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*Dramatic Publishing*

# **THE DEATH OF THE BLACK JESUS**

**A Play in Two Acts**

**by**

**DAVID BARR**



**Dramatic Publishing**

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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(THE DEATH OF THE BLACK JESUS)

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To my parents...  
whose unwavering love and support  
continues to guide each and every step that I make.

To my wife...  
whose immeasurable love and devotion  
is undeserved by this writer.

And to Dave Kunz...the better craftsman...  
who helped transform a story into a readable play.

*THE DEATH OF THE BLACK JESUS* held its world premiere (as *Betrayal Of The Black Jesus*) on January 25, 1995 at The Unicorn Theatre, Kansas City, Missouri. The Producing Artistic Director for this 1994 National Playwrights' Award winner was Cynthia Levin, and it was presented with the following artists:

### CAST

Steven Schaffer Downs . . . . . *L. Roi Hawkins*  
Jonathan "Skibow" Morrison . . . . . *Darryl A. Stamp*  
Arthur Evans Jr. (a.k.a. Rakim Shabazz) . . . . *Walter Coppage*  
Cassandra Taylor Atkinson . . . . . *Lynn Annitra King*  
Bobby Wright . . . . . *Kurtis Armstrong*  
Arnie Stomotokos, White Male Audience Member, Man  
*Ken Boehr*  
White Female Audience Member, Woman #1 . . . *Carolyn Cox*  
Black Female Audience Member, Woman #2 . . . . *Tiffany Sipple*  
Newscaster . . . . . *Bev Chapman*

### PRODUCTION STAFF

Stage Manager . . . . . *Robert Foulk*  
Set Design . . . . . *B. Michael Yeager*  
Lighting Design . . . . . *Ruth E. Cain*  
Sound Design . . . . . *Roger Stoddard*  
Costume Design . . . . . *Mary Traylor*  
Properties . . . . . *Sarah Jane Barnum*

# **THE DEATH OF THE BLACK JESUS**

A Play in Two Acts (15 scenes)  
For 5 men and 3 women if doubling

## **CHARACTERS**

ARNIE STOMOTOKOS\*  
STEVEN SCHAFFER DOWNS  
BOBBY WRIGHT  
JOHNATHAN "SKIBOW" MORRISON  
CASANDRA TAYLOR ATKINSON  
ARTHUR EVANS JR.—a.k.a. RAKIM SHABAZZ  
YOUNG BLACK FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER /  
WOMAN #2  
WHITE MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER / MAN  
WHITE FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER / WOMAN #1

\*Could double as WHITE MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER and  
MAN in both acts.

**TIME:** The present.

**PLACE:**  
In and around a local Chicago television studio.

## SCENE THREE

*(Lights up on DOWNS, DC, under a spotlight. As he begins to speak, soft specials come up slowly on the individual members of the Black Jesus. MORRISON standing DL. ATKINSON seated DR, EVANS standing defiantly UR. As the members of the Black Jesus address DOWNS straight ahead... offstage focus... DOWNS negotiates his way around to each member. This is his divide and conquer moment. The same conversations and same persuasions he has used with all three. Only their individual reactions are different. The lighting and nuances of this scene should be very similar to the previous scene. DOWNS adjusts in body, voice, and attack to each member's disposition to his proposal. Suggestion: Different colored spots to suggest mood of each individual character. Red—MORRISON, blue—ATKINSON, white-hot—EVANS.)*

DOWNS. It's the chance of a lifetime.

ALL. Really?

DOWNS *(reaching)*. For your country.

ALL *(amused)*. My country?

DOWNS *(righteous)*. For your people.

ALL *(sarcastically)*. You can't be serious.

DOWNS. For yourself.

EVANS & ATKINSON. We're not about that.

MORRISON. Tell me more.

DOWNS. See, I've always considered you the real brains behind the entire Black Jesus organization.

