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THE MISSOURI HORROR

A Ten-Minute Play

By David Crespy

CAST OF CHARACTERS

YOUNG BLACK MAN (YBM)African-American, late twenties, academic, sweater, nice dress pants, polished shoes. Nice-looking, professional, warm, friendly, and deadly serious.

YOUNG BLACK WOMAN (YBW)African-American, late twenties, bohemian, an artist in dreadlocks, maybe a funky tie-died t-shirt, a long skirt, casual, spirited, a bit of a goof.

NOTE: Actors can use their actual names if they prefer. The genders may be changed as necessary.

SETTING

The present. Columbia, Missouri. Or anywhere. Perhaps even today.

David Crespy is a professor of playwriting, acting, and dramatic literature at the University of Missouri. He founded MU's Writing for Performance program and serves as its co-director. He is the founding Artistic Director of MU's Missouri Playwrights Workshop, and he is president of the Edward Albee Society. David's plays have been developed and produced in theatres across the U.S., including the River Union Stage, NJ Dramatists, Playwrights Theatre of NJ, Nebraska Repertory Theatre, Primary Stages, The Cherry Lane Theatre, The Playwrights Center, HB Playwrights Foundation, Austin Melodrama, Jewish Repertory Theatre, Stages St. Louis, First Run Theatre (St. Louis), and Creative Theatre Unlimited.

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Lights rise on a YOUNG BLACK MAN and a YOUNG BLACK WOMAN standing side by side.

YOUNG BLACK MAN

This is a horror story.

YOUNG BLACK WOMAN

And it is true.

YBM

It is based upon the excellent research and writing of a University of Missouri Professor Douglas Hunt, and an undergraduate student, Patrick J. Huber.

YBW

Look it up. A matter of public record.

YBM

In a small college town.

YBW

1923.

YBM

The world was changing, the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics was first established.

YBW

Yankee Stadium opened its doors.

YBM

Archaeologist Howard Carter found Pharaoh Tutankhamen.

YBW

Firestone Co. put their inflatable tires into production.

YBM

The Ku Klux Klan made a surprise attack on a black residential area in Rosewood, Florida: The Rosewood Massacre.

YBW

Hitler demanded “hatred & more hatred” in Berlin. And Harry Houdini freed himself from a straight jacket while suspended upside down, 40 feet above the ground, in New York City.

YBM

And in a small college town... a girl was *reportedly* raped. Regina Almstedt.

YBW

Daughter of a Professor, Hermann B. Almstedt. In Columbia, Missouri. An otherwise liberal college town, *liberal for its time*, filled with educated people.

YBM

Students. Respectable businessmen. Members of the Chamber of Commerce.

YBW

Doctors. Lawyers. Clergy.

YBM

Elks. Rotary Club. Country club, golf-playing, civilized human beings. (Pause) 1923.

YBW

But in this town. There was a horror.

YBM

Tentacled, nameless, ancient.

YBW

Its entrails entwined in the deepest hole of hell.

YBM

Little Regina was tempted down to the MKT railroad tracks by the old Stewart Bridge. Tempted by a devil.

YBW

But nothing like the horror that lived just beneath the skin of that town.

YBM

The beast with a thousand writhing heads. Massive, hulking tunneling deep below the surface of that town.

YBW

Here's the deal: We'll never know the devil who did that thing to that little girl. Justice will never be served.

YBM

That part is what you call—a mystery.

YBW

In 1923, Columbia was part of what was known as “Little Dixie” in Missouri.

YBM

Confederate and slave-owning in the Civil War.

YBW

Despite the fact that the State University was there, with its shiny new school of Journalism, founded just 15 years earlier in 1908 by Walter Williams. First of its kind in the world.

YBM

Despite the fact that this was a school, in 1923, with a thriving School of Law, a School of Medicine, with some of the most educated scholars in the country...

YBW

There was horror.

YBM

There was horror; clammy, stinking, in full decomposition. Yet alive.

YBW

With people watching, knowing, seeing, smelling, hearing, feeling the toes in their shoes...

YBM

...The hands in their pockets, the shirts on their backs, and the breeze of a Sunday morning in April.

YBW

The horror had a hearty shake, a laugh, a kidding joke, a slap on your back.

YBM

Fetid, spoiled, hulking, many-eyed, with hungry fleshy mouths, teeth chattering in its head.

YBW

The town of Columbia was clearly divided, and it was an unspoken thing.

YBM

Black women found work as domestics, laundresses, and cooks, but black men struggled to make a living, and when they did...

YBW

It was as a janitor or a porter or a cook, and that was considered to be a high-paying job.

