

Time to A Phantom

By Zachariah Ezer

WHY I LIKE IT: Drama editor JANET COLSON writes:

I love deceptively simple stories that could only be told onstage, and Time to A Phantom is one of those. With just two characters (unless you count a temperamental toilet), and a one-line premise, “Kyle’s Apartment is haunted, so he calls his super,” this play is a contemporary ghost story with heart and soul that gets under the skin and into the grit of race and privilege.

*Playwright **Zachariah Ezer** takes the risk of giving his character Jerome a thick Caribbean accent, which takes some effort to decode, but it’s worth it. At first it almost seems like a foreign language, but then we realize we’re getting almost every word – and even learning a few new ones (a “duppy” is a ghost). It takes some serious balls to pull off writing dialect, especially in a piece that’s this racially charged, but in Time to A Phantom it’s the magic ingredient, communicating across invisible lines of culture, class, experience, and trauma.*

The piece is not without humor or irony, but as in most ghost stories, the roots are in tragedy and loss. The duppy-haunted toilet is symbolic of a story that can’t – or won’t be flushed away. And whether or not Kyle can accept the existence of ghosts, he’s shaken out of his privileged vantage point long enough to take off his headphones and listen to another person’s story.

*From creating a toilet ghost to addressing systemic racism, **Zachariah Ezer** isn’t staying on the sidelines. Watch out for this playwright. We need to be haunted with stories like these.*

KYLE

So how do you get rid of a ghost?

JEROME

Ya na get rid of duppy, dem just fade away.

Five Stars.

(Spacing and font size are playwright’s own.) Eds.

Time to A Phantom

By Zachariah Ezer

CHARACTERS

Jerome: Black, 50s

Kyle: White, 20s

PLACE

The Big City

SYNOPSIS

Kyle's Apartment is haunted, so he calls his super.

Lights up on the dingy studio apartment of, KYLE, a boy in his twenties. He futzes on his computer with intense focus, headphones encasing his ears, preventing him from hearing a knock at the door. Unheard, the knocks continue to grow louder until...

KYLE

Oh, uh, come in. It's open.

In walks JEROME, a man in his fifties, annoyed to even be here.

JEROME

Mi deh yah. Wah seems ta be de problem?

KYLE

It's, well, the toilet. It's running.

Both stop to listen for it. No running.

JEROME

I dun hear notin.

KYLE

It comes and goes.

JEROME

Botta you?

KYLE

A little bit, yeah--

JEROME

--Dun let it.

Jerome thinks this is hilarious. A Caribbean "Not" joke. He laughs to himself and turns to leave.

KYLE

Hold on! I pay the exorbitant rent for this apartment, and, as the superintendent, that's your salary. You have to fix the toilet.

Jerome stares at him for a second.

JEROME

Yuh goin call mi managa, den?

KYLE

If that's what it takes.

JEROME

Aight den.

Jerome crosses over to the bathroom. He inspects the toilet. As soon as he touches it, it starts running. Jerome calmly walks back into the bedroom.

JEROME

Mi find de problem.

KYLE

Yeah, what's wrong?

JEROME

Yuh ave a duppy inna here.

Kyle stands up.

KYLE

What's a duppy?

JEROME

A ghost.

KYLE

A ghost? There's a ghost in my bathroom?

JEROME

Wah mi seh?

KYLE

Yes, I heard what you said, but there's no way that it's true. Did you check that little cup on the chain in the back of the toilet?

JEROME

Mi check aal mi need. Ghost inna de apartment.

KYLE

How do you know that?

JEROME

Yuh can feel it, can you?

KYLE

No, I can't.

Jerome shrugs.

JEROME

Not a shock, dere now.

KYLE

I can't feel anything because there's nothing to feel. Ghosts aren't real.

The water running gets louder.

JEROME

Now wat yuh goin say dat fah?

KYLE

Because it's a ridiculous idea.

JEROME

Payin two grand ah mont is a ridiculous idea, but yuh do it, don't yuh?

KYLE

What's it to you?

JEROME

Mi used to live here. Mi kip tabs pon de place.

KYLE

Why'd you move down to the basement?

JEROME

Mi not tell ya? Two grand a mont ridiculous.

The running stops. Kyle looks away, guilty.

KYLE

So how do you get rid of a ghost?

JEROME

Ya na get rid of duppy, dem just fade away.

KYLE

Well, how long is that going to take?

Jerome shrugs.

