

Mother Tongue

(Two actresses, Thalia and Naomi are rehearsing speeches by Mother Jones and Sojourner Truth, respectively. The rehearsals are not going well when Naomi suggested they try using hoo-doo possession rituals to experience the historical women more deeply. This scene begins when Thalia agrees to the experiment)

THALIA

This is crazy. Oh well.

(Taking the hat from her head, following Naomi's example.)

Upon my head I place this hat as a sign of my homelessness. Let my hat find no hook until justice is at home in my land.

(She puts the hat on and strikes the bell.)

NAOMI

(Taking a small book from her pocket.)

The law of the Lord, the law of the land, be a lever in my hands. Ache', ache'-o.

(She puts the book back in her pocket.)

THALIA

(Taking the linen cloth from her waist.)

Your weave is soft and fine. Your beauty hides your strength and binds our wounds.

NAOMI

(Taking a small coin purse from her pocket.)

Your emptiness is my fullness, my freedom, and my fame.

(Same action)

Ache', ache'-o.

THALIA

(Picks up walking stick.)

With this stick, I will beat back my enemies and raise my friends. I will be this stick.

(She strikes the bell twice.)

NAOMI

(Taking the leather belt she is wearing from around her waist.)

Let this belt sing the wounds of my people. As they bear it, they are bound to it.

(She looks at it a moment longer, then wraps it around her waist again.)

Ache', ache'-o.

THALIA

(Reaches to her neck and removes a small cord on which is suspended a small pouch, which, heretofore, had been under her blouse. She opens the pouch and removes a small lock of hair.)

Oh my daughter, be with me, as you were before, as you will be again.

(She gently puts the lock of hair back in the pouch and around her neck where it is hidden again by her blouse. She rings the bell three times. At the end of the sound from the bell, it is clear that the women have slipped into the reality of Sojourner and Mother)

SOJOURNER

Sunday morning, I help lace missis to her Sunday gown.

THALIA

(Thalia climbs up on the plinth and looks out over the crowd.)

My friends, we are here to tell you that no more will the mothers reach down into the cradle...
(She breaks off.)

MOTHER

We were living in Memphis when the yellow fever came. The rich and the well-to-do fled the city, but we could not get away.

SOJOURNER

I always wondered at the stuff – was so soft and smooth, nothing like the nigger cloth we had to wear. Well, one Sunday morning, she sent me to the barn. There was massa, in his Sunday best running a bunch of hickory rods through a low fire. He made me tie cords round them. I tied 'em pretty, thinkin' I had been asked special for the lacing. I gave them rods to massa, all smiley and proud.

MOTHER

Across the street from me, ten persons lay dead from the plague. The dead surrounded us. All about my house I could hear weeping and the cries of children.

SOJOURNER

Next I know, he grabbed my neck, and turned me around so fast, the sky twirled, and lay to whipping me.

(She takes off the belt and begins miming the master's movements, striking every time she says "whip".)

He whipt me til the blood began to spurt.

MOTHER

On by one, my four little children sickened and died. My husband caught the fever and died. All day long, all night long, I heard the grating of the wheels of the death cart.

(She takes the cloth from her waist and the pouch from her neck. She twists the cord around the cloth. It is her youngest child, an infant of eight weeks. She holds it and tries to comfort it.)

Just you hold on. You're all right, you're gonna be all right.

(The baby dies. Mother sits down, the baby in her lap.)

SOJOURNER

Then he whipt me some more cause his churchin vest got spots. He whip me til I don't remember.

MOTHER

I sat alone through nights of grief. No one came to me. No one could.

SOJOURNER

Next I knew, I'm lying on the barn floor, with straw and mud and mess all stuck to my back. There's blood coming from between my legs and I hurt deep inside. I crawled to my bed and began to pray.

(She pulls the book from her pocket; it is her freedom papers.)

Lord, please help me last another year. Please, Lord, please.

(After a moment, both women begin preparing to leave. Mother rises and gently takes the baby to bed, lays it down, unwinds the cord, gently shakes the cloth, then smooths it on the bed.)

Sojourner takes the purse from her pocket and the book from the bed. She puts the book in her purse and slips the purse on her belt. She cinches the belt about her waist. She leaves the cabin and walks down the center aisle.)

VOICE

Who will buy this strong nigger woman? She's as big as an ox and strong as a man. She'll be a real good breeder. Buy her now and double your investment in a few years.

MOTHER

(Enters from the audience left aisle, and crosses to the stage right steps. She raps on the plinth.)

Excuse me, can you provide lodging for a lonely pilgrim?

DRUNKEN LEERING VOICE

Come on in, I'll give you something even better.

(Mother exits upstage left.)

SOJOURNER

(Enters from the audience right aisle, and crosses to stage left steps. She raps on the plinth.)
Mrs. Dumont! Mrs. Dumont! Let me in. I must be speaking with you.

