

STRANGE

PLAYS ON
LYNCHING
BY
AMERICAN
WOMEN

FRUIT

edited by

Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens

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Georgia Douglas Johnson (1877?-1966)

Georgia Douglas Johnson was the most prolific of all playwrights who wrote dramas on lynching. Her six known lynching plays are *Safe*, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, two versions of *A Sunday Morning in the South*, and two lost plays—*And Still They Paused*, and *A Bill to Be Passed*. Unlike her plays on non-lynching themes, none of her lynching dramas was published or produced in her lifetime. This irony speaks loudly to the genre and its critical reception.¹

When the American theatre is studied from the perspective of the anti-lynching tradition, Johnson clearly emerges as a central figure. With *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), she became the first playwright to deal truthfully with the issue of alleged interracial rape of white women and to dramatize white women's complicity in the lynching ritual. She was also a pioneer in writing plays in the anti-lynching tradition in which a lynching incident occurs during the dramatic action. Understanding the nature of theatre and its power to make offstage events as powerful as those occurring on stage, she paved the way (with *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* and *Safe*) for the use of sound and lighting effects, vivid oral description, and audience imagination to convey the horrors of lynching and its impact on families.

Winona Fletcher notes the economy of Johnson's artistic technique in creating "tightly structured dramas," which Margaret Wilkerson describes as "taut and spare in dialogue and action based on the very real drama of terrorist acts directed at the Southern black community."² Judith Barlow cites Johnson's "believable characters that sharply differed from the comic, bumbling, black figures so often created by white dramatists" and, Joycelyn Donlon notes, Johnson's dialogue represented "authentic folk speech rather than the stereotypical mutilated English."³ Drawing on the historical tradition of social protest drama and the contemporary developments of "stage realism" and "folk drama," Johnson's plays reflect the universal human struggle for survival within the specific context of black southern families resisting the brutality and injustice of lynching.

According to Winona Fletcher and Kathy Perkins, Johnson had already won recognition as a poet when she was encouraged by friends to try her talents as a dramatist in the early 1920s. Fletcher and Perkins establish important connections between Johnson's contributions to the anti-lynching campaign of the period, her growing awareness of the impact drama could have on effecting social change, and her submission of four "plays on lynching" to the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), 1935-1939.⁴ Fletcher notes that none of Johnson's plays was produced by FTP and reveals the barriers faced by playwrights who write social protest drama from a black perspective. In examining the comments of FTP readers on Johnson's plays, Fletcher reports that one reader noted, "It would appeal to many audiences composed of men and women who have feverish ideas about the lynching 'Down South.' Its rather unhealthy matter would interest and delight many loose thinking, race baiting persons both black and white."⁵

Safe received more favorable comments, but FTP readers were "aghast at the notion that a lynching could take place for no obvious 'good reason'" and criticized Johnson for suggesting so in the play.⁶ The response of one FTP reader was that "*In fact* the crime that produces lynching is vastly fouler," prompting Fletcher to observe, "Clearly, this reader has fallen victim to the myth that 'only rape produced lynching down South' and expects the playwright to protect this myth by ignoring the truth."⁷ Fletcher's valuable study provides insight into how racial attitudes and myths surrounding the atrocity of lynching became barriers to the production of lynching dramas. *A Sunday Morning in the South* was judged as "not offensive" to either blacks or whites and accepted by FTP readers but, as mentioned earlier, there is no record of either its publication or production in Johnson's lifetime.

Gloria T. Hull notes that most of Johnson's plays focus on female characters, a trait seen in her lynching dramas, which serve as an expression of the "unique horror" black women felt about lynching.⁸ Elizabeth Brown-Guillory sees the stand against lynching expressed in *A Sunday Morning in the South*, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, and *Safe* as an indication that Johnson was "preoccupied with pointing to the atrocities faced by many blacks at the hands of the lynch mob."⁹ The two lost plays, *A Bill to Be Passed* and *And Still They Paused*, apparently expressed support for the passage of the Dyer anti-lynching bill in the 1920s.

