

SPIRIT IN THE VINE:

A SANKOPERA

Libretto by Jay Saint Flono
Music by James Thomas Dargan

(Excerpted Version)

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Obadiah, the Shackle-King of Exodos
Cosima, crown princess of Exodos
Sable-Rose, High Queen of Exodos
Prince Cotton, a fairy prince
Mother Magda, a powerful conjureess and midwife
Treeboy, a Devil and musician in Obadiah's court
Melalamia, a nighttime goddess of bloodlust
Lady Sandine, Cosima's favorite
Mamagole, owl-woman of peace
Watsilla, owl-woman of vengeance
Ouida, owl-woman of justice
Three Priests, guardians of the Ancestors
Father Wind, Chief of the Flying Africans
The Cymbee Queen, Mother of the Water Spirits
The Songster, narrator

CHORUS

Courtiers, Guards and Ladies © Jay Saint Flono

DANCERS

9 Dancers representing Spirits: 3 Fairies, 2 Flying Africans, 2 Water Spirits, 2 Devils, 7 Wild Beasts and 9 Ancestors

SCENE I: THE ROYAL GROVE

(At RISE: A serene place full of flowering shrubs, trees and erotic statuary. Obadiah, Sable-Rose and their royal train: courtiers and servants fanning them with palm branches, are gathered.)

SONGSTER

Spirits o' de dus' an' sea, come by here, come by here. Dese bones ain't dry inside o' me, come by here, come by here. Let music be thy daily bread, come by here, come by here. Songs o' de livin' sung by de dead, come by here, come by here.

(Lyricall music begins)

Pon ol' time in Exodus, land o' Honey, Glory an' Dust in de Cunjuh Land by de S'wanee Sea, a Land o' Light born from de Slave: All o' we heard music in de air. Yet dere was no song fuh king Obadiah, dere was no song fuh Sable-Rose. De Sorcerer Obadiah an' his Fairy wife. De Almighty Obadiah had no spell fuh make her belly grow. No chil' for de King, no chil' fuh de Queen. For six hundred hallowed days and nights, dey pray an' fast unto de Dead, dey cry out to de Great Cunjuh 'Oman, waitin' in silence fuh a blessing to be poured out, an silence returned to dem. No chil' for the King, no chil' for the Queen. Soon, dey heard a salty wind blow from a far country, an' out of it came Mother Magda, de Great Cunjuh 'Oman, an' she said unto dem:

(Enter Mother Magda)

MOTHER MAGDA

De Great Cunjuh 'Oman has heard thy cry! Wait my chillun' jes' a little mo' while! Soon an' very soon you'll have a true-born chile. Surrender all dem sorrows like de music in a song, keep yo' faith in dese words and hold on!

SONGSTER

Mother Magda stood 'pon de sand. From de Sea she take a stone in she hand. Bless it, she did. Mother Magda wit' she hands made a sign. She say:

MOTHER MAGDA

Konjami!

SONGSTER

And she conjure a vine! A spirit in de vine! Wrap it, she did. Thrice 'round de stone, thrice 'round de stone, thrice 'round de stone. She take de king seed an' she take de queen blood. One drop from de King, one drop from de Queen, all buried in de Earth 'neath a lil' persimmon tree dat fuh so long de Queen loved. Dey waited in silence fuh a blessin' to come out, de grey stone became an egg mo' brighter than gold. Some longsufferin' alchemy burned through de soil an' inside lay a new baby wit' a spirit of old.

OBADIAH

Kome! Kome! Kome! Kum ba yah, kum ba yah to this great Exodos kingdom-wood! Blow down you Flying Africans from your airy home, get up Devils from your hellish gloam, walk the waves from faraway you Cymbee daughters of waters, unfurl from your flower-beds you Little Spirits A-Glowing, come and anoint her!

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(Drums. Father Wind and Flying Africans enter. The Flying Africans give a lively dance.)

FATHER WIND

Sweet Cosima, blessed you be, no man shall a-hinder thee. By the breath of S'wanee Sea, I'll make music from this seed: I gift you the Judgment Horn, crafted for a single thing, from it you may be reborn, call upon your ancestors in your time of need!

(Enter Treeboy and Devils. The Devils give a joyous dance.)

TREEBOY

Shake de Drinkin' Gourd, blow de screamin' fife! Fiddle reelin' Juba chords, beat a drum o' praisin' life! Give de gift of song to her, descendant of John de Conqueror!

(Enter Cymbee Queen and Watah Spirits. They give a serpentine dance.)

CYMBEE QUEEN

Wata bring you, de wata shall take! Wata rise 'pon you like a salt-wata snake! Wata flow by night an' ebb by day, wata brought you, de data will bear you away!

SABLE-ROSE

Over my head, I hear music in the air. There must be a God somewhere!

CHORUS

Ooh, in the air! O, God is with us in our song! Somewhere, somewhere there is God! Over my head there is God, there must be a God somewhere!

(Sable-Rose stands in the center with the baby. The Cotton-Fairies enter and dance around her)

SABLE-ROSE

Sacred ones a-glowin' in the secret night. Black skin so sweet with hair so silver-light. Flittin', flyin, singin', sighin' secretly: plantations bow before your Mirror's majesty, allelu, alleluia! Dancin' in the treetops, dancin' in the moss, spirits of the little ones, heal our loss: let the world see what we know to be true: the blackest people are gentle, too. Spirits of the cotton and the sugarcane, you have heard our every cry and healed our pain, and if humans dare forget your tenderness: then we should always be a slave and never rest! Allelu, alleluia!