YBM

So when James T. Scott, a respectable 35-year-old janitor, married to his schoolteacher wife who taught at the Douglas School, bought a fancy Hupmobile—white people watched.

YBW

White people noticed.

YBM

But no one said anything. Aloud. Privately maybe.

YBW

Regina had beaten back her rapist with her umbrella. He had grabbed onto her feet, but she managed to get away. Away from the Stewart bridge.

YBM

Regina went home, bruised, cut, but *unhurt*, in a daze. Her father was grateful, and hoped that would be the end of it.

YBW

But that night the monster was born, a creature with many mouths...

YBM

...Many tongues. Darting in and out. Putrid breath. Mocking, stinking, a smirk just beneath its fleshy worm-like lips.

YBW

(for the moment, becoming the outraged *Columbia Tribune* Editor)
Regina *had* been raped.

YBM

(agreeing)

It *was* a black man.

YBW

With a Charlie Chaplin moustache.

YBM

Smelling of chemicals. Not sure which ones.

YBW

With peculiar eyes.

YBM

Carrying a bundle.

YBW

The dogs were loosed in the Sharp End.

YBM

The poor black neighborhood of Columbia, where no whites dare venture.

YBW

But the dogs lost the scent.

YBM

Still black men were rounded up.

YBW

Among them, James Scott, a thirty-five-year-old janitor at the University, whose job it was to dump cadavers into the incinerator at the University of Medicine.

YBM

People *knew* James Scott; he had served with valor in World War I, a widower, he married Gertrude Carter at the Second Baptist Church, by Reverend J. Lyle Caston.

YBW

Who else would serve for loss of Regina's maidenhood? Not Ollie Watson or Jadie Scott, his black jail mates, who had already been charged with the raping of black school girls.

YBM

That would not feed the beast.

YBW

The beast of a thousand heads and feet. Who drew a bead upon the courthouse. Whipped into a frenzy by its many mouths and the pen of local *Columbia Tribune* editor, Edward Watson, who exhorted his fellow citizens to give James Scott "swift justice."

YBM

Why waste time with a trial over a black man? Why squander community coffers?

YBW

Police Chief Rowland brought James Scott to the curb of the home of Hermann Almstedt, who brought his daughter Regina out to identify her attacker from her porch thirty feet away.

YBM

"Oh! Those are his eyes!" she cried. "Don't let him come any nearer!"

YBW

And the pumping heart of the horror surged as all became clear. Scott was picked out by a hidden Regina in Prosecutor Ruby Hulen's offices the next afternoon. Or so it was reported by the *Tribune*.

YBM

The foul breath of the beast tinged the vial of formaldehyde when Regina sniffed and identified it from among other vials claiming, "I can see him when I smell it!"

YBW

By Saturday evening, April 28, 1923, the *Columbia Tribune* had all but issued James Scott's sentence, having tried him in the court of public opinion.

YBM

"There has been much talk of mob activity and many men of sound judgment who do not believe in mob law are of the opinion that if it is positively proven that the negro is the man who committed the crime the taxpayers should be saved any costs that might accrue from a trial and that summary justice should be dealt to him."

YBW

James Scott earned \$65 dollars a month. As much as a white janitor. His wife earned \$75 a month as a teacher. And that was the needle under the skin of the beast, pumping the bubble of life into its sickening heaving chest.

YBM

At around 11PM that evening, a crowd surged around the jailhouse where James Scott was being kept. At first a small group gathered near the columns at Walnut and Eighth Streets, and it was dispersed by Sheriff Brown. Then it returned and at midnight began to move into the jail itself.

YBW

Although deterred at first by the jail's bars and locks, the unmasked lynch mob brought forth an acetylene torch, and began to burn away at the locks separating it from the doomed Scott.

YBM

And they took James Scott, put a rope around his neck. And dragged him by it, pulling him down, until he stopped them and said: "Do not pull me. I will go."

YBW

And though Sheriff Brown had known exactly what that mob intended to do, he had done nothing to safeguard his prisoner, had not made any special fortifications of his jail, did not move James Scott to a safer location.

YBM

And alongside James Scott walked a student journalist from the University of Missouri, Charles Nutter, who would later testify against the leaders of the lynch mob.

YBW

Scott turned to him and said, "I am not guilty, I swear it, but I have no chance."

YBM

And in that crowd were other students, laughing, cavorting.

YBW

Who were, as W. E. B. DuBois later commented, receiving a course "in Applied Lynching."

YBM

Afterward, the University turned its head, tried to pretend its students were not there. But they were.

