

Venus Dramaturgical Note:

Dramaturg: Sophia Badia

Saartjie Baartman was born in 1789 to the Gonaquasub people of the Khoikhoi, in South Africa. Her father and mother died when she was still young, and her future husband and child would also, unfortunately, pass away before Baartman was even twenty-one years old. It was at this time, Saartjie was illegally trafficked and sold into slavery to work as a “domestic servant” for a physician in Great Britain. Baartman suffered from a genetic abnormality known as steatopygia, which meant she possessed abnormally large buttocks. As a result of this condition, she was dubbed “the Hottentot Venus” and was put on display in Carnivals and “freak shows” around London. She was later witnessed by another white doctor who, fascinated with her physique, purchased her once again and took her to Paris with him. She was continually displayed (majorly in the nude) and was subjected to experiments in the name of medical curiosity. Tragically after a time of manipulation and abuse, Saartjie died in 1815 of complications from an infection most likely believed to be an STI or inflammatory ailment. Even in death, however, her body was still not her own as she was dissected and displayed in museums up until 2002 when her body was finally released for burial and she was put to rest in her native village.

Black women have been the victims of medical abuse, manipulation, and neglect for centuries. Less than thirty years after the death of Baartman, James Marion Sims, a white doctor in Montgomery, Alabama, performed excruciating experiments with no anesthesia on Lucy, an enslaved Black woman, while other doctors observed. Sims continued these experiments on Black women and was greatly commended for his exploitations, credited as the father of Gynecology. In 2021 the Black maternal mortality rate was 68.9 per 100,000 live births. The statistic for White maternal mortality rates was 26.1 per 100,000 live births. Black women are continually subjected to medical negligence and abuse as harmful stereotypes are still perpetuated daily including even a belief that black women feel less/no pain.

Though this production is a somewhat fictionalized account of the famous Venus’s experience, the cruelty depicted is nothing short of accurate. Baartman was taken advantage of by corrupt, racist, misogynistic persons who sought to manipulate and use another human being for their own gain. Her story is shown through the lens of an audience observing a woman with a dream of a better life, a desire to experience love and reverence, fame and wealth, at a time when Black women were considered property. Even more tragically it was not only white men that took advantage of her dreams, women and other people of color were willing to take her goals and twist them into their own profits. As the onlooker, the audience is tasked with perceiving the entire reality of the circumstances just as the real Venus was once displayed, we are asked to see a woman that is utterly alone and provide her with the company she so deserved in the end.

These Shining Lives Dramaturgical Note:

Numerous historically and culturally significant events marked early twentieth-century America. Between the two world wars, the sinking of an unsinkable ship, the women's suffrage movement, and a worldwide economic depression, it is sadly no surprise the Radium girls have been pushed to the background. Nearly one hundred years later, their stories are finally brought back into the modern light, the lasting impact is quite evident of these courageous women's fight for justice. For decades young girls and women were exploited by Radium Dial companies across America. These girls were unknowingly exposed to toxic levels of radiation on a daily basis causing them to fall fatally ill. After years of fighting for their day in court, the Radium Girls would stand up against some of the most powerful people of their time in order to achieve justice not only for themselves but for those who would come after them. These women were instrumental in the development of procedures and laws surrounding workplace safety and business accountability. This show may be historical fiction, but these girls were real, these illnesses were real, their pain was real, but most importantly their bravery was unequivocally real.

Great care was taken into researching and respecting these stories, in order to best compile this information we developed a website. It is intended to serve as an insight into life during this time while exploring the culture, science, and history of the Radium girls in the hopes that their stories can not only be heard but felt.

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