

Front of Bibi Baobab

Bibi Baobab

(Grandmother Baobab)
[Swahili word for grandmother is Bibi]

ONE-ACT DUOLOGUE

[Image that Moses has on wall, and that speaks via offstage female actor
OR
The painting could be a hollow frame with an African woman's head sticking through.]



LIVING ROOM OF A CHIC LONDON FLAT. SEPTEMBER 2020 - DAY

(MOSES TEMBO, A STYLISH, FORTYISH BLACK LONDONER WITH A CULTURED ACCENT AND DRESSED IN A CARY GRANT-TYPE SUIT IS GAZING INTO SPACE.)

MOSES:

As I stand here, self-isolating in my South London flat in this Covid-19 pandemic, I'm thinking of Bibi, my father's mother—Bibi's Swahili for grandmother. Don't often think of Bibi but, as a trader in African textiles, I'm a non-essential worker now with time to reflect.

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

Can hear myself breathing. My thoughts turn to George Floyd, that black man who died in Minneapolis because a white police officer knelt on his throat. I felt sick, when I heard from the video clip George's plea, "Please, I can't breathe".

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

Guess you need a bit of diversion from the world's ills. Okay. I've begun painting portraits. I've painted Bibi. Look! She's on the wall, staring at me. It's almost a confrontation. Odd, how different the room now seems with Bibi sandwiched between a print of Andy Warhol's *Coca Cola* bottle, a symbol of modern mass consumerism and a print of his *Marilyn Diptych*: fifty images of Marilyn created from the same publicity photo from the film *Niagara*.

(BIBI BAOBAB, A WIZENED AFRICAN WOMAN IN THE PAINTING, STARTS TO SPEAK TO AUDIENCE. MOSES IS UNAWARE OF HER BEING VERBAL)

BIBI:

Marilyn Monroe? Is she real?

MOSES:

Marilyn's face goes from vividly coloured to black and white. It's like fading. Some arty-farties say it's suggestive of Marilyn's mortality. I'd say it's more a mouldering of scarlet lipstick and turquoise eye shadow, not to mention the

MOSES: (Contd.)

evaporation of a bleach bottle. To me, in this print, Marilyn isn't there.

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

The contrast is shocking between my Warhol prints that are alienating and highlight fragile superficiality and my oil painting of Bibi that's eternal, firm and the true colours of Africa.

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

Somehow, Bibi's eyes are gateways into our deeper selves. But, hey, who's into depth, these days? 'False news' is more exciting, and 'Sex it up' a clutched phrase. But that's just Kundalini power, man.

BIBI:

It's important to me to tell you I'm a simple village woman, who can neither read nor write, and that my world's a baobab tree that stands a mile from Mundari Village in Muzarabani, a flat land that lies along the Mozambique-Zimbabwe border. I want you to map it in your skull, and picture me there. I want you to smell the red dust of Africa, hear the shriek of the fish eagle, and feel the dryness of pampas grass. '*Use all you senses,*' I'm forever saying.

MOSES:

Bibi's probably asking me to play traditional Zimbabwean music based on the mbira that's better known as the 'thumb piano', but the only mbira music I possess is modern, played with electric instrumentation and with lyrics pigeonholed by social and political comment.

(ZIMBABWEAN MUSIC STARTS PLAYING FOR A MOMENT, THEN STOPS. MOSES LOOKS BEWILDERED.)

BIBI:

I've stopped the music. I don't like it, although the 'thumb piano' is traditional to us Shona folk. I play it by holding it in my hand, and plucking the tines with

BIBI: (Contd.)

my thumbs, my right forefinger and sometimes my left forefinger. I'm a stickler for details, a teacher.

MOSES:

I sense Bibi knows your fear over the corona virus, and wants you to talk to her. Let her in, allow her listen to you. She's a wise woman, a listener for anyone troubled, and always she'll be found under her baobab tree beyond the maize field. Don't worry. If you can't go to the baobab, the baobab will come to you.

BIBI:

The baobab's already here. Don't let Moses fool you into thinking I'm special. Today, in Harare, many 'bench grandmas' like me. No couches, no bedside manner—just nods and intent listening. We old women are all baobabs. Moses, tell the folk about baobabs.

MOSES:

I sense Bibi urging me to clue you up on the baobab. Well, it's a symbol of strength, respected for its healing properties. Bibi always said if you understood the baobab, you understood her.

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

More? Who's saying 'more'? All I know's long-ago, the gods in error planted the baobab upside, hence its bizarre shape. It can live for several thousand years. A long time, but Bibi Baobab will live forever.

