

Open to Interpretation

by
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CAST

KHALID, a middle-aged African American man in a Dashiki and other traditional African garb.

CHEYENNE, a woman in her twenties who could be dressed in military fatigues, a leather jacket or some other tough-looking clothing.

BLY, a somewhat frail, beleaguered looking white man who is wearing a suit and tie.

HOLLINGSLY, a middle aged white man who is dressed meticulously in an outfit that shows he is a patron of the arts, a culture vulture, and proud of it. He speaks with a royal Connecticut/Olde English accent.

JANITOR, a non-speaking cameo role.

THE TIME

The present.

THE PLACE

Interior of an art museum or gallery.

SETTING:

On back wall stage right is a wild avant garde art deco piece. On the back wall stage left is another equally wild, almost disturbing work. In the middle is a "work" that shows nothing but standard and uniform black inside a frame.

AT RISE:

The scene opens with an empty stage. After a moment, various patrons slowly move from offstage and work their way toward the painting in the center, as if they were casually reviewing each painting in the museum. The first to arrive at the center is KHALID. Upon viewing the "black" work, KHALID nods his head in affirmation, and gives a raised fist to the work. The second to arrive is CHEYENNE. Upon viewing the "black" work, CHEYENNE nods her head affirmatively, brings her hands together and raises them to the painting. The third to arrive is BLY. Upon viewing the "black" work, BLY nods his head in affirmation and affirmatively points to the painting. The three stare at the "black" painting silently, mesmerized, not moving. After a pause, HOLLINGSLY appears from stage right and begins his path to the middle. He

stares at the "black" painting, pulls out a notebook and begins taking notes.

HOLLINGSLY

(Reading his notes aloud, ostensibly to himself, but loudly enough for the audience and his fellow art viewers to hear. He reads quickly, pedantically and pompously.) That this artist has been able to bring so many formal and technical changes around the constant focus of his attention is a signal demonstration of the generally underappreciated fact that aesthetic possibilities carried to extremes of deliberateness are as likely to produce visual marvels as the caprices of the unfettered hand.

BLY

Excuse me, Latvian, right?

HOLLINGSLY

The painting?

BLY

No, the language.

HOLLINGSLY

The language, sir, is English.

BLY

Not the English I know.

HOLLINGSLY

Perhaps it is because you are not as cognizant of the language as you may believe.

BLY

Or *perhaps* it's because you're more interested in hearing yourself talk than in understanding what's really going on with this work.

HOLLINGSLY

Well! In addition to being rude, you are obviously frustrated that your comprehension level simply won't allow you to grasp the lofty underpinnings of said work.

BLY

The *work* I grasp fine. What I don't grasp is why you've got to interrupt us all with that psychobabble.

HOLLINGSLY

I was merely noting that the emotional impact of this work results from the unexpected encounter between the subject and viewer, ergo--

BLY

Wrong wrong wrong. I can tell you what this guy is trying to get across, and I don't need a thesaurus to explain it.

HOLLINGSLY

(Sarcastically.) Can't wait to hear this.

BLY

It's about men becoming men again. About forgetting all this political correctness and rediscovering manly things -- like a fatty steak, a fine cigar and a good old tittie bar.

(HOLLINGSLY gasps: the others give BLY derogatory glances. BLY then points to the work.)

The black is about man's return to his roots, to basics, to simpler living. No fru fru colors, no frilly pink lines. Just black. Solid, manly black.

(KHALID chuckles derisively.)

BLY

(Earnest.) Is there a problem, my man brother?

KHALID

Your brother? I'm your brother?

BLY

You are a man, so you are my brother.

KHALID

You've got to be kidding.

BLY

All men are my bothers. We are united--

KHALID

(Rhetorical.) Would you listen to this shit? This man -- this *white* man -- now he wants to be my brother.

BLY

Of course.

KHALID

After all these years of holding me down, a man like you -- a man with the power, who keeps my people in check -- now you pull this "We are men, we are brothers" speech?

BLY

But we share the same instinctual needs, the same urge to become hunters, to let out the *boy* within.

KHALID

You better watch that "boy" shit.

BLY

No no no. I don't mean -- I, too, have a boy within.

KHALID

Where do you people come up with this?

BLY

You don't understand, my man brother. It's time for us all to rediscover our proud hunter heritage.

KHALID

"Rediscover?" White man like you, you got the luxury of rediscovering. An African American man like me, I'm still trying to discover my first heritage.

BLY

The only place you need to look is in within yourself, my man brother. I can help you -- my group--

KHALID

There's more of you?

BLY

It's called the Howling with Wolves club. We're always looking for manly men to join our weekly retreats to the wilderness, where we beat tom toms and reclaim our *machismo*. (He howls.)

KHALID

Gee, a night out with lily white fruit flies dancing around trees. All you need is a rope and a low hanging branch.

BLY

No, my man brother, we're all one universal man. (Points to the painting.) *He* understood it. *He* captured it in manly, manly black. (He howls.)

KHALID

So now you want black back?

BLY

I'm not taking--

KHALID

For two hundred years, you wanted nothing to do with black -- because it reminded you of us. Black magic, black moods, black Monday -- everything bad you called black. Now, because of this fine work, you want it back.

BLY

But my man brother, this artist uses the rugged strength of black to represent man's --

KHALID

This artist, you think he's white or African American?

BLY

Doesn't matter--

KHALID

He's African American.

