

KAMAU IN THE AFTERLIFE

By Victoria Muthiani

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor JANET COLSON writes:*

Victoria Muthiani's haunting play is a modern morality tale in which three tormented souls await their final judgment in the reception area of the afterlife (staffed with the familiar snarky receptionists we know we'll all be seeing at the gates of hell). The three of them share the same name - as the playwright tells us, Kamau is a very common name in Kenya - and at least one of them deserves eternal damnation.

This is a strange and magical play. Praise for the three-act structure, the classical feel of the piece coupled with contemporary cynicism, and the simple expressive language. Also, no spoilers allowed, but there are twists. I like that.

Muthiani's self-styled mélange of surrealism and je ne sais quoi leaves us with a bold existential play that hearkens to Sartre's No Exit and Dantes Inferno, but maybe with a little more hope for humanity.

Here's a sample from the other side:

REBECCA: (aside) The dead do not dream, but I feel as though I have dreamt up all these faces. The silver cord which tethers me to all I am tugs me closer to The Absolute. There is no wind around me, but I feel a chilling breeze, as if coldness is all I've ever known.

(Spacing is playwright's own.) Eds.

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CHARACTERS

REBECCA KAMAU, a woman who never fulfilled her dreams, died at age 21

GODFREE KAMAU, a pseudo-religious man, died at age 56

CHARLES KAMAU, a man too afraid of facing himself, died at age 23

SISYPHUS (SISSI), a young woman, the receptionist of Hell

PARVATI, an older woman on a wheelchair, the receptionist of Heaven

THE CERBERUS, three men who usher the damned into hell

ACT I

SCENE 1

A cosy waiting room. Two women, Sisyphus and Parvati, sit on different edges of the same receptionist desk. Each has a thick ancient book open before them which they are steadily reading and making notes on. Behind them are sign posts. The one behind Sisyphus reads: to heaven, and points across to Parvati, stage right. The one behind Parvati reads: to hell, and points across to Sisyphus, stage left.

The three Kamau's are sited on the same long bench.

Sisyphus stands up.

SISYPHUS: Kamau?

The three Kamau's stand up and look at each other.

GODFREE: Yes, I'm Kamau.

CHARLES: No, I'm Kamau.

REBECCA: No... I'm Kamau.

Sisyphus looks at her book.

SISYPHUS: One of you belongs in hell.

Godfree chuckles and sits back down.

GODFREE: I had my funeral in a church. My wedding ordained by a priest. I served in the House of God on Sundays and baptised all of my children.

REBECCA: I was baptised but I never liked it, the water was too cold and there were too many people watching.

PARVATI: Baptism, a metaphor.

SISYPHUS: Who is going to hell?

GODFREE: Not me.

CHARLES: I was never baptised. My parents said I was christened, but I don't remember it.

GODFREE: They buried me with a statue of an angel overlooking my grave.

CHARLES: They burnt me.

GODFREE: There are flowers there right now, blooming.

CHARLES: I'd be lucky if the living remember me.

SISYPHUS: Who is going to hell?

CHARLES: Does it hurt, being in hell?

SISYPHUS: Just emotionally, physically, and mentally.

Charles miserably sits back down. Sisyphus goes to her desk and gathers three pamphlets which she hands to the three Kamau's.

CHARLES: "A Spirit's Guide to the Infrastructure and Eternal Suffering of Hell"?

Sisyphus sits back at her desk. She takes a telephone from under her desk and makes a silent call.

GODFREE: (flipping through the pamphlet) Charon? Hungry Ghosts? Yama? This must be a joke. The Bible said nothing about a place called Elysium.

REBECCA: There's a paradise in hell?

Sisyphus ends the call and hides the telephone once more.

PARVATI: It's the heaven of the damned.

SISYPHUS: Part of the Axis Mundi.

PARVATI: The younger sister of the Isles of the Blessed.

SISYPHUS: And the youngest son of Heaven.

GODFREE: Blasphemy! Where is Saint Peter in all of this?

Sisyphus and Parvati snigger to each other.

CHARLES: So hell isn't that bad?