EVANS & ATKINSON. Get to the point, Downs.

DOWNS. This project takes somebody with vision...and with feeling to really make it happen.

EVANS *(firing)*. Then hire Louis Farrakhan.

ATKINSON. Then hire Sister Sojah.

DOWNS. People that have their fingers on the...

ATKINSON. ...pulse of the masses. Right?

DOWNS (*wheeling and dealing*). I'm prepared to offer you 50% of the distribution, syndication, and aftermarket paraphernalia receipts should you sign on to co-host this show. You could be bigger than Oprah! Literally and figuratively. What do you say, "Blood"?

ATKINSON (*amused and in disbelief*). Blood?

EVANS (*pause*). I know this will be hard for you to believe, Mr. Downs, but this is not about money...or distribution rights...or Oprah.

ATKINSON (*jabbing*). Fifty percent? So I guess we'll pay Johnnie and Rakim out of your share?

DOWNS. Well, I...

MORRISON (*pondering*). Fifty percent?

EVANS (*angrily*). We're not gonna be a part of your little circus act. My appearance on last night's show was to talk about life, man. What black people have done...and what they should do *now*. How we shouldn't let people like you blind us and distract us from the struggle. So you can take the Downtown T-shirts, the coffee mugs...your distribution rights...and the 50% share and shove it up your...

ATKINSON (*reminiscing quietly*). I remember how hard it was for us to get a forum to speak when the Black Jesus first started. All of the rallies we organized...and the fundraisers. Nothing worked. Even most of the brothers and sisters in our own neighborhoods thought we were crazy. Now a black man is just throwing this in our laps for free. What a difference 20 years makes.

DOWNS (*reassuring quickly*). You'll look great on camera. Trust me...



EVANS (*defiantly*). Our lives are not goddamned soap operas,  
Downs!

ATKINSON. I don't know...

DOWNS (*pushing*). You are the only one who can really make this thing work. That's why I came directly to you. With all of the friends and family you've seen gunned down since you first joined the group...what have you got to show for it? If it wasn't for the popularity of rap videos, nobody would have ever known you guys existed. Black kids today think Malcolm X is a colored T-shirt and a baseball cap, for God's sake. What's wrong with giving them *real* heroes again? If you walk out on this opportunity...all of those young kids will keep getting fed the same, mindless garbage about who the Black Jesus were... and what they really stood for. (*Pause from all three who stare at DOWNS intently.*) You know I'm right. Let's do a test taping. A "demo" of the show. Not to be broadcast, of course. But a sort of audition to suggest what the show might be like. In front of a live audience we'll hand pick. I'll invite some of the station corporate heads. You and the others can field a few questions.

ATKINSON (*buying time*). I don't know. I'll have to discuss this with the others...

DOWNS. How much longer do you intend on doing penance for ghosts and memories? Think about the effect that'll have on those poor, innocent little girls. Would Kenny have wanted his family to live trapped like that? What would Bobby have done?

ATKINSON (*blankly*). Bobby?

DOWNS. Rakim. You spent 18 of your best years in a cage like an animal. Here's your chance to tell America what it did to you...and your family.

EVANS. Forget it, Downs. (*Lights fade down on EVANS. DOWNS moves to MORRISON.*)

DOWNS. Just think about it. Fifty percent of the gross. You wouldn't make that kinda bread sellin' a billion of those cookbooks. (*Pause.*) Right now America thinks that Johnnie Morrison, the Black Jesus, is nothin' but the white man's nigger, writing cookbooks on chitlins and spareribs. Is that how you want to be remembered? The black Frugal Gourmet?

MORRISON (*begrudgingly*). I want to hear some more about this 50% share. (*As lights fade on the pair, DOWNS puts his hand on MORRISON's shoulder approvingly. MORRISON looks up into DOWNS' face menacingly but obviously accepting. DOWNS has won. DOWNS exits.*)

(*Lights up on three Black Jesus members still in "green room" of studio.*)

EVANS. What the hell you talking about, Skibow?