YBW

Imagine it if you will, over one thousand people. People you may know, neighbors, grocers, folk who go to church, who pray on Sundays.

YBM

There in the crowd. Farmers, store clerks, milkmen, ordinary human beings, who stood as part of the mass of a monster. Standing there with a black man with a noose around his neck.

YBW

Do not think that all those people were in a trance. Do not think they did not know what they were doing. Their flesh slipped into one flesh, they embraced the leviathan they were about to become.

YBM

They were warned not to take justice into their hands, they were begged not to do this thing. Judge Henry A. Collier pleaded with them.

YBW

"Men, do not kill him now. I will promise you a fair trial and swift justice if he is convicted."

YBM

Sheriff Brown, facing the horror of his own failing, stated:

YBW

"Is there a man here who will aid me in preserving law and order?"

YBM

But there were no men there.

YBW

In their place was the beast. Two thousand eyes, two thousand feet, a thousand hungry mouths filled with teeth, and for its food it wanted human meat.

YBM

To the Sheriff, it said:

YBW

"Take him to Stewart Bridge. Hang him."

YBM

Dragging James Scott down to the bridge, the beast trudged, knocking him down, dragging him, surging ahead of itself, as many drove in their cars to get a better look.

YBW

Once there, on Stewart Bridge, at its railing, the girl's father, Professor Hermann Almstedt, confronted the maddened crowd, the horrible mass of mob, with its massive hands and shrieking mouths:

YBM

"I am the father of the girl. As an American citizen I plead with you to let the law take its course with this man. I ask it of you in the name of law and order and the American flag."

YBW

But the snarling behemoth bared its massive fangs and roared:

YBM

Shut up!

YBW

SHUT UP!

YBM

SHUT UP!

YBW

Or we'll lynch you, too.

YBM

James Scott maintained an eerie calm just before the end. He humbly and simply maintained his innocence to anyone who would listen:

YBW

"I am an innocent man. I have a fifteen-year-old daughter and it would be impossible for me to commit this crime. I have never touched a white woman my life."

YBM

But the crowd whistled, hissed, and tormented him.

YBW

Liar.

YBM

Liar.

YBW

Liar.

YBM

They pushed him up to the railing. And he stood there teetering. And he said:

YBW

"Lord, thou knowest the truth. Have pity on an innocent man's soul, O Lord. Thou knowest my innocence. Will thou allow an innocent man to suffer?"

YBM

But chattering mouths and corpse fingers gripped him.

YBW

The massive, muscled, yammering mass of putrefied flesh lifted him up in its slimy, fetid hands, and tossed him over the rails.

YBM

And James Scott plummeted down, smashing through branches and leaves, hurled by the beast of many eyes, many stomachs, many human hearts.

YBW

Until the manila rope around his neck snapped him to a stop.

YBM

The sound of his neck breaking making an instant... audible... crack.

YBW

And as quickly as it had assembled, the beast now satisfied, scattered, split apart...

YBM

Dispersed, dissolved, disappearing like scattered leaves.

YBW

Leaving only the swinging corpse of James Scott, hanging from the railing of Stewart Bridge. Just a few souls waiting to retrieve his poor, beaten body.

YBM

His body was cut down, examined by the coroner, buried, and years later a stone crudely marked where his body was thought to lay.

YBW

Though George W. Barkwell, "Hamp" Rowland, Marvin M. Jacobs, and Estill B. Davis, were tried as ringleaders of the mob, all were acquitted. No white jury would rule against them.

YBM

And James Scott lay buried, accused, but never tried, of a crime for which he was more than likely innocent.

YBW

That is until the Reverend Clyde Ruffin, of the Second Baptist Church of Columbia, Missouri, and a Professor of Theatre at the University of Missouri...

YBM

Raised the funds for James Scott to receive a proper headstone. And his congregation saw to it that flowers were laid before it.

YBW

In November 2013, his death certificate was amended to remove the phrase "committed rape" and changed to "never tried or convicted of rape."

YBM

But the beast remains.

YBW

It does not speak.

YBM

It whispers.

YBW

It awaits.

YBM

It lingers within you.

YBW

The horror is there. It is you.

YBM

In that crowd. Watching. Doing nothing.

YBW

Allowing.

YBM

Permitting.

YBW

Spreading its venom.

YBM

Imagine you were there.

YBW

Would you have stopped them?

YBM

Would you have just watched?

YBW

Turned away after it happened and continued your life having seen it?

YBM

Horror.

YBW

Horror.

YBM & YBW

(a whisper)

Horror.

END OF PLAY