

Brick Top



Yes we have no BANANAS today

By

Beverly **A**ndrews

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Beverly Andrews', "Bricktop," is one of those stories that wraps you up in nostalgia, in culture, in what good stories always manage to wrap you up in – a tale. If you're anyone like me and you spent any moment of your formative years working through as much modernism as one could handle, if the 20's are your bag, then this is a story for you. Half life lesson, half monologue, all a lovely conversation, the reader of this piece takes a special role as listener, as genealogist, as a recorder of the past to learn more about themselves and where they come from. It's as if you're listening to your grandparents tell you about their lives as you intrinsically trace your own roots through their history (when you're a kid it's boring, when you're an adult you curse how stupid you are for not even attempting a question). Andrews' story takes you back to a time of expatriatism and flappers, of Fitzgerald and Cole Porter, of champagne and the charleston, all while creating the depth of character one needs to keep on wanting more memories passed down. I wanted more memories passed down. Sit on down and listen. Enjoy.*

EDITORS' NOTE: *Though originally submitted as drama we felt this wonderful monologue with its convincing evocation of the Jazz Age was stronger when presented as fiction. But we left the dramatic format as is—that's HOTS! in action,*

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)

It is funny but it's only when the few become many that you become in their mind something to be feared.

And we had the top people coming and I mean the top like the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Although I have to say they were a very strange couple, she seemed to be the one in charge and he seemed more like an empty shell of a man. When you looked him in the eyes, there were times when there just did not seem to be anyone looking back. I wasn't surprised when I heard years later he had been seen in Germany giving the Nazi salute. He seemed like someone who was willing to play whichever role he was handed, I often wondered if he ever regretted his decision to abdicate the throne. But it's not something you would ever dare ask him.

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Setting: The living room of black retired cabaret performer and club owner Bricktop.

She opens the door to a young man who enters.

“Come on in child and don’t you look just the spitting image of her. I think the older you get the more you look the same. I know she didn’t actually have you, but despite that, the fact she adopted you and your brothers and sisters, you know some of you to me, just seem to be dead ringers for her, I swear you are. They say that when people spend a great deal of time together they grow to be like each other so I suppose that’s the reason. Anyway, come on in child and sit down. Have you come from far? And would you like anything to drink? I can get you something if you like. You sure you don’t want anything? Ok I’ll stop fussing. It’s the weirdest thing, when you get older you just fuss over people especially young people. I guess you try to make up for all the things maybe you didn’t do when you were young. You know like not being as considerate of others as you probably should have been but weren’t. Anyway, let me just sit down and stop fussing before I drive you crazy.

Sitting here though with you just reminds me of how much I miss her. I feel real bad saying that to you since you have so much more reason to miss her than I do, since she was your mother. Nevertheless, to me it just seems like our lives, were always just so, so intertwined. We pretty much came to Paris at roughly the same time and just seemed back then to have these strange destinies, which mirrored each other. So when she died it was as if a part of me died, too even though I had not actually seen her for years. That was not because we did not want to; it is just that life seemed to sweep us along and did not allow us much breathing space. But I loved Josie so much, although at some point our lives seemed to take such different turnings. Even in our relationship to Paris. For me it was always a temporary home but for Josephine she took Paris to her heart and in the end that love became mutual.

When I think of her now I think of her as always liking, well at least at the beginning anyway long before you and your brothers and sisters came along, adventure. She could be just the wildest thing. I mean walking a wild cat up the Champs Elysees. I mean who else on earth would do a thing like that but Josephine. And in a way, that was where we were in fact quite different. I was the older, practical one. I guess I kind of sensed even then that if I did not take care of the business, there would be no one around to do it for me. I think Josephine always thought in the back of her mind that somehow things would just work out. Maybe that is why I will die ok while Josie was always struggling for money, despite at one point being one of the richest women in the world, but she would go from that to having almost nothing and yet still die a legend. Now she was a real hard worker do not get me wrong, after all, she died just after giving her last show but she was just never practical, about money. I guess what I mean is that there was always something of the romantic about Josephine. There was something in me that somehow always had my feet firmly planted on the ground but then again, I am not the artist that she was. I can sing well enough and dance a bit if I’m forced to but maybe my skill was always in creating an atmosphere in a club where people could just come in and escape their lives if even for a night, a dream night. I would get the music just right and the lights had to do the trick. You would be surprised to know that rich people want to escape their lives just as much as the poor do. In a strange way perhaps even more, since now, they have all they want but their lives are still unhappy.