PARVATI: That depends on what you did?

SISYPHUS: Did you do something evil? Something you want to confess...

Charles shamefully looks away from her teasing gaze.

SISYPHUS: You better say it, before they get here.

REBECCA: Before who get here?

GODFREE: The angels?

Parvati and Sisyphus cackle as fog appears and dogs are heard growling and howling. Enter, from stage left, The Cerberus. The three men are dressed identically.

Godfree shuts his eyes and mutters a prayer.

CERBERUS 1: Prayer?

CERBERUS 2: It's too late –

CERBERUS 3: for that.

GODFREE: Where is God in all of this?

CERBERUS 1: God is everywhere.

CERBERUS 2: If you come with us,

CERBERUS 3: We can take you to the creator.

GODFREE: Get behind me Satan!

Godfree shuts his eyes and continues praying. One of The Cerberus growls.

CERBERUS 3: Is this the one

CERBERUS 2: We're taking to –

CERBERUS 1: Helheim?

SISYPHUS: I don't know, that's why I called.

Godfree weeps louder. The Cerberus stare at Rebecca and Charles.

CERBERUS 2: I see,

CERBERUS 1: They're all called –

CERBERUS 3: Kamau.

The Cerberus point at Charles and Godfree sited on the bench.

CERBERUS 1: Get up,

CERBERUS 3: And stand -

CERBERUS 2: Before us.

The two men stand before The Cerberus. Rebecca retreats towards the reception desk.

CERBERUS 2: There is a place in hell -

CERBERUS 1: For both of you but,

CERBERUS 3: Only one of you can come.

CHARLES: Are there beds in hell?

CERBERUS 1: You can sleep on the bed of illness.

CHARLES: How about food?

CERBERUS 2: You can eat from the plate of hunger.

CHARLES: What if I get thirsty?

CERBERUS 3: Then you can drink from the river of oblivion.

CHARLES: Will I see my friends?

CERBERUS 1: Just the ones you knew well;

CERBERUS 2: Anxiety,

CERBERUS 3: Fear,

CERBERUS 1: Need,

CERBERUS 2: Agony,

CERBERUS 3: Guilt,

CERBERUS 1: And conflict.

CHARLES: (to Rebecca) I never meant to do it you know, and now I'm going to spend the rest of my life suffering because of it.

THE CERBERUS: You were already suffering. Come.

Sisyphus picks a t-shirt from under her desk and gives it to Charles. Charles puts it on. It is plain and written "I KILLED HER".

Parvati wheels herself out of the desk with a coin in her hand. Charles opens his mouth and Parvati places the coin under his tongue.

The Cerberus lead him towards Hell. The fog appears. Dogs are heard howling

ACT 2

SCENE 1

Godfree is kneeling at the bench praying. Parvati and Sisyphus are looking at their books once more.

REBECCA: (aside) The dead do not dream, but I feel as though I have dreamt up all these faces. The silver cord which tethers me to all I am tugs me closer to The Absolute. There is no wind around me, but I feel a chilling breeze, as if coldness is all I've ever known.

PARVATI: Kamau?

Godfree stands up and looks wearily at Rebecca.

GODFREE: That's my lift.

REBECCA: I remember you. You were my father.

Godfree nods.

REBECCA: What made you so sure you were going to heaven?

GODFREE: I lived a moral life.

SISYPHUS: But you failed at ethics.

PARVATI: Kamau, God will see you now.

REBECCA: You know what? I think you went to heaven because you believed you were worthy.

SISYPHUS: You weren't a good person Kamau.

REBECCA: You might have been good to yourself but you weren't good to us.

Sisyphus wheels Parvati out of the desk. Parvati removes the blanket covering her legs. They are badly burnt. Godfree looks away.

GODFREE: Cover yourself.

Parvati leaves her legs bare.

PARVATI: We hope we never see you again.

GODFREE: Everything I did, I did so I could have my place in His Kingdom.

Godfree begins to exit towards Heaven, then looks back –

GODFREE: I wonder why you think I went to heaven.

He leaves.

REBECCA: Where has he truly gone?

PARVATI: Back to the wheel.

