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Dramatic Publishing

The Men's Cottage

By
Moses Goldberg



The Men's Cottage

Drama. By Moses Goldberg. Cast: 2m., 1w., 1 boy, 1 girl, extras optional. Here is a drama of adolescence, set amidst the color and movement of a ceremonial, primitive society. This play, especially written for a junior-high-school audience, deals with the coming-of-age rituals of a boy in a primitive culture. He is torn between the freedom of childhood and the pressures to assume adult responsibilities. His changing relationships are explored through dance and dialog with his uncle (the chief), the tribal medicine man, his best friend, and—most particularly—with his grandmother. It culminates in his bittersweet acceptance of the inevitable. Inspired by the works of Margaret Mead, this play is suitable to many production styles, from basic to elaborate. Whichever route is selected, the story of *The Men's Cottage* will mesmerize its young audience. *Unit set. Primitive costumes and masks. Approximate running time: 40 minutes. Code: MJ6.*

ISBN-13 978-0-87602-229-0



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www.dramaticpublishing.com

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MOSES GOLDBERG



Dramatic Publishing Company

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(THEMEN'S COTTAGE)

ISBN: 978-0-87602-229-0

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THE CAST

THE BOY

THE GIRL

THE GRANDMOTHER

THE CHIEF

THE MAGICIAN

THE MEN'S COTTAGE

was premiered by Stage One:
the Louisville's Children's Theatre,
on January 22, 1979
with the following cast:

The Boy.....	Kirk Davis
The Girl.....	J. Smith
The Grandmother.....	Cheri Chenoweth
The Chief.....	Alan Sharkey
The Magician.....	John Youngblood

Directed by Moses Goldberg
Choreography by Myreon Taylor
Designed by Ken Terrill

THE MEN'S COTTAGE

by

Moses Goldberg

SCENE 1

(The stage is dark. A simple drum begins to beat — the rhythm of the Men's Dance — quick and virile. The lights dimly reveal one or more huge primitive masks of grotesque magical figures, the central mask with a gaping mouth. Scattered about the rest of the stage are the sections of huts of the villagers, especially Agbeko's hut and Okwara's. The entire setting looks as though it were woven of sticks and vines. It could be Africa, or New Guinea, or even some unknown tribe in some far-off future time when mankind is reduced once more to a primitive state where the residents represent a mixture of races and types of humanity. All of this is barely perceived in the dimness. Gradually, a single spotlight brightens to the point of visibility, and we see Agbeko, the Grandmother, as she slowly — pained with age — does the steps of the Men's Dance without any attempt to keep time to the drum. As she dances, she is laughing softly to herself.)

AGBEKO: It is forbidden for a woman to do this dance. This is the Men's Dance. *(She dances on, chuckling her defiance.)* Okwara has announced that a woman who does this dance will never be a mother . . . Okwara is wise . . . he is magic and sorcery; but . . . I dance the Men's Dance, and I am a mother seven times. I am a grandmother even, many times. *(She finishes and the drum stops.)* At my age I am not interested in motherhood. *(She approaches the audience)* I had five sons. Two died very young. Three did the Men's Dance, and went to sleep in the Men's Cottage. I had also two daughters, both very strong. But I have lived a long time. Of all my sons, only Olunze still lives, and he is the Chief. That is another reason why I am not afraid to dance — what can Okwara say to the mother of his chief? *(She removes a silvery leaf from her pouch, tears it into several pieces, and begins to chew on it.)* Five sons I had . . . and four are dead. Amatefe was the youngest . . . he slept in the Men's Cottage, and then he married Iruka. He was the youngest, maybe the prettiest. He died of sorcery; his wife Iruka died of sorcery. Even Okwara could do nothing to save them. Some other magician must have been jealous of them. I have lost a husband and four sons, but Amatefe was the prettiest. Now, who will teach the Men's Dance to the son of Amatefe? My grandson, almost as pretty as his father . . . who will see his time come on him; and who will teach him the Men's Dance? *(She resumes her slow dancing as the spotlight on her fades.)*

SCENE 2

The lights come up on a clear place in the center of the village. Okwara is preparing a ritual, and lays out his bones and charms in a magical pattern. After a moment Gini Kanwa runs in and stops to watch him, fascinated by Okwara's intentness.)