MRS. DUMONT

Get off with ye, Bell. You were only too pleased to run away a year ago. We'll have none of you now.

SOJOURNER

Ma'am, I must know what is happening to my son Peter.

MRS. DUMONT

You know as well as I, he was sold to Dr. Gedney afore ye left.

SOJOURNER

Where is he now, ma'am?

MRS. DUMONT

Does it matter now that he's gone?

SOJOURNER

Missis Dumont, I hear fearful news of him. Now I'm asking if you know where he be? Will you tell me?

MRS. DUMONT

Dr. Gedney sent him to his brother Solomon. Solomon thought he was so useless, he sold him to Eliza's new husband.

SOJOURNER

Where have they taken my boy?

MRS. DUMONT

Why to the plantation, I should expect.

SOJOURNER

Oh my God! They have gone and done it. They done took my baby to Alabama! Lord, they made my little boy a southern slave! It were against the law and they done it anyway. Missis, I got to know how this happened. Master Dumont told me Peter would be free on the Emancipation Day. And now you tell me he's been sold down south.

MRS. DUMONT

Don't you have as many of them as you can care for?

SOJOURNER

Ma'am, you're talking on my son.

MRS. DUMONT

What do you mean your son? He was my husband's. He sold him as was his right.

SOJOURNER

Ma'am, you must tell me where Miss Eliza lives, for I'll be having my son again.

MRS. DUMONT

How can you get him? You have no money.

SOJOURNER

I have no money, it's true. But God has enough, or what's better. I'll be having my child again.

MRS. DUMONT

(Laughing)

I'm sure God has more important things to worry about. Now be off.

(She exits off stage.)

SOJOURNER

You may laugh, but what you give me now, the Lord will return to you ten times – and I'll be having my son.

(Sojourner goes next door – SR steps – and begins her search for someone to help get her son back from the south. She knocks on the plinth.)

Please can you help me. My little boy's been sold down south against all laws of God and man.

MAN'S VOICE

If you don't get off my porch this instant, I'll dispatch you to hell with my shotgun!

(Sojourner exits upstage right.)

MOTHER

(Enters from upstage, paces in front of houses. Finally she knocks on the SR side of the plinth – the home of Mrs. Rutherford. A servant answers the door.)

I'm wondering if you're needing the services of a skilled seamstress?

SERVANT

Well, I can't say nothin' for Madame, but I can tell you, she just let one lady go for makin' her sleeves too long.

MOTHER

I'd like to speak to her if I could.

SERVANT

If you'll wait here.

MOTHER

What's her name?

SERVANT

Rutherford, Abigail Evangeline Rutherford.

(Servant exits. Shortly Mrs. Rutherford enters. She sees Mother and starts to go out.)

RUTHERFORD

Nancy! Come get this woman out of here. I've told you to never let tramps in the front door.

MOTHER

Excuse me, ma'am, I've come to see if you could use the services of a skilled dress maker.

RUTHERFORD

Who? You? Why you can't even keep yourself up.

MOTHER

Ma'am, I've no lodgings. I need work to secure me place.

RUTHERFORD

No lodgings? Where do you live?

MOTHER

I've just arrived from Memphis. Ma'am, I've had a hard time of it. I need work to get meself a little house. I'm a fine seamstress – I can design and copy patterns, as well as stitch.

RUTHERFORD

Didn't your car on the train have a basin?

MOTHER

I walked. I'd be pleased to start with a bit of mending...

RUTHERFORD

You mean to tell me you're one of these street vermin one sees everywhere?

MOTHER

I can pleat drapes and do hand work as well, ma'am.

RUTHERFORD

No. This will not do at all. You must leave. Goodbye.

MOTHER

I'm just looking for a bit of work so I can keep body and soul together. Now will you have me sew or not?

RUTHERFORD

I believe I've given you my answer. It's people like you who are ruining this city. I can't even look out my window at the lake without seeing some filthy wretch and her snot-nosed brats. Believe me, if I had my way, I would do as the Tribune suggests – I'd give the vermin poison and put them out of their misery. Is that clear?

MOTHER

Let me tell you this, my high and fine lady. You are not worthy of my labor. You are a parasite and a thief. I assure you that 'twill be you, not me, that we'll be getting rid of.

RUTHERFORD

(On her way out.)

Nancy. Come remove this woman at once.

(Nancy returns.)

NANCY

You have to leave. Please go now.
(She begins herding her upstage towards the SL steps.)

MOTHER

Why do you do your mistress' dirty work? Why are you cooperating with those that would keep us down?

(Mother is being backed up by Nancy. As they reach the steps, Mother trips and grabs Nancy as they both go down, landing hard on their rumps. The impact brings the actresses back to themselves.)

NAOMI

What the hell was that?

THALIA

That was amazing. Let's do it again.