BLY

I don't see the signature. How do you know he's bla-- African American?

KHALID

One proud African American man can recognize another.

BLY

Well, whatever his skin color, his work speaks to all men seeking to become the hunter again. (He howls.)

KHALID

His work isn't talking about hugging a tree. It's the black of his skin. A proud, dark, rich color--

HOLLINGSLY

Technically, black is not a color.

KHALID

Save that crap for your notebook. My brother artist refuses to be diluted by pale, weak colors being forced upon him by *the Man*.

HOLLINGSLY

I fail to see how this work represents--

BLY

(Whining.)
But he's my brother, too.

KHALID

Your lily white eyes can't see it for the liberating work it is.
No way your type could know him.

CHEYENNE

Her.

KHALID

Huh?

CHEYENNE

The artist. He's a her.

HOLLINGSLY

Huh.

BLY

No way he's a her. He's a he.

KHALID

A proud Afric--

CHEYENNE

Don't waste my time with all this back-to-manhood, playing-in-the-trees crap--

KHALID

Look sister, this work represents the oppression my people--

CHEYENNE

Has nothing to do with the *male* half of your people.

KHALID

Hell are you talking about?

CHEYENNE

The artist is a woman whose soul is black because she is relegated to subservient role in this male-dominated society.

HOLLINGSLY

Excuse me, my dear lady, but I don't see--

CHEYENNE

How could you, from that high male perch. You need to look at it from the basement, from the gutter, from your knees, where a woman is relegated to remain in this stifling caste system, this male haven. (She indicates the painting.) *She* understood that.

BLY

So how long you been a visual ventriloquist?

CHEYENNE

A what?

BLY

You know, where your eyes are in one place, but your sight's in another.

(HOLLINGSLY giggles.)

CHEYENNE

Oh, there's nothing wrong with my eyesight. I just happen to know a male-dominated world when I see one. And so does this genius female artist.

HOLLINGSLY

Madam, while I am quite sympathetic to your plight, I must question your interpretation of this fine work --

KHALID

How do you know he's a her?

CHEYENNE

Because a woman just knows. The black represents the blackness of the *female* artist's - heart ... (She addresses BLY.) from years and years of scars brought on by your kind.

KHALID

You got that right. His kind--

CHEYENNE

Is your kind. You're all *men*.

KHALID

Don't put me in the same category with --

HOLLINGSLY

I too must object to being grouped with a male chauvinist.

BLY

Well, I'm not apologizing for anything. I'm a male, and proud of it. (He then sings the following tune to the theme of Helen Reddy's "I am Woman.")

I am man,
hear me roar,
my virility to restore
you can see the hairs upon my manly chest.
I'm the hunter--

KHALID

Ohhhh shut up. Look, sister, I know where you're coming from. As an oppressed African American--

CHEYENNE

And an oppressive man.

BLY

Here we go again, it's man's fault. It's always man's fault.

KHALID

It's not man's fault, it's *The Man's* fault.

CHEYENNE

It's all of you. Doesn't matter what color you are, you're all chauvinistic and you're all the reason this tragic genius female artist's soul is so black, as this work clearly shows.

HOLLINGSLY

My dear, while the work is black, it does not represent the artist's soul, (to KHALID) nor the artist's skin color, (to BLY) nor the urge to revert back to being a Neanderthal.

BLY

Okay, genius what does it represent?

HOLLINGSLY

(Fast and pedantic.) Based on my years of study -- and a doctorate in art history -- I see a bold experiment in light -- and absence of light -- contrasted with a Reubenesque reverie for Mondrian malevolency in a Dali dilemma, hence an amalgam of Pollack-like perception within the framework of Chuck Close closeness that leads to a Monet montage presented in a Seurat-styled symphony.

KHALID

Man talks a lot, but says nothing.

BLY

That's because he forgot what it's like to be a *real* man. To say what you feel instead of mealy-mouthed, politically correct--

HOLLINGSLY

Would you please cease and desist with your "real man" ramblings. You're giving the rest of us a bad name!

CHEYENNE

The bad name you've already got. He's just adding to it.

KHALID

Look, just because you hate men doesn't mean the artist does.

CHEYENNE

The artist hates hypocrisy, which is what you're full of. Talking oppression--

KHALID

Not talking it, living it--

CHEYENNE

All the while you're oppressing women yourself.

KHALID

What? I have never oppressed --

BLY

Don't bother arguing with her. She's just jealous she's not like us.

KHALID

"Us?" There is no "us." There's you, there's me.
(A janitor has entered from offstage left, he is holding a sign and slowly makes his way to the center stage.)

BLY

How could you say that after looking at this inspirational work, which unites us as men?

KHALID

It's about the oppression of--

CHEYENNE

The demeaning of--

BLY

The glory of--

HOLLINGSLY

The perspicacity of --

(As the JANITOR reaches the center work, he hangs a sign that reads, "SORRY, THIS WORK IS BEING RESTORED." As the actors see the sign, they all lapse into uncomfortable silence, where each is embarrassed to catch anyone else's eye. All that is heard is throat clearing, perhaps some nervous whistling and a bit of stammering. They then slowly work their way to the other pictures, stealing furtive glances at each other as they do so. They slowly make their way offstage. The last one to leave is BLY. Before he leaves, he takes one last look at the black picture and says the following.)

BLY

Well, it's certainly the manliest *background* I've ever seen.
(He howls. Curtain comes down.)

END