Plays by Johnson that did not deal with lynching were more likely to win recognition through production or publication. *Blue Blood*, in which a young mulatto couple about to marry discover that they have the same white father, won honorable mention in the 1926 *Opportunity* play contest. The play was produced by the W. E. B. Du Bois Krigwa Players and published in Frank Shay's *Fifty More Contemporary One-Act Plays*, 1928. *Plumes*, which treats the struggle of a black mother to deal with poverty and her daughter's illness, was awarded *Opportunity's* first place in 1927 and was produced the same year by the Harlem Experimental Theatre. Johnson's historical dramas, *Frederick Douglass* and *William and Ellen Craft*, were published and produced in her lifetime.¹⁰

Throughout her life Johnson worked as a file clerk, teacher, and librarian. After the death of her husband, Lincoln, in 1925, she worked for the Department of Labor as Commissioner of Conciliation. She saw that her two sons received quality educations while she continued to work and write.¹¹ Known as "an individual with a big heart," Johnson took in stray dogs and cats and ran a correspondence club "for lonely people all over the world."¹² Her home on S Street in Washington, D.C., became a regular meeting place for writers, artists, and public figures, as well as for former prison inmates with whom she had corresponded. Donlon writes:

Johnson named her house "Half Way Home" in part because she saw herself as half way between everybody and everything and trying to bring them together, and also because she wanted to make her home a place where anyone who would fight half way to survive could do so.¹³

Although Brown-Guillory reports that many of Johnson's non-lynching plays were produced in church halls, lofts, and schools in the Washington, D.C., area, this multitalented artist ultimately found more success as a poet than a playwright. Johnson was awarded an honorary doctorate from Atlanta University in 1965 and continued to publish poetry until her death at the age of eighty. Documentation of barriers to the production of her plays on lynching, coupled with the fact that much of what she wrote is lost, serves to emphasize her position as a leading figure in a largely unrecognized and unexamined dramatic genre. Her position as the most prolific (but unproduced) playwright of lynching drama testifies to her vision of theatre as "art for life's sake" and her struggle to help bring such a theatre into being.

NOTES

1. Fannie E. Hicklen credits Johnson with ten lynching plays in her 1965 dissertation, "The American Negro Playwright, 1920-1964."
2. Winona Fletcher, "From Genteel Poet to Revolutionary Playwright: Georgia Douglas Johnson," *Theatre Annual*, 40 (1985), 41; Margaret B. Wilkerson, ed., *Plays by Black Women* (New York: Mentor Books, 1986), xviii.
3. Judith E. Barlow, ed., *Plays by American Women: 1900-1930* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 1985), xxvi; and Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon, "Georgia Douglas Johnson" in Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in America: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1993), 641.
4. Winona Fletcher, "Georgia Douglas Johnson," in Trudier Harris, ed., *Dictionary of Literary Biography (Vol. 51): Afro-American Writers from the Harlem Renaissance to 1940* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1987), 159; and Fletcher, "Georgia Douglas Johnson" in Alice Robinson, Vera Mowry Roberts, and Milly Barranger, eds. *Notable Women in the American Theatre: A Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 475; and Kathy A. Perkins ed., *Black Female*

Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 22.

5. Fletcher, *Theatre Annual*, 53.

6. Fletcher, *Theatre Annual*, 54-55.

7. Fletcher, *Theatre Annual*, 55.

8. Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 229, n. 19.

9. Elizabeth Brown Guillory, ed., *Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 15, and *Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 7.

10. Both are published in Willis Richardson and May Miller, eds., *Negro History in Thirteen Plays* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers), 1935.

11. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine, "Georgia Douglas Johnson," *Black Theatre USA: The Early Period, 1847-1938* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 640-642.

12. Perkins, 22.

13. Donlon, 13.

Safe

c. 1929



Georgia Douglas Johnson

CHARACTERS

LIZA PETTIGREW, *the wife*
JOHN PETTIGREW, *the husband*
MANDY GRIMES, *Liza's mother*
DR. JENKINS, *physician*
HANNAH WIGGINS, *neighbor*

SETTING

Place: *Southern town*
Time: 1893

Scene: Front room of a three-room cottage. Back door leading to kitchen. Door to left leading to Liza's room. A front door and a cot along the wall. A table and oil lamp, three chairs, baby garments, a basket of socks, newspapers, etc.

Scene Opens: LIZA is discovered sewing on some small white garments. JOHN is reading the evening paper by an oil lamp on the table.

LIZA: (*lifting her voice*) Ma, come on outer that kitchen—jest stack up them supper dishes and come on and set down and rest, you hear?

MANDY: (*from kitchen*) All right, Liza, I'm coming out in a minute now.

LIZA: (*to John*) Ma's been on her feet all day long. She don't know how to rest herself.

JOHN: (*absently*) Eughhu. She sho don't. (*continues reading*)

LIZA: (*calling again*) Come on, Ma.