(The Three Priests enter and give the baby a baptism)

THREE PRIESTS

Saltwater Deities, Ancestors! Let it be known and seen: that Obadiah has blessed his true-born queen. We ask that you keep them, hold them, cover them and bind them forever in your Love, 'till Time shall be no more! And we ask that you bless their newborn daughter, Cosima! Let her walk, let her talk and be one with all power. And keep her forever in your Love, till Time shall be no more! Amen!

OBADIAH

Praise my daughter's shimmering fame! Praise my daughter's newborn name! Music is the highest magic and she's the purest note alive! Praise my Singing Daughter, and build her a sacred shrine. Bear the temple, bear the temple, bear the temple into life. Bear the temple, bear the temple, bear it out with

mason-knife. Tabix mortar, stone and oil, iron gates and golden foil! All you elements conjoin with a mass of public coin! Wake the nation, strike foundations with a never-ending toil!

(Chorus repeats “bear the temple, bear the temple, bear the temple into life” as the scene changes. As the Temple is erected, the voices fade and all the People and Spirits leave until Obadiah is left alone. Darkness.)

SCENE II: THE TEMPLE OF MUSIC

(At RISE: An altar piled with instruments surrounded by censers and tables overflowing with fruits and bottles of wine. Colorful banners with the emblem, shield and standard of the Goldenchain family surround the altar. Obadiah drinks deeply, laughing to himself, whispering “spirit in the vine, be mine, be mine”. The Three Priests approach him slowly.)

THREE PRIESTS

Obadiah, son of sin, seek to build this shrine no more. Two daughters’ hearts lie deep within, yet one of them is on your shore! True Religion’s slain!

OBADIAH

Be still! I am still the Shackle-King! Shepherd of the Land, Father of Freedom!

THREE PRIESTS

Hear the words of the Ancestors, ‘neath us an evil power festers!

OBADIAH

The blood within me runs hot with Hudu’s fire! I make no pacts with perilous priests! My Rod and Rule will never faint nor feint to tire!

THREE PRIESTS

Obadiah, son of sin, if you build you seek to die! This hallowed ground ‘pon which we stand was once the heart of the Cunjuh Land!

OBADIAH

Lies you tell!

THREE PRIESTS

Deep within its rocky breast sleeps a god that will not rest. Beware Melalamia! Beware the Devil's Daughter! Beware Melalamia! Or she will bring your line to slaughter! Obadiah! Obadiah! Obadiah! Obadiah!

OBADIAH

(He throws his glass of wine at them. The Priests begin to hum as he speaks.
Lyricall music begins.)

Silence! Shh! Listen. It started with a feeling and the love of wine. When cancerous pains took my father's laughing life, around my heart the lust for lush tastes entwined, entwined, entwined. Whatever childlike love I had then is now lost to me? To Cosima, what can I truly be? Just another thing to love and lose again, again...

~~THREE PRIESTS~~ ©Jay Saint Flono

O King, death is not the end! By birth, by life, by death, rebirth, all time we borrow on this Earth shall be restored again.

OBADIAH

But in my dreaming mind I can be loved once more, you see. I have a Secret Place bewitched away from prying eyes. I mix up roots and secret flowers. I raise my seal of gold and iron and say the spell: "Spirit in the vine, be mine, be mine!" Drug me, inflame me, succor me with dreamlike powers! Spice and bubble, transform from green to the pit of negrified dye! Go down inside me and never let me die!

THREE PRIESTS

Gods have mercy, Gods have mercy! The King has lost his mind! He has sacrificed his soul for spirits in the vine! We must put a spell upon him, quickly, quickly cool him down! Brothers, raise your seals together, fix him with a cunjuh sound. Sing:

(The Priests circle Obadiah threateningly. As the four men chant, a display of light and flame ensues, but Obadiah is the clear victor)

OBADIAH

Afixa'Akembefara Mahudutiyafara Sunguladisya Ban!

THREE PRIESTS

Selwida Ngolo Makumba Bendem!

THREE PRIESTS

Aye Gods, help us! Your Majesty, we press and plead! Humbly listen, humbly heed. Should this benighted path you take, unfamiliar Spirits in wrath will wake and feast on all your prideful flesh, blacken bone and rape the breath!

OBADIAH

Hexes, Haints, Spirits of the Fall: rush into the golden hall. Arrest these men who yearn to die and judge them harsh with scornful eye!

THREE PRIESTS

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Saltwater Deities, have mercy on us all!

(Thunder, lightning. The Priests shout as they are swallowed by shadows. Obadiah laughs to himself. Calm. Sable-Rose runs into the Temple, baby in arm. She is horrified beyond belief. Lyrical music begins.)

Sable-Rose, why are you inconsolable?

SABLE-ROSE

I fear your love's too hot like Hell's own breath, sourly overwhelming me--a nectar made from the fruits of tragedy. Your face was once so full of life but now death resides inside your eyes, whose radiance sing a spiritual song, but every note hums deep with lies.

OBADIAH

Hush now, Sable-Rose, you are forgetting yourself, my sweet wife. It's because of love that I bore this temple into life. I bore it to celebrate what we once could not. I tied together all the

fraying bonds of our family's hallowed lore, making an everlasting sanctuary that will never come to its fall. I did it all for our Singing Daughter, beloved forevermore.

SABLE-ROSE

I see. I see I am seen and unseen. You are the sun and we are in the temple's shade. You hoard and drink and drink and shout, power's changed you and estranged you no matter how long my heart has prayed. To you, my motherhood is a precious gemstone that your power signifies. I am black alabaster and my hair is a honeycomb, but with my breasts, my hand, my sex, my voice that cries I hold sixty million secrets but have no soothing place to call home. And you are the bittersweet king who would shut close your heart's hidden door to me, your sweet wife, who is a fool to have ever loved you more.

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