JEROME

Who can say? Duppy fade until people can't see it, den until odda duppy can't see it. Den it goes onto de odda side.

KYLE

Then why is one haunting my bathroom?

JEROME

Haunt a word fah wi, ya na? Duppy not haunt; duppy just be. Duppy not care if wi here or not.

KYLE

Okay, I can see you're not going to help. Just go; it sounds like it stopped anyway.

Jerome turns to leave. Kyle puts on his headphones. The running starts again. Kyle throws his headphones against the couch.

KYLE

Goddamn it!

JEROME

Wat yuh got dere?

KYLE

I'm trying to get all the static out of this Robert Johnson song, but I can't focus.

JEROME

Wat yuh wan dat fah?

KYLE

I'm a DJ, and I want it so I can--

JEROME

--Nah, nah, yuh nah wan hear de crackle?

KYLE

Because I want the song, unfiltered, how it was supposed to sound.

JEROME

Dat is de blues. Yuh affi ave de pop and de hiss.

KYLE

That's not how the song was originally recorded.

JEROME

Yuh tell mi dat *de* Robert Johnson, man what sold his soul, would nah wan a likkle mystery in de music?

Kyle considers this a moment.

KYLE

What makes you such an expert?

JEROME

Used tah play de bass.

KYLE

In a band?

JEROME

Long time ago.

KYLE

Were you any good?

Jerome comes to life.

JEROME

Wi used tah tour de country. Packed crowd, aal ovah. Al caused ah riot inna Charlotte once.

KYLE

Why'd you stop?

JEROME

On de road too long. Mi dawta dea worry, so mi come home, ya na?

KYLE

Do you miss it?

JEROME

Fram time to time. Tings worse to lose dan playing de blues.

Kyle nods, pretending he understands. The toilet stops.

KYLE

Yeah... So, where'd you learn all that stuff about ghosts?

JEROME

Pass dung trough de years, ya na? Moda to son, fada to dawta.

KYLE

Can I ask you a question?

Jerome shrugs.

KYLE

I took this class in college, and the professor asked us, "Is a ghost from the present or the past?"

Jerome thinks a moment.

JEROME

De past. Is a ghost of a person.

KYLE

Yeah, but the ghost is here now.

JEROME

But it nah fram de present. De duppy a just a shell. De person long gaan.

KYLE

Exactly.

JEROME

Okay, so one of dem riddles?

KYLE

I guess so. I never really got my head around it, myself.

Jerome smiles.

JEROME

Mi ave a riddle.

KYLE

(playing along)

Okay, let's hear it.

JEROME

Wat got a mout, but neva talk, always run--

KYLE

--It's a river.

JEROME

Yuh na even let mi finish!

The toilet starts running again.

KYLE

Sorry, that's an old one. Well, it started again. Do you think it can hear us?

Jerome shrugs.

KYLE

Then why do I feel like this ghost has a great sense of timing?

JEROME

Duppy dun care about timing.

KYLE

How could you possibly know that?

JEROME

Tink bout it. Person live wat, maybe eighty years. Ded foreva.

KYLE

Okay, I can see that. Once you're looking at eternity, you would think about time a little differently.

JEROME

What did yuh study in college?

KYLE

Ethnomusicology. It's like--

JEROME

--Mi know wat dat be.

KYLE

I'm sorry, that was really condescending. Did you go to college?

JEROME

Started, ya na?

KYLE

Why didn't you finish?

JEROME

Well mi dawta did bawn.

KYLE

Where's your daughter now?

JEROME

Gaan.

KYLE

I am so sorry.

Jerome nods.

JEROME

It was ah long time ago.

KYLE

What happened?

JEROME

Shi died inna dis apahment.

Kyle looks over to the bathroom, suddenly much more aware of his surroundings.

KYLE

How did she die?

Jerome draws closer to Kyle. Perhaps the lights dim. The toilet definitely picks up in volume.

JEROME

Long time ago, ya know, dey try kick wi out of de building. Someting bout condos. Well dey stopped fixin tings. One night, it was de middle of winta, Ya know, I'm playing in de hip paht of town. Jazz. Ya na white people luv jazz. Mi dawta was home alone. She whole heap like yuh; can't fix ah damn ting. Well, sometime late dat night, de radiator go out. Ya na she couldn't fix it haself, so she wait fi mi. Gig ran long. Mi come home, an she froze to death. Found har in de showa, using de hot wata to get warm. Mus ave ran out, cah de wata runnin wen mi gat back was ice cold. Ou long was shi de unda dere? An howa? Two?