MANDY: (*appearing in the kitchen doorway*) I hate to leave them dishes all dirty overnight, but if I must, I must. (*She looks about the room for something to do.*) I reckon I will jest mend John's socks while I'm setting here. (*She brings a basket with socks, needle and thread in it over near the table light with a chair.*)

LIZA: No, Ma, you lay down on your cot and stretch out a while and rest. First thing you know I'll be down and then you got to be up and around waiting on me—so rest while you kin.

Johnson

MANDY: (*obediently putting up the sewing basket*) All right, honey. I'll stretch out a minute or so if you wants me to. (*She goes over to her cot against the wall and falls down heavily with a sigh upon it.*) My, this feels good to my old bones.

LIZA: Of course, it do—you're plum wore out; you done a sight of washing today.

MANDY: (*yawning*) Yes, I been going pretty steady today. What you making on now?

LIZA: Just hemming some little flannel belly bands. (*She holds up one for her mother to see.*) I got all the night gowns ready now. My time's pretty nigh near.

MANDY: Yes, it's jest about time—nine months I count it.

JOHN: (*lowering the paper*) Well, well, well. I see they done caught Sam Hosea and put him in jail.

MANDY: When they ketch him?

JOHN: Paper says this morning. I reckon his ma is plum crazy if she's heered they got him.

LIZA: I knows her. She's a little skinny brown-skinned woman. Belong to our church. She use to bring Sam along pretty regular all the time. He was a nice motherly sort of boy, not mor'n seventeen I'd say. Lemme see. 'Twant no woman mixed up in it, was it?

JOHN: No, seems like he and his boss had some sort of dispute about wages—the boss slapped him and Sam up and hit him back they says.

MANDY: Eugh eugh—that's mighty unhealthy sounding business for this part of the country. Hittin a white man, he better hadder made tracks far away from here I'm er thinking.

(*Just then there's a soft knock at the door.*)

JOHN: I wonder who that is.

LIZA: Go see!

(*John goes to the door. HANNAH WIGGINS enters.*)

JOHN: Howdy, Miss Wiggins, come in and take a cheer.

HANNAH: (*still standing and excited-like*) Howdy! I jest thought I'd drop over here, being as Liza was so near her time and, and—

MANDY: (*sitting up on the cot*) Go on Hannah; what's the matter, you look all flusterated—what's up?

LIZA: Set down, Miss Hannah, there's a cheer.

HANNAH: (*sitting down on the edge of the chair uneasily*) I, I come over here to see how Liza was most special—then I wanted to see if yaw'll knowed about the trouble—

MANDY: Liza's fine. But what trouble is it you're talking 'bout? We ain't heered nothing 'tall!

JOHN: I saw in the papers they done caught Sam Hosea—we all thought he'd got out of town. I jest read 'bout it.

HANNAH: Yes, but that ain't all. (*shakes her head*)

LIZA: What else is it? Tell us!

HANNAH: (*looks around the room again, floundering*) You see I heered they done formed a mob downtown and it mout be there'll be hell to pay tonight!

JOHN: (*excitedly*) Who told you that?

HANNAH: Jim Brown told me 'bout it. He dropped in our house jest now and said as how things didn't look good at all downtown. So I thought I better run over and tell yaw'll.

JOHN: Ain't they gointer call out the soldiers, did he say?

HANNAH: No, he jest said the crowds was gathering and it didn't look good in town.

LIZA: (*in awed tones*) You don't reckon they'll take Sam out of the jail, do you, John?

JOHN: I don't know. (*he gets up and goes to the door*) I think I'll step down the streets and see what they knows by Briggze's store.

MANDY: (*to John*) You think you oughter go out?

LIZA: Be keerful and don't stay long.

JOHN: I'll be right back. Don't yaw'll worry. (*goes out*)

LIZA: I been setting here thinking 'bout that poor boy Sam—him working hard to take kere of his widder mother, doing the best he kin, trying to be a man and stan up for hissef, and what do he git? A slap in the face.

HANNAH: Chile, that ain't nothing—if he gits off with a slap. These white folks is mad—mad—he done hit a white man back.

MANDY: They ain't gointer stan for it. I done seen it happen before.

LIZA: What's little nigger boys born for anyhow? I sho hopes mine will be a girl. I don't want no boy baby to be hounded down and kicked 'round. No, I don't want to ever have no boy chile!

MANDY: Hush, honey, that's a sin. God sends what he wants us to have—we can't pick and choose.

