the only one who can beat him is me. 'Cause I've beaten him before and if I did it once, I can do it again. The whole world's waiting for that fight--everyone but Shorty and Shadow. Why do they boycott white fighters? Why does Shorty refuse to take on white fighters?

MICKY

Ladies & Gentlemen, Todd Ketchel.

(to Shorty)

It's true, we've noticed there hasn't been a single white fighter in your last fifteen fights.

KETCHEL

If they weren't black, Eddie Jones and all the others would never have been challengers. Shorty will fight any phony or journeyman as long as he's black.

SHADOW

(whispering between his teeth)

I'm gonna kill you, Todd. One day I'm gonna kill you, I swear..

KETCHEL

(screaming)

Now it's threats! Bluffs! Intimidation! He's threatening to kill me! He threatened to kill me!

SHADOW

Not at all. I was just trying to explain to him that his attitude before the press is harmful to the boxing world.

MICKY

But Shadow, wouldn't a fight between Shorty and Ketchel be a spectacular event? "The Revenge of the Century"...

KETCHEL

Of course, it would be a spectacular event. But this fight's never gonna happen 'cause Shadow's a racist.

SUSIE

Todd, that's enough!

SHADOW

It's OK, Mrs. Ketchel. Isn't it common nowadays for people to justify their own racism by referring to some kind of black racism?... But I won't be dragged into that polemic. Let's simply consider the facts. The boxing world may very well be a jungle but it's a jungle that has rules. Ask Todd Ketchel his current ranking...

KETCHEL

Cut the crap, Shadow. You know very well that rankings don't count for the Title, that you--Buster McCauley--and you alone are holding all the cards and that if you want it, that fight will take place. But you've always been against it. You've always tried to discredit me with accusations of fixed fights, doping, or whatever you could find. But I'm still here. I'm still standing. I'm still a fighter.

SHADOW

As I was saying, if we look at the world rankings, we can see Todd Ketchel isn't in the top ten. And rules are rules...

KETCHEL

It's not the rules, it's you.

SHADOW

Sorry, Todd. As things stand, this fight cannot take place.

KETCHEL

Let's get out of here, Susie... Ladies and Gentlemen and viewers at home, good night. Come on, Susie.

He exits. Reactions all around.

MICKY

Well, at least that has the merit of being clear. I think we've covered everything. Thank you for being with us tonight. This is Micky Abraham for Network Sports.

Lights shift.

SHADOW

Little jerk! Sooner or later, I'll crush him. I'll crush him like a cigarette butt!

ANGIE

Come on, Shadow. Let the damn fight happen.

SHADOW

If you throw a bone to hit a dog, it doesn't offend the dog. Don't you see that's exactly what he's after? Winner or not, he wants that fight.

ANGIE

So what's it to you? This is Li'l Jazz's sixth press conference that this fool's wrecked for us. Shorty and I have talked about it and he's completely up for it. So why not?

SHADOW

Because I said so. What Ketchel wants is to fill up his pockets before he retires. He wants to hit the jackpot and only a fight against Shorty can get him the jackpot. But Shorty's no jackpot. The day Todd's ranking allows him to be an official contender, the fight will take place. We're not the Salvation Army. It's not like we've ever been handed anything. We've always had to prove something, including the fact that we're men--us, the forefathers of civilization! So let Ketchel prove himself! Let him prove that he's strong enough, agile enough and smart enough to have the right to fight for the World Title!

ANGIE

Then do something so he stops badmouthing us every time there's a mike around!

She storms out.

SHADOW

If you want to bite someone, don't show him your teeth first. Right, Shorty?... Don't show him your teeth first.