OKWARA: Go away!

GINI KANWA: I haven't said a word.

OKWARA: You are bad luck to my magic.

GINI KANWA: I'm not.

OKWARA: This is not a game I am playing. I must do each thing right or there will be no meat for any of us.

GINI KANWA: How does the magic work? *(Reaching toward a piece of the pattern.)*

OKWARA: *(slapping him away)* Quiet, child! It will be your own fault if you are hungry tonight. *(He finishes his arrangements and begins to manipulate his arms and body over the pattern.)*

GINI KANWA: You look like a monkey when you do that.

OKWARA: *(Breaking off the ritual and grabbing the boy)* Stupid! Make fun of the magic and you will be covered with sores. *(Threatens to hit him.)*

GINI KANWA: Don't! I'll be quiet.

OKWARA: When your father and mother were dying of the fever — who stayed up all night doing the magic to save them?

GINI KANWA: *(Crosses away, muttering)* You didn't save them.

OKWARA: What? Speak louder.

GINI KANWA: I said, "You did, oh mighty Okwara."

OKWARA: Now stand back. I must give blood to the hunt god. *(He draws forth a stone knife and prepares to cut his own arm.)*

GINI KANWA: Don't do that.

OKWARA: Gini Kanwa is a child still. *(He takes the boy's head, forcing him to look at him.)* What will you do when the time comes for you to go the Men's Cottage? Will you be still afraid?

GINI KANWA: I'm not afraid!

OKWARA: Good. Then help me. You hold out the knife. *(He forces the knife into the boy's hand and holds out his arm. Gini Kanwa tries hard to be brave and approaches with the knife, but he cannot cut Okwara.)* It is not your arm that will be cut. *(The boy tries again, but cannot. He drops the knife and turns away.)* Child! Look at me! *(After a pause, Gini Kanwa turns to him.)* Soon you must be a hunter. When the hunter kills a pig there is much blood and squealing. The pig twists and cries for a long time. The hunter stands there, still, with his spear in the belly of the pig. *(Gini Kanwa becomes faint and sinks to the ground.)* What a tall child you are!

GINI KANWA: Leave me alone!

OKWARA: It is past time for you to be a man.

GINI KANWA: Next year — my uncle said next year!

OKWARA: Your uncle is chief, but he cannot make you remain a child forever. You must sleep in the Men's Cottage soon; or be called a coward in front of the tribe, and driven into the forest. *(He regards him a moment*

silently.) I think I will find some other place to do my magic. (Collects his implements and exists. The girl enters just in time to see him go, but is warned by Gini Kanwa's dejected manner that there has been an argument.)

AFI: *(Angrily)* Gini Kanwa, there you are. You didn't come to the stream to help me fish.

GINI KANWA: No.

AFI: You promised you'd come.

GINI KANWA: I know.

AFI: I lost two fish. I wasn't strong enough to catch them by myself.

GINI KANWA: I am also weak today. I probably wouldn't have been much help.

AFI: *(Notices his bark necklace)* Hey, you finished it!

GINI KANWA: Yes.

AFI: Where did you find this piece?

GINI KANWA: *(Slowly recovering from his embarrassment)* In the forest. I took it from a tree that had been hit by lightning.

AFI: Now you can start on one for me. You promised.

GINI KANWA: I want to mix paint for your's though! Blue and green. You will help me find the dyes?

AFI: You will help me fish next time?

GINI KANWA: All right! You don't have to keep on reminding me.

AFI: *(After a pause)* What did Okwara say?

GINI KANWA: Nothing.

AFI: Sure.

GINI KANWA: He says that I must soon be a man.

AFI: *(Wrestling playfully)* He's crazy. You are the same age as me.

GINI KANWA: *(Pulling away)* He is the magic one.

AFI: He is a puffed-up porcupine.

GINI KANWA: If you say so.

AFI: Is that what's worrying you?

GINI KANWA: You're crazy! Come on! Let's play five-stones.

AFI: Not now.