HANNAH: No, we sho can't. We got to swaller the bitter with the sweet. (*just then a shot is heard*)

MANDY: (*jumping up*) What's that?

HANNAH: Sho sounded like a shot to me. I b'lieve them white folks is up to something this night.

LIZA: Listen, ain't that noise coming this a way?

HANNAH: It sho sounds like it. (*goes over to the door, cracks it, peeps out and listens*) They's coming—big crowd headed this way.

MANDY: (*excitedly*) We better put out the light and pull that curtain way down.

HANNAH: Yes, that's right, you can't tell what them devils might git it in they heads to do.

(*There is an increasing sound.*)

LIZA: (*in awed tones*) They wouldn't come in here? Would they?

MANDY: (*consolingly*) No, they wouldn't, but then we better keep it dark.

(*Another shot rings out. The women jump and look at each other in fear.*)

again, floundering) You see I heered they done
d it mout be there'll be hell to pay tonight!
that?

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them white folks is up to

it, peeps out and listens)

at curtain way down.

might git it in they

it, peeps out and listens)
it dark.

in fear.)

LIZA: *(plaintively)* I wonder where John is—

MANDY: He oughter been back here before now. *(she goes to the window and peeps cautiously out from behind [the] shade. Hannah follows and then Liza.)*

HANNAH: You stay back, Liza. You oughtenter see sich things—not in your delicate state.

LIZA: But what they doing? Where they goin to?

MANDY: Yes, go back, Liza, and set down. Let us watch. *(a confusion of many footsteps and tramping horses as the roar becomes louder)*

LIZA: *(beginning to walk up and down the room restlessly)* Ma, Ma, do you think they got him—do you think they'll hang him . . . ?

MANDY: *(patting Liza on the shoulder)* I don't know. You try and kep quiet. You hadn't ought to hear all this screeching hell—God help you! *(goes back to window)*

HANNAH: She sho oughten. It's a sin and a shame! Coming right by here, too . . .

(Then a voice rises above the men outside shouting, "Don't hang me, don't hang me! I don't want to die! Mother! Mother!")

LIZA: *(jumping up)* That's him! That's Sam! They got him. *(she runs to the door and looks out. Hannah and Mandy follow her quickly and drag her back, shutting the door quickly)*

MANDY: They'll shoot you! You can't do that! They're mad—mad!

LIZA: *(crumpling up on the chair shivering, her teeth chattering)* Oh my God, did you hear that poor boy crying for his mother? He's jest a boy—jest a boy—jest a little boy! *(the roar outside continues)*

HANNAH: *(to Mandy)* This is mighty bad for her, mighty bad—

MANDY: *(looking at Liza critically)* Yes, it sho is. *(she thinks a minute)* I hates to ast you, but John ain't got back and we ought to git a doctor. Could you steal out the back and git him?

HANNAH: Yes, I'll go, I kin steal out the back ways.

MANDY: Better hurry, Hannah. I don't like the looks of her. *(Hannah goes out through back)*

LIZA: *(continues to shiver and shake)* Oh, where is John? Where is John? What you reckon has happened? Oh, that poor boy—poor little nigger boy!

MANDY: Try not to worry so, honey. We's in the Lord's hands. *(shaking her head)* My poor, poor chile. I'll heat a kettle of water, then I'm gointer fix your bed so you can lay down when you feel like it.

(Hoarse laughter is heard outside as the noise grows less and less. Mandy goes into small bedroom adjoining kitchen for a moment, then comes back, looks at Liza, shakes her head. Then Liza begins walking up and down the floor all doubled over as if in pain. She goes to the window occasionally and looks out from behind the shade. The noise of countless passing feet is heard and an occasional curse or laugh. She trembles slightly every time she looks and begins pacing up and down again.)

MANDY: (*coming over from the bedroom*) Come on and lay down now, chile; the doctor'll be here to reckon. I'll git all your little things together for you. (*goes over and begins to gather up the little white garments Liza had been sewing on*)

LIZA: (*stands stooped over in the opening of her bedroom door*) Did you hear him cry for his mother? Did you?

MANDY: Yes, honey chile, I heard him, but you musn't think about that now. Fergit it. Remember your own little baby—you got him to think about. You got to born him safe!

LIZA: (*looks at Mandy wild-eyed*) What you say?

MANDY: Born him safe! Born him safe! That's what you got to do.