Jerome trails off, and the lights return to normal. Kyle looks back to the bathroom.

KYLE

So, you think...

Jerome nods. The implication is clear.

KYLE

Okay, I'm sorry. I've let this go on long enough.

JEROME

Wah yuh mean?

KYLE

I'm really sorry that your daughter died, and it's really shitty that the people that own this building are fucking criminals, but no. That's not your daughter in the bathroom. Ghosts aren't real.

Kyle's tone is serious, but his posture is less sure.

JEROME

Who yuh tellin'?

KYLE

I'm telling you. Are you going to fix the toilet or not?

Jerome stands and walks toward the bathroom.

JEROME

Haunt. Dat is ah word fah wi. Wat it mean?

KYLE

I don't know. Is this another riddle?

Jerome turns back.

JEROME

It mean fa be someplace yuh dun belong. Duppy haunt cah de ouse is fi de living.

KYLE

Sure, and your daughter is haunting my apartment.

JEROME

Now yuh believe mi? Dat's always how it always go. Wi not belong. It's nah ya fault. Wi inna ya space. Well wah yuh doin wit it? Mi see yuh around de block. Neva hail up nobody. Don't know ya neighbors. Yuh even know mi name?

Kyle is flustered. He obviously doesn't.

JEROME

Jerome. You're Kyle, an shi Clarissa. Mi dawta ah na ghost.

KYLE

So, I don't belong here. Because I'm white?

JEROME

Cah yuh tek de life outta everyting yuh touch.

KYLE

Who am I haunting? I'm not dead.

JEROME

Yuh nat alive. Yuh want mi to exorcise mi dawta... Yuh haunt wi everi day of wi life... Yuh haunt de life yuh neva knew yuh didn't ave.

Jerome walks into the bathroom.

JEROME

Shush, babi gyal. I hear yuh.

Jerome puts his hand on the toilet again, and it stops running completely. He returns to the bedroom, and walks to the door.

KYLE

Are you just going to leave me here with this ghost in my apartment?

JEROME

Let mi know ef notin else need fixin. Mi ave notin but time.

Jerome exits.

Kyle looks around his apartment, full of fear.

The toilet starts running again.

Lights dim as Robert Johnson's "Me and the Devil Blues" plays, full of crackle.

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *One thing I like to do in my work is present a theoretical conundrum (whether it be Philosophy, Black Studies, Queer Theory, Media Studies, etc.) in a theatrical fashion. This piece is no exception; I often think of it as an unofficial adaptation of a Mark Fisher article called The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology, which I think everyone should read. I was very interested in the idea of whether a ghost was from the present or the past and what it means to haunt a space. The gentrification setting came from my own life. I was living in Brooklyn, New York after college, and I would see how a lot of white people my age interacted with our Jamaican super (he actually was a musician, as well as the worst weed dealer in Bed-Stuy). I always felt this kinship with both sides as a Jamaican-American myself but still a gentrifier, so I wanted to imagine a heightened version of that relationship that would let me play with the ideas that were already swirling around in my head. Our toilet was also running around that time, and that brought the whole thing together.*

This play went on tour in the summer of 2019, heading to The Woodside Players of Queens' Summer Play Festival where we did a reading (and won Best Play!) at the Long Island City Library, The DC Black Theatre Festival for another reading, and it finally had its world premiere at the Fade to Black Play Festival in Houston, Texas. The next year, we finally did a full production in New York at the (now defunct) Secret Theatre, and Charging Moose Media recorded a version of the play for their "At the Table" podcast. Publication was the white whale for this piece for a while, so I am glad it's finally found a place to rest.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Zachariah Ezer is an M.F.A. [Playwriting](#) Candidate at the University of Texas at Austin. His work has been developed at numerous theatres in New York, Chicago, LA, DC, Houston, and online. He is a UT

Michener Fellow for the class of 2023, a 2020 Town Stages Sokoloff Creative Arts Fellow, a 2018 BUFU EYEDREAM Resident, a 2015 Wesleyan University Olin Fellow, and a member of The Tank's LIT Council. He is also a dramaturg (for The National Black Theatre, Merde, foolsFURY, and The Workshop Theater, where he is currently in residence), an essayist (published by Gizmodo/io9, HuffPost, Bubbleblabber, and elsewhere), and a performer (in alternative rock band [Harper's Landing](#))