Closing my eyes now though I see the Paris as it was then. Not the Paris you see now which is over run with tourists, divided by class, fearful, and angry towards everyone who comes from somewhere else. Back then, it was a different city, a city of colour and light. It was so very different when Josephine and I first got here. There were so few of us there back then, that when we arrived, we were in their eyes instantly something rare and exotic. It is funny

but it's only when the few become many that you become in their mind something to be feared.

However, back then things were different, when we arrived we were both entertainers, Josephine arrived in Paris as the comic turn of the chorus. She had already made a bit of name for herself, making silly mistakes on purpose on stage and pulling those clown faces, you know like crossing her eyes and stuff and then she would return and do the same routine perfectly. She said she would have long arguments with her mother about what she was doing. Her mother hated the fact that people were laughing at her but she told her that she was doing this for now since one-day things would change and on that one-day, people would no longer laugh but only stare at her with admiration.

Well, you know when she came over she was performing in La Revue Negre, combining all the stereotypes that name suggests, but Josie just seemed to rise above it. Like when she came out on stage wearing only a skirt of bananas and nothing else. The audience that night at the Follies Bergere just went wild. When I saw her dance, I could see that all she was actually doing to be honest was a souped up Charleston, again with the comic bits tacked on. But it didn't matter to the white people who saw her dance they just loved it and honey they went just crazy. Like they had died and gone to heaven. When I close my eyes now I can just see this whirl of long legs and arms on the stage, this almost elegant frenzy. Josie would be up there just dancing her socks off, Just dancing.

It is funny to think now that Josephine did not initially want to do it at all, wearing nothing but a skirt of bananas. She said when the wardrobe mistress brought her the costume; she asked what exactly was it meant to be since it certainly was not a costume, because there just wasn't anything there. She thought at first it was demeaning and it is something later in life she actually wanted to forget. When she transformed herself into being the respectable face of France's musical life it was like she closed a door on that chapter of her life. Back then, though, we use to get together and talk about it for hours on end. Josie felt in Paris she had found a window that she could escape through from all the indignities of racism back home, but we would often question if it wasn't simply exchanging one identity which wasn't really us for another one which really wasn't us either. I use to say to Josie I don't think they really want to see us for who we really are but simply what they project us to be. Whether that's being someone who is so inferior that we aren't quite human or someone who is so exotic, so chic, so sexy, so impossibly beautiful that we're still aren't quite human either. Neither are real, both in a way somehow take away our humanity and are projections of what they want us to be, but yet both Josie and I joked that at least in Paris, the identity handed to you allows you to live a far more comfortable life. And that's saying something.

My journey here was different, I came over as a performer as well but not as a super star like Josephine. It was a quieter trip in a way. I sang and somehow became a friend to some of those big white stars. Stars like Cole Porter whose marriage was camouflage for his true sexuality and yet he and his wife did in fact really love each other, I think. I always thought though the pain he was in after his riding accident was in fact an internal pain, caused by never allowing himself to be who he really was. But they would hire me to help them dance just like us. Josie and I use to laugh our heads off, when we got together at the thought that secretly somewhere deep inside they somehow wanted to be us. Gosh, the people that I met back then like this young black poet, Langston Hughes. I first met him when he was washing

dishes in a club I was working in. Back then he was a real shy boy who was struggling with both the racism he faced and the fact that he loved men too. Something not easy when you are black, since the black church takes such a strong stand against it. He was an outsider like we all were back then; maybe that's why we all became such great friends. I often say though that for so many artists it's a pity that they can't somehow see into the future since that shy young boy would go on to become a legend. A voice for a generation.

Sex though was everywhere back then. I do not know if it was the fallout of the war and that maybe in the back of our minds, we kind of knew there was another one coming just around the corner. I mean even Josie and I had ..., well now I won't embarrass you by going into any details about it, but you know. It is strange since it was hard to work out whether we were having all those lovers because we were fulfilling who we really were or were we simply responding to what people expected us to be. Or on the other hand were we simply acting out of a real deep sense of loneliness, since we seemed to be caught between these two very different worlds. When you are an artist and one with even a small name it can be hard to sometimes, to separate who you are, from the persona the world has created for you. If you are not careful, you get confused and you don't know where one stops and the other one begins. She at one point became that woman walking the cheetah up the Champs Elysees and I the woman smoking the cigar. But was that really either of us? Even now I'm not so sure.

It's funny once Josephine got older she simply pretended none of this actually happened. I think by the time she had you lot she wanted to reinvent herself as this respected French institution and all those things, which had gone before were no longer part of her life. I on the other hand decided that it was all part of me, the me who I was and the me I have going to be, along with the me I am now. So it would be like cutting out a whole part of my life.