SISYPHUS: Samsara.

REBECCA: What's going on with me?

SISYPHUS: You're dead.

REBECCA: Where do I go from here?

Rebecca goes behind the reception desk and retrieves a birthday cake from under it. She licks the icing with her finger.

REBECCA: (to Sisyphus) I think, this was meant to be yours.

SISYPHUS: Yes it was. I never got to taste it.

REBECCA: That man was my father.

A beat.

REBECCA: The one before him my killer.

A beat.

REBECCA: I know who both of you are. But who are they?

Rebecca points and faces the audience.

REBECCA: And why are they just looking? Why do they have nothing to say?

Rebecca walks to the edge of the stage and watches the audience. She gets off the stage and approaches the audience, staring at them with unfamiliarity. She goes back to the stage.

REBECCA: My unconscious. You may be watching me, waiting for me to realise something, but dying is not easy you know. Why does it feel like I'm the only one of us dying?

SISYPHUS: Because you're the last of us who needs to accept.

REBECCA: The spotlight, the one I spent my entire life trying to avoid. The stage I never performed in. The plot I never cared for.

A beat

REBECCA: (to Parvati) Mum... It aches to think that I have left you with tulips which never sprouted.

PARVATI: Tulips, which only bloomed for a day.

REBECCA: Will sorrow consume me for the rest of my death?

SISYPHUS: Only if you choose to become a phantom of life.

REBECCA: What else can I be?

PARVATI: Alive, without any recognition of who you used to be.

SISYPHUS: The salty scent the wind carries by sea.

PARVATI: The wish carried by dandelion seeds.

SISYPHUS: The hunger of stray dogs.

PARVATI: The solitude of hibernation.

REBECCA: Dust floating in the sunlight.

SISYPHUS: All that you were

PARVATI: All that you are.

SISYPHUS: All that you'll ever be.

REBECCA: No more picking dirt under my fingernails, or sifting through the dirt in peoples hearts.

REBECCA, PARVATI, SISYPHUS: No more desire.

REBECCA: I'm not ready! There is still too much I've never done. I never played the piano on stage for all of them to hear. You know how much I wanted to.

PARVATI: We know.

REBECCA: It was my passion. The one which kept me awake, my heart beating softly and my breath like a blanket. Those were the only times I'd feel warm.

SISYPHUS: We know.

REBECCA: I'm not ready! Even now the thought of it caresses me, reminding me of life. How my eyelids would close in the night and my feet would feel those dull blades of grass. And the sunlight on my skin, the lavender in the garden. (to Sisyphus) Sissi! Your coffee in the morning!

SISYPHUS: We know what you're feeling.

PARVATI: It's love, and it will never leave you.

REBECCA: I would do anything to be caught in the rain.

PARVATI: Love will never leave you.

REBECCA: Or dance alone in corridors.

SISYPHUS: Love will never leave you.

REBECCA: Let my fingers touch the keys once more.

A beat.

REBECCA: Love will never leave me. Go before me, return to dust. I won't be far behind, I only want to feel the passion flow to my fingertips.

Sisyphus nods and hugs Rebecca. Sisyphus and Parvati exit to Heaven.

ACT 3

SCENE 1

An iridescent black piano. Rebecca is sited on the piano bench.

The spotlight hits her.

She begins to play. Fingers buoyantly bouncing rhythmically from one key to the next.

Passion oozes out of her song.

Each note fulfils

and sings a celebration,

for the life she lived

and the love,

which never stopped

surrounding her.

THE END

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *Kamau is a very common name in Kenya, the idea of multiple Kamau's meeting at the same place was the favourite improv scenario for my high school drama class. This was supposed to be funny, but I guess without the influence of Siraiyion, Okidi, and Liam, it really wasn't. I always enjoyed bringing the sardonic and miserable characters to our improvs, it would only be fitting that my take on Kamau's adventures would be entirely surreal and set somewhere in the psyche.*

ARTIST BIO: Victoria Muthiani is a writer from Nairobi, Kenya. Her plays dramatize the conversations she has with herself, the words she wishes people could hear coming out of her mouth.