Detroit ‘67

A Play
By Dominique Morisseau

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Act One. Scene Five.

Lights up on Chelle. She stands at the bar and counts out money.

CHELLE  
(to herself)  
Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine… two hundred.

Caroline enters from the washroom, drying her hair.

CHELLE  
We did good last night.

CAROLINE  
Did we?

CHELLE  
Sure enough. You worked this room like a little butterfly. Luring them fellas into your cocoon. Got Harold and Peanut spending more money in this place then I’ve ever seen.

CAROLINE  
Just doin’ my part…

CHELLE  
You served up those drinks faster than Lank ever could. I should keep you around and send him on.

Caroline laughs. Chelle looks at her.

CHELLE  
How’s that gash coming?

CAROLINE  
Oh. (beat) It’s fine.

CHELLE  
Healing okay?

CAROLINE  
I suppose so.

CHELLE  
You ought to keep putting that ointment on it ’fore it gets worse.
CAROLINE
Oh right…. Okay…. 

Beat.

Chelle counts out money and hands it to Caroline.

CHELLE
Here you go…. Twenty dollars. From the tip jar, like we agreed.

Thanks.

CHELLE
I’m goin’ out to run a few errands for tonight’s joint. You hear Lank come in, just tell him for me.

I’ll let him know.

CHELLE
Don’t know if it’s my decorations or Lank’s 8-track player or Mama and Daddy’s house… or you…. But one of them four is real good for business around here…

Chelle folds her money and puts it in an envelope.

Be back soon…

Chelle exits up the steps. Caroline looks around herself. She counts her money over again.

CAROLINE
Fifteen …. Twenty…. 

She moves to the clothes-line and finds a safety pin. She pins the money to the inside of her bra. It is meticulous. She’s done this before.

Caroline looks around the basement, slightly bored. She heads to the 8-track player.

Caroline dances to the song with reckless abandon. She finds a pole. Goes to it. Dances with it like a lover.

Lank opens the door to the basement and stands at the balcony. Caroline dances-oblivious. Lank watches with a smile and enjoys Caroline’s moves.

Finally – she turns and sees him staring.

LANK

Hey there.

Beat. Caroline is frozen. Marvin sings on. Lank smiles. Caroline moves over to the player and stops the cassette as Lank approaches.

CAROLINE

Shit- I’m so sorry/ for bothering with-

LANK

No need for sorry/ you ain’t did nothing-

CAROLINE

I shouldn’t have/ been messing in your things-

LANK

It’s alright. / I’m not protesting-

CAROLINE

I’m so embarrassed.

LANK

Don’t need to be embarrassed. Just dancing.

CAROLINE

I had no business in your music. I was just…curious- that’s all….

LANK

Curious is okay with me. I like curious. (beat) You like Motown?
CAROLINE

Yeah…. I like it…..

LANK

Yeah? Who you diggin’ on?

CAROLINE

I don’t know, um…all the groups you have here. Temptations. Four Tops. Gladys Knight and the Pips.

LANK

You know about Gladys Knight and the Pips?

CAROLINE

Sure. The Supremes. Martha and the Vandellas.

LANK

You diggin’ on Negro music?

CAROLINE

Somethin’ wrong with that?

LANK

Maybe not. (beat) What you dig about it?

CAROLINE

Depends on who’s singing.

LANK

What about the Temptations?

CAROLINE

The Temps? Their dance moves – total synchronicity. Their harmony…their bass….it’s what all music should be made of…

LANK

Mary Wells.

CAROLINE

Voice like cashmere. Real sweet sounding….

LANK

Listen at you! - Marvin Gaye?
CAROLINE
Now Marvin is something altogether different. His voice can just sort of…pull on you…

LANK
How you mean?

CAROLINE
Like….I don’t know….like tug at someplace deep in you. Somewhere no one else can touch and just… moves you in a way you didn’t even know you could be moved, you know?

LANK
Yeaaah….moves you real good….


CAROLINE
Yep it’s… good music…

Lank approaches the fuse box. Opens it.

LANK
Hope I’m not intruding on you...

CAROLINE
Not at all...

LANK
Just wanna check the fuse box. Almost shut the party down last night when I blew that fuse. Worse thing in the world is to be the DJ when the music stops playing before quittin’ time. Folks’l be ready to chop off your neck.

Lank flicks switches on the fuse box. Goes to his 8 track player.

LANK (cont’d)
Think I’m gonna change that extension cord, too. 8-track player is a new breed. My sister don’t get that. I try to tell her, this is changin’ the way we hear music. And we got to change with it. (beat) You heard the difference? The cassette sound? Real smooth, wasn’t it?

CAROLINE
It was. Sounded really good last night. Folks were dancing so hard, I swear I saw the walls sweating.
LANK
Yeah…now that’s what a party is supposed to do. You ever dance til’ the walls sweat?

CAROLINE
Not dance….
Beat. Getting even hotter. Need to cool down.

LANK
I wouldn’t have picked you for a lover of Negro music.

CAROLINE
What’s wrong with Negro music?

LANK
Nothin’s wrong with it. Just seem like you’d listen to those ol’ classical cats. Beethoven or Chopin. Them piano dudes.

CAROLINE
What’s a Beethoven?

LANK
What’s a Beethoven?!

Caroline laughs and shakes her head. Lank looks at her.