Sometime around then I decided that I wanted to be in position to pay myself rather than being hired by other people and so I worked out how to buy my own clubs that way I can pay myself and the others around me. Josephine never really did that and the money came and just went out with all you kids. I on the other hand had too many fresh images in my head of what it was like not to have money and was absolutely determined it would never happen again so I took every chance I could to learn the business and make sure those clubs made money. And we had the top people coming and I mean the top like the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Although I have to say they were a very strange couple, she seemed to be the one in charge and he seemed more like an empty shell of a man. When you looked him in the eyes, there were times when there just did not seem to be anyone looking back. I wasn't surprised when I heard years later he had been seen in Germany giving the Nazi salute. He seemed like someone who was willing to play whichever role he was handed, I often wondered if he ever regretted his decision to abdicate the throne. But it's not something you would ever dare ask him. Then there was F Scott Fitzgerald, a kind but also a sad man. It was like he had gotten the prize he had always wanted, by marrying his childhood sweetheart, but after he married Zelda he found he could never really make her happy. She had so many problems of her own, they were problems that he just couldn't mend, and the closer he got to her the more they seem to exasperate his own. People after blamed him for what happened to her but I think they just never realised that there was another side to their story.

But back to your mother, you are going to hear an awful lot stuff about her now she's dead, my advice to you would be to take whatever you hear with a big pinch of salt. There were many different Josephines and in a way all of us perhaps only knew one of them. I am probably her oldest friend and even for me there was a part of her that even I didn't know. All I will say is that we both arrived here at a very different time so different to what it is now. And Josie at her best because of all she had been through and all she had seen, had a vision for what the world could be, she never talked about the past because she wanted to help shape the future. That's why she adopted all of you. She wanted to show the world a future where if you were black or any race you didn't have to take on a persona to be accepted, simply because it was handed to you like we did, you can now simply choose to be yourself. So if you ask me how she would have wanted to be remembered I think she would have wanted to be remembered for that and not necessarily all the other things. (pause) And me how would I like to be remembered? Child give me a minute to think about that one!!"

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Bricktop came out of a workshop I was asked, to take part in, by a friend, published novelist and poet Maria Straw-Cinar, for her film PhD project. She wanted to recreate a literary salon of the 1920's which would include many of the legendary female poets, artists and authors of that period. Despite the fact that I knew that period well, I had never heard of Bricktop. Once Maria introduced me to her there was much about her life which resonated with my own, since I too had lived and worked in Paris as a fashion model and a dancer. I can't say that there was a literary style which influenced my writing or that there were themes I consciously wanted to explore, I wanted to just simply tell her story. Once I finished the piece and emailed it to Maria to read it, she sent back the loveliest voice message to say that she absolutely loved it. It was the last message I would receive from Maria, she died after a year long battle, few of us were aware she had been fighting, with bowel cancer. I've kept the voice message Maria sent, since it feels like her continual encouragement to me as a writer and I would like to dedicate this story to her. She too had lived in Paris (something I didn't know until after her death) and there is something about Bricktop's incredible, fun loving, free spirit which was very much Maria.*

AUTHOR BIO: Beverly Andrews is an African American playwright and director living and working in the United Kingdom, a recipient of the 2017 Roland Rees Award Bursary, also a recipient of six research and development awards from Arts Council of England. Writer and producer of film/theatre hybrid *Sophia* which looks at the life of Asian suffragette Sophia Duleep Singh. Shot during the UK's lockdown, *Sophia* was screened commercially at the Lexi cinema and by the cultural wing of India's High Commission's Nehru Centre. *Sophia* will be screened in the New Year at the UK's Asian film festival. The play version of *Sophia* was produced in Bhutan, by the Royal Thimpu College. An audio recording of *Sophia*, exists as part of the *Forgotten Women* podcasts is currently available on Spotify. Beverly's musical *The Coloured Valentino*, received Talawa's Black Female playwright award bursary. The musical was given a research and development grant by the Arts Council of England and had a showcase in 2022 at the Arcola Theatre. Her play about Afghanistan called *Annawon's Song* made the shortlist of the Sundance Institute's theatre lab. Her play *Love Bites*

appeared in New York's Dream Up festival. Beverly is the director of the documentary "I am Going to Make a Miracle" which looks at the work of the acclaimed Arcola Theatre. I am Going to Make a Miracle won three international awards and was bought by Sky Arts in New Zealand. Beverly has made this year's European wide shortlist of ENOA's opera residency programme as a writer.