LIZA: (*turning her head from side to side as she stands half stooped in the doorway, she repeats*) Born him safe! . . . Safe . . . (*she hysterically disappears into the next room*)

MANDY: (*sighs and continues picking up the little garments, smoothing them out nervously. Just then the door opens and John enters*) Oh, where you been, John? Why didn't you come back before now?

JOHN: I tried to but I got headed off—they come right by here too. It was terrible, terrible . . . Where's she?

MANDY: In the room. I done sent fur the doctor; he'll be here any minute.

JOHN: (*nervously going toward Liza's bedroom*) I'll go in and see her. Poor little Liza. (*enters room*)

MANDY: (*goes to the window and peers out and listens as scattering footsteps sound outside on the sidewalk. Then she busies herself about the room, turns down her bed, lights the lamp and turns it down low. Just then there is a knock at the kitchen door. Calling*) John! John! (*John comes to the door.*) See if that ain't Hannah at the back door with the doctor.

JOHN: (*hurrying*) All right. (*he goes through the kitchen and returns with Dr. JENKINS*)

MANDY: I'm sho glad you come, Doctor; she's right in there. Please hurry.

DR. JENKINS: (*to Mandy*) Get me some hot water.

MANDY: I got it ready for you. John, git the kettle! (*John goes in kitchen*) She's terrible upset, Doctor, terrible . . .

DR. JENKINS: I know—Hannah told me all about it; she stopped at her house a minute or two, but said tell you she'd be here to help.

JOHN: (*returning with kettle*) Here 'tis.

MANDY: Set it in the room.

(*The doctor goes into the room with his bag and John comes out.*)

MANDY: How is she?

JOHN: Mighty upset.

MANDY: She ain't never seen no lynching not before, and it was terrible—her being so nigh her time too.

JOHN: Do you think she'll git through all right?

MANDY: I pray God she do. But she's shook to pieces.

Come on and lay down now, chile; the
our little things together for you. (*goes
white garments Liza had been sewing on
of her bedroom door*) Did you hear him

but you musn't think about that now,
aby—you got him to think about. You

you say?

That's what you got to do.

*she stands half stooped in the doorway,
(she hysterically disappears into the next*

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adel! (*John goes in kitchen*) She's

it; she stopped at her house
to help.

comes out.)

and it was terrible—her

JOHN: I oughter been here myself, but I didn't know I was gointer be cut
off . . .

MANDY: Course you didn't. We's all in the hands of the Lawd.

JOHN: (*drops his hands helplessly on his knees*) What a terrible night.

MANDY: I wish Hannah would come on back. I'm that nervish.

JOHN: She was right brave to go for the doctor.

MANDY: Want she?

(*Just then a baby's cry is heard from the next room and both of them jump up and
look toward the closed door. They take a step forward and wait.*)

JOHN: You reckon she's all right?

MANDY: I hope so, but . . .

JOHN: But what?

MANDY: I don't know zactly; I never did see her look like she looked tonight.

JOHN: (*groaning*) I wish the Lord this night was over.

MANDY: God knows I do too—my poor, poor chile.

(*They wait for what seems like an eternity listening to the muffled sounds in the
next room. Then the doctor appears at the door, closing it behind him. His face looks
distressed.*)

MANDY: (*nervously*) How is she? Can I go in?

JOHN: (*agitatedly*) How is she, Doc?

DR. JENKINS: (*holding up one hand*) Wait a minute, calm yourselves. I've got
something to tell you, and I don't hardly know how . . .

MANDY: (*bursting into tears*) She ain't dead, is she? Doc, my poor chile ain't
dead?

JOHN: (*biting his lips*) Tell us, Doc, tell us! What is it?

DR. JENKINS: She's all right and the baby was born all right—big and fine. You
heard him cry . . .

JOHN: Yes . . .

MANDY: Yes, we heard.

DR. JENKINS: And she asked me right away, "Is it a girl?"

JOHN, MANDY: (*stretching their necks out further to listen*) Yes, yes, Doc! Go on!

DR. JENKINS: And I said, "No, child, it's a fine boy," and then I turned my back
a minute to wash in the basin. When I looked around again she had her
hands about the baby's throat choking it. I tried to stop her, but its little
tongue was already hanging from its mouth. It was dead! Then she began,
she kept muttering over and over again: "Now he's safe—safe from the
lynchers! Safe!"

(*John falls down on a chair sobbing, his face in his hands, as Mandy, stooped with
misery, drags her feet heavily toward the closed door. She opens it softly and goes in.
The doctor stands, a picture of helplessness as he looks at them in their grief.*)

CURTAIN