MORRISON (*glaring at EVANS*). I'm talking about this exposure giving us our first legitimate chance in years to scream rape and cry foul to a mass audience of white people.

EVANS. That boy doesn't give a damn about the struggle... All he cares about is that we do our "angry black man" act consistently enough to keep his precious ratings up.

MORRISON. And what's wrong with that?

EVANS. He's counting on making a killing off of it. That's what.

MORRISON. What the fuck happened to you, A.J.? (*Pause.*) Man, you are not gettin' the picture here. This is our chance for redemption, my brother. To show that who we are and what we did has meaning. Some real meaning, man. All I got from the '60s is a beat-up leather jacket, a

black leather cap and slogans I don't understand anymore. I got nothin'! No wife to share my life with. No kids to pass my dreams to.

EVANS. Man, I spent 18 years on the rock for what I believed in. You think I don't know where you're coming from? Nobody in this room sacrificed more and got less for it than I did. And a million words on this young boy's TV show won't make one damn bit of difference to my life... (Pause.) See, while I was inside I had to insulate myself from things that I couldn't change on my own terms. I had to narrow my range of the things I really cared about or I would've gone crazy. (Pause.) There was only one exception to that rule, my brother...freedom. Pulsin' through your brain...and every cell in your body. Every day. Every hour of the day. (Pause.) And through it all, the smell of death surroundin' you like a winter coat. The 24-hour moans. And groans. Clanking bars. And the sudden screams of fear, and rage...and despair. Through all of that I kept my faith in the *one* thing I knew was real. And I refuse to believe that Black Power is gonna be turned into nothin' but a bumper sticker. (Pause.) But...I still got my faith in us. I still got faith in the cause...

MORRISON (*dispassionately*). Fuck the cause! I'm talkin' about people, man. The people in the cause. I wanna let people know I'm still here. And that I count for somethin'. Not just another statistic...another unfortunate casualty of the '60s. I wanna let them peckerwoods know how they destroyed my life...my family. And that I ain't forgot nothin'.

EVANS. But you don't have to play by his rules to do that. His rules. His game. He even says when to play. We never followed anybody else's agenda.

MORRISON. And what did it get us? Can't you understand this is our one chance to play in whitey's backyard and burn down the whole goddamn house?

ATKINSON. Johnnie, cool it. Now I've sat here and listened to you both. What you're saying makes sense from both sides. But, Rakim...if we can control what goes out over the airwaves without sacrificing our principles...or selling our souls...what harm's being done?

EVANS. Sandra. Appearing on this cartoon of a talk show Downs is proposing will make our whole participation in the Black Power movement look like bullshit. He is asking us all to be caricatures of our former selves for money and TV ratings...and that makes me sick.

ATKINSON. Rakim. Times have changed since you were put in prison. We've had to use all kinds of non-conventional methods of getting our message across to the people. Methods that, granted, were unacceptable in the '60s. But are more than appropriate today. And we've got to *change* with the times, brother.

EVANS. Casandra. I've always been able to reason with you. Tell me you don't believe white America will use television to say anything about blacks they want. Tell *me* why nobody ever gets sickle cell in the "Huxtable House"? Or why Merkle Urkle will never have problems with student loans for blacks? Or why little black kids on TV can't be cute unless they are adopted by white parents? Or why "Oprah" lost 100 pounds again and this time she's gonna keep it off? Or that "Fresh Prince" never has been called a *nigger*? You tell me why, Casandra? (*EVANS looks toward ATKINSON. She remains speechless and bows her head. EVANS, frustrated and defeated, begins again.*) What the hell happened to you two? Is this why I rotted in prison all those years? To see you both become fucking movie stars?

What happened to “power to the people”? And all that  
“black power” shit? What happened to *you*??!

*(WRIGHT appears UR.)*

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