LANK (cont’d)
Ohhh…I see…. You pullin’ my leg. Havin’ a little fun with me….

CAROLINE
Maybe.

LANK
So you like Negro music. I like Negro music. But only one of us is a real Negro.

CAROLINE
Maybe.

LANK
Maybe?

Caroline laughs and shakes her head again.

LANK
Ohh…you like to joke a lot. Like to play with me, hunh?
Caroline shrugs. Lank looks at her with intrigue. She returns his look. Quick beat.

Lank finishes at the fuse box. He moves over to the 8-track player. Changes the extension cord.

Caroline mosies across the basement floor. She brushes past the walls. The little brown girl. The four-pointed star. The black fist.

CAROLINE
Who’s the artist?

Lank looks up. Caroline points to the star.

LANK
Artist? …. You mean that thing?

CAROLINE
It’s interesting.

LANK
Chelle drew that… long time ago. My ol’ man – he used to have me and Chelle down here all the time. Gave us permission to write on the walls. “Mark your territory” he used to say. So… we did.

CAROLINE
She like stars?

LANK

CAROLINE
And this?

LANK
That’s supposed to be Chelle. I drew it for her. Six years old. Tryin’ to be thoughtful. But she started crying and told Mama I was trying to make her look ugly on purpose. She tried to make me wash it off…. but Pops convinced Mama it was art, and that we’d laugh about it one day. (beat) Chelle still ain’t laughed yet.
CAROLINE

You draw the fist too?

LANK

Nah. Pops drew that. Said it was Joe Louis’ fist. Said the Brown Bomber was gonna always be a champ in this house. “That Black fist is gonna set us free.” That’s what my ol’ man would say.

CAROLINE

You were close to your folks.

LANK

Pretty tight knit. Whole family. You?

CAROLINE

No, I…no. My folks split when I was a kid. We don’t really talk much. I’m kind of a loner.

LANK

Oh….

CAROLINE

But your folks…they gave you lots, hunh?

LANK

Didn’t have much, but they had this house. That’s one thing they had. Both of ‘em- hard workers. Mama would fry hair right upstairs in that kitchen-

CAROLINE

Fry hair?

LANK

You know…with the hot comb on the stove? (beat/ nothing) Anyway, Pops was an auto man. Ford Motor Company. Served ‘em til’ his death half a year ago. He tried to get me in there… but that auto stuff ain’t for me. I ain’t never been one for a whole lotta up and down when my heart is into somethin’ else.

CAROLINE

Somethin’ else like what?

LANK

Doin’ for myself. Finding somewhere to really be somebody and have something that no one can take from me. You know?

CAROLINE

Yeah, sure…. (beat) But how…. I mean…. how do you get that, you know?
LANK
Me- I bought some property over here. Gonna open up my own business.

CAROLINE
Yeah?

LANK
That’s the plan. Just hopin’ it’s the right one. Ain’t settle in me easy yet.

CAROLINE
Maybe that’s good. If it was too easy, it proably wouldn’t be worth much. At least you got a plan. That’s good to have. Keeps you believing in something.

What you believe in?

CAROLINE
I… (beat) I don’t really know anymore. Things I thought I believed- changed. It’s like I woke up and suddenly I’m not the same person I thought I was. I’m just in this moment and… everything before it is bullshit. (beat) It’s good you found something for yourself. I wish.

Lank looks at Caroline.

LANK
Say- what happened to you?

CAROLINE
Oh… um…

Somebody hurt you.

CAROLINE
Langston, I-

Lank.

LANK
Lank. I just… think it’s best to leave that night in the past.

CAROLINE
You sure it’s gonna stay there?
Beat. Lank approaches Caroline slowly.

LANK
When I saw you out there that night... somethin’ happened. I saw you look at me. Heard you without no words. You know what I mean?

CAROLINE
You heard me…

LANK
It don’t make a lotta sense, I know…me bein’ what I am and you --- --- but in that moment, all the trouble could come on me ain’t matter. Only thing mattered was that I felt you needin’ somethin’. Couldn’t pull away.

Lank steps closer to Caroline. She inhales.

CAROLINE (nearly breathless)
What’d you feel…

Lank doesn’t answer. Instead, he takes another step closer. They stare at each other for an extended moment …dangerously close…on the brink of a kiss…

The door to the basement flies open as Chelle enters.

CHELLE
Hey Caroline – is there any more ice in that freez-

Caroline quickly moves away from Lank.

Chelle stops when she sees Lank and Caroline alone. The silence is revealing. Chelle looks to Lank with instant disapproval. Her eyes bore holes through him.


Finally:

CAROLINE
I ... think we’re out of ice....
Chelle’s eyes remain on Lank. She makes no contact with Caroline as she answers.

CHELLE

Freezer in the garage….got plenty….

CAROLINE

Should I go out back and bring some in?

CHELLE

That’d be good…

CAROLINE

No problem….

Caroline walks past Lank and moves toward the steps. She passes Chelle who remains focused on Lank.

CAROLINE (cont’d)

Be right back….

Caroline leaves.

Chelle glares at Lank for like an eternity. Disapproval and disgust shoot from her eyes.

Lank feels the impulse of shame at first, and then suddenly looks back at her defiantly.

Finally Chelle turns and leaves.

Lank remains still…contemplative…