GINI KANWA: *(Takes out his pouch with the stones in it)* Come on; you can be first.

AFI: I think I am mad at you. You didn't help me fish.

GINI KANWA: You are mad at me because I always win at five-stones.

AFI: Not always. Anyway, you have better stones. I lost my smoothest ones.

GINI KANWA: You can use mine. Let's play.

AFI: I can use your stones and go first?

GINI KANWA: Go on! *(They start to play, a game rather like "jacks" where one stone is thrown up and then certain combinations must be picked up before catching the first stone.)*

AFI: One – two – three – four – five.

GINI KANWA: One – two – three – four – five.

AFI: Two – I missed! Let me try again?

GINI KANWA: My turn!

AFI: *(As he is ready to throw)* Does Okwara say when you must be a man?

GINI KANWA: *(Scoops up the stones)* You are trying to make me miss!

AFI: No, I'm not.

GINI KANWA: Then be quiet! *(Throws them out again.)*

AFI: My father says Okwara gets paid a pig for teaching the boys the Men's Dance. That's why he's always in a hurry for them to be big enough to learn it. *(Gini Kanwa misses)* Hey, it's my turn.

GINI KANWA: You talk too much!

AFI: Two – four – five. Got it. When will you make my necklace?

GINI KANWA: Never if you don't help me find the dyes. Two – four – five. So there!

AFI: You promised!

GINI KANWA: I never promised!

AFI: You did so! Don't you remember last month when I was sick. You said . . .

GINI KANWA: All right! I remember. You don't have to keep on reminding me. It's your turn.

OLUNZE: *(The Chief enters, carrying a spear.)* Gini Kanwa!

GINI KANWA: My uncle?

OLUNZE: I thought you had gone on the hunt with the men?

GINI KANWA: No, uncle.

OLUNZE: You are not going?

GINI KANWA: No.

OLUNZE: Why not? You must learn how to . . .

GINI KANWA: I have to look for dyes today. I promised Afi I would make her a bark necklace. Blue and green.

OLUNZE: *(After a pause)* Afi, leave us to speak together.

AFI: *(starting out)* I'll see you later, Gini Kanwa? *(He does not reply)* Gini Kanwa? *(She hands him back the stones.)* I'll be at the stream. Trying to fish. *(Exits.)*

OLUNZE: *(When she is gone)* You still play at five-stones. How old are you, child?

GINI KANWA: You know my age, Uncle.

OLUNZE: When I was this high I slept in the Men's Cottage. Your father, Amatefe, when he was this high. Now you are grown to a much greater height and still you sleep in the hut of your grandmother.

GINI KANWA: My grandmother is old — she needs someone to look after her.

OLUNZE: Gini Kanwa, I have decided it is time for you to learn the Men's Dance.

GINI KANWA: But you said next year. You said I could . . .

OLUNZE: Gini Kanwa, it is your time!

GINI KANWA: Yes, Uncle.

OLUNZE: The men go to hunt pigs. Take my spear and go with them. You have much to learn to be a hunter.

GINI KANWA: But they've already gone — half an hour ago. I'll never catch up . . .

OLUNZE: Then you had best go quickly.

GINI KANWA: But this is your spear, Uncle. What if I break it, or . . .

OLUNZE: Then take care to throw it only at pigs, and not at rocks. *(Gini Kanwa reluctantly exists, and Agbeko comes forward from the shadows, where she has been listening.)* My mother listens to the private words of the men. Maybe her ears will fall from her head.

AGBEKO: You cannot think of anything to say that I have not heard before, Olunze.

OLUNZE: I am too busy to stay and be scolded. *(Starts out)*

AGBEKO: I do not scold, my son. I only ask a question.

OLUNZE: *(Stops)* Ask it then, Mother.

AGBEKO: What is the first duty of a chief?

OLUNZE: To keep the village strong and safe.

AGBEKO: And happy?

OLUNZE: *(Coming back to her)* No. Mother, not happy — strong and safe. Happiness is . . . comfortable, but we can live without it. The village must have men; men to hunt, to fight if necessary. To marry and have more sons. Playing games and painting pictures on bark do not help the village. These are the pastimes of a child.