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

The baobab's bark's used for cloth and rope, the leaves for medicines, while the fruit, "monkey bread", is eaten. Sometimes, folk live inside of the huge trunk, and fish eagles nest in the crown. The leaves resemble an extended

MOSES: (Contd.)

hand, reaching out in friendship. Odd the baobab's ninety-per cent water and mirrors a human being that's also ninety-per cent water.

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

Earlier, I heard on the news Covid-19's now in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe? It's another world, one that forty-years ago, after independence, father left, taking us to England. I was then eight years old.

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

In England, father changed, became a chameleon, taking on not only duller colours of sky and earth but also shallower values like consumerism and celebrity worship.

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

He began supporting Chelsea Football Club, wearing a smart suit. I followed suit—if you'll forgive the pun. This Cary Grant gear I wear because I always thought Cary the epitome of English sartorial elegance.

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

Back to Bibi. I glimpse, now and then, her face fusing with her baobab tree, the one beyond our old maize field. No! Bibi isn't dead, will never die, and always faced problems like a baobab sturdy against storms.

BIBI:

Many times, I faced problems like tsunamis, but won through. My son, Moses' father, once told me whenever anyone in the family became depressed, I'd say, "*Use your hands, start making money. Many things to do such as selling second-hand clothes, fruits and vegetables, offering cleaning services.*"

(MOSES POINTS AT A SWITCHED-OFF TV.)

MOSES:

I listen a lot to updates on this new virus. I must. Not only to protect myself but also those physically around me.

BIBI:

Don't dwell on this virus to the point where you become depressed.

Depression in my Shona language is *kufungisisa*, "thinking too much".

(MOSES POINTS TO HIS TONGUE.)

MOSES:

Listen through my tongue to her.

BIBI:

Only you, Moses, can't hear me. You were never a listener.

MOSES:

Bibi will tell you about the time the floods came to her world. Don't dismiss her. With climate change, many will experience floods. Therefore, I bet she might tell you how once the water came early morning, when she was about to go to the fields. She might tell you how huts were flattened and chickens drowned. She might tell you a Red Cross truck came to rescue them, but got stuck in mud, and all the villagers had to walk days to safety. My father once said Bibi was always saying, "*I lost everything and now I have to start again from scratch*".

BIBI:

To advise others, I use *kuvhura pfungwa*—that means 'opening of the mind' and that means your mind. Traditionally in Africa, we old women used to play the role of counsellor, but now, we listen more, scold less. Like I once said, "*When folk keep things inside, their problems begin*". I also say folk must go through two other steps—*kusimudzira* (uplifting) and *kusimbisa* (strengthening).

(MOSES GOES TO THE WINDOW.)

MOSES:

Down below, I see a masked Indian woman returning from what is called 'essential shopping'. Keeping well away from a child lingering nearby, she turns to the child, *"Hello!"* she calls, *"How are you doing?"* That woman values human beings. Bibi's the same. Bibi's my blueprint for wisdom and love, one that long-ago was a dropped seed under a baobab. I can still see her wizened head swelling into the big belly of the baobab. I can still smell her sweat. It's unique, scented with safety.

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

Imagine how great it would be if we could create a global network of Bibi baobabs. Still, I realise you might be saying the self-isolating is getting to me, and that I've 'flipped my lid'. Not so. I now know why Bibi Baobab sometimes spoke to me. I'd lost my way in Life.

BIBI:

I am still speaking to you, Moses, and you never lost your way in Life. You just had never found it.

(MOSES STARES INTO AUDIENCE.)

I'll leave you with an African proverb:

"Truth is like a baobab tree; one person's arms cannot embrace it"

(MOSES POINTS TO HIS PAINTING/FEMALE ACTOR OF BIBI BAOBAB.)

Bibi's waiting for you. She's the baobab and the baobab's her. The baobab's you. Talk to her. Maybe she'll say, *"Once this is over, don't return to an abnormal 'normal' but create a healthier world with the true values you abandoned, long-ago, when you deserted the baobab."*

BIBI:

So true, Moses. I was about to say that.

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

I'm waiting for you all, will always be waiting for you because every one of us is a seed from the same baobab. If we remember our fellow human beings, who have suffered and died, they will breathe again through us.

(O.S. LONG, HEAVY BREATHS)

Listen to George Floyd.

(MOSES AND BIBI START HEAVY BREATHING, AND THEN THE SOUND OF MANY BREATHS.)

CURTAIN