

MAMA D

A full-length comedy

by

Jeff Barker

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Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all.

– *Emily Dickinson*

Consider it pure joy my brothers and sisters
whenever you face trials of many kinds.
For you know that the testing of your faith
develops perseverance.

– *James, the Apostle*

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Two of the poems suggested (by Langston Hughes and Shel Silverstein) are not in public domain at the time of this writing (April, 2012). Should producers be concerned in anyway, these poems may be replaced.

The drawings used in the premiere production may be copied from the script, but higher quality reproductions are available from the artist, Jonathan Sabo, who also has short animated movies to accompany some of the transitions. Jonathan may be contacted at:

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A Note After the First Draft

Those who attempt the potentially arrogant and certainly lonely task of writing are helped—at least I am—by finding one person who is a guaranteed reader. My guaranteed reader is a beautiful woman who doesn't think she's all that beautiful. I believe her to be not only a beautiful woman but an immensely talented actor. She doesn't think she's all that talented. But as I said, I believe her to be beautiful and talented (and also intelligent, full of grace), so I asked her if I could write a role for her. She replied, "I've been waiting a long time for you to ask that." I'd say those are about the most encouraging words a writer could hear.

I went to work. A title and first monologue were finished soon. Here was an intriguing character, a larger-than-life woman out to change the culture one playful, joyous moment at a time. She sat in the back of my subconscious for months and months. And then, I borrowed the deadlines of my playwriting students, and wrote alongside them, forcing myself to keep up. I did for a while. When I couldn't keep up, I promised them doughnuts as punishment, in hopes that I'd never have to buy a doughnut. That was a peripety, because they started cheering for my failure. I couldn't stand their disappointment, so I bought doughnuts, and I was off the writing hook.

A Christmas present. That became the final motivator. We agreed, my intelligent, gracious actor friend and I, that we wouldn't spend any money on presents this year. I knew right then what my present would be. And so I continued to write in the cracks of the busy teacher's life.

So, what I'm telling you is that even though everything I write was already for her, my guaranteed reader, this one was to read with herself in mind. And to commit to memory and bring to life. My dream is that it will one day bring her many delights out there on the boards.

I dare, here and now, to call her Mama D.

– Jeff Barker
Orange City, Iowa
Advent

Acknowledgements

I start with Karen, who is not only the first actor to play Mama D, but who is my own personal Mama D. Not that she's much of anything like the character in the play. But she once was an English teacher, and she has long been a writer of, instigator or, encourager of poetry. She is a bringer of beauty. She is the inspiration behind this play.

This play didn't, of course, stop with the first draft. Others who helped in that process include actors of the first table reading: Greta Hays, Anna Pitney, Dan Sikkema, Jon Sabo, Hannah Barker. And then the cast of the world premiere of the play at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa: Erin Anderson (Joon), Karen Bohm Barker (Mama D), Brian Brandau (T. Dog), Julia Cure (Mom), Renee Eisenhour (S. G.), Tiemen Godwaldt (Rax), Daniel Sikkema (Peanut), Ali Sondreal (Jackie), Alex Wendel (Deebo).

The designers on the first production were all wonderful. But I must especially mention Jonathan Sabo who re-designed our theatre (and re-built it) so that Mama D would have access to her classroom audience and could drag them immediately onto the stage. Jonathan also invented a rear screen projection surface out of taped together white paper! And it worked beautifully (even after we fire-proofed it). And then he invented (along with the expertise of Drew Schmidt) a means of drawing animated movies of the backgrounds to function as projected settings for the play but also journeys right into Mama's imaginative perspective. Quite remarkable and funny. Some of these images are described in this script, but Jonathan may be contacted personally should you wish to further consider his drawings and movies. Other designers who created beautiful support for the premiere were Abby Bierly (sound), Jeff Taylor (lights), Heather Piatt (fire), Sheric Hull (smoke), Amber Huizinga (costumes), Anthony Wubben (properties), Megan Weidner (audience participants coordination), Andrew Stam and Shelby Vandermolen (title/poster graphics), and Drew Schmidt (animations and video).

Cast of Characters

4 women, 3 men, 2 flexible

Mama D Myra Delaney, a high school teacher

Other adults

T. Dog	Bob Bailey, the principal
Joon	a teacher, female friend of Mama D
Mom	Mama D's mother
Peanut	Pete Allman, a lawyer

High school students

S.G.	a true blue student (female)
Jackie	a follow-along student (male or female)
Deebo	a clueless student (male or female)
Rax	Ren Fieldhouse, a terrorizing student (male)

Some persons in the audience will also play roles. These are to be improvised with actual audience members.

Place

Mama D's universe (classroom, school, home and town).

Time

The present.

this is Karen's

Mama D

ACT I

SETTING: Unit set. Many locations represented simply by lights and a portable prop or two. The stage should be as accessible to the audience as possible since several audience members go onto the stage. In the original production, a rear-screen projection surface made of paper showed still images and short animated movies throughout the play to indicate locations.

The screen says “Mama D” as the audience enters.

AT RISE: Lights come up on Mama D watching a line drawing appear showing the silhouette of all the characters of the play. Then she turns to the audience.

MAMA D

This is a play about the day my father died.

(Self-chastising groan accompanied by a grimace.)

I didn’t mean to start so grim. Let me try again.

(Sudden, bright smile.)

This is a play about the day that almost everyone in town got their wish and the old high school burned to the ground!

(The drawing on the screen switches to a drawing of the school.)

Of course, nobody said they wished for the high school to burn down. Except two of us. Who had our own reasons.

(Staring at one person.)

This is not a funny play.

(Sudden switch to stare at another person.)

Please stop laughing.

(And one more person.)

Just—

(Beat.)

Try to make the best of it. Hold it lightly, like a water balloon.

Let’s go back three days. First day of school.

(Now the drawing shifts to her classroom, and then drawings change throughout the play to match locations of the scene.)

Every year, on the first day of school, near the end of each class period, I say to the students: Now. One more thing. Don’t you dare call me “Mama D.” Don’t you ever say the word. My name is Mrs. Delaney. You may call me that. If you were my professional colleague or my very close personal friend, you might call me by my first name, which is Myra. I also have another name that is not spoken in these halls. It is spoken in my kitchen when I arrive home

from this heartbreaking daily struggle. This war against the cultural abyss—that selfish, cynical dreary light that threatens to obliterate the daily victories earned here in this blessed haven of—

(Pointing at someone in the front row.)

Do you greet me in the kitchen of my home?

(Pointing to someone else.)

Are you my professional colleague?

(And yet another.)

My very close personal friend?

(Nodding.)

Oh, I can see what you're thinking, "No, Mama D, you don't have any very close personal friends."

(To the entire room.)

Don't you dare call me "Mama D!" Don't you ever say the word.

(Pointing at someone in the audience who looks high school age.)

You. What are you not going to call me?

(Whether or not they answer with "Mama D.")

Get up here. Get up here in front of the class right now.

(If person comes up, fine. Otherwise, MAMA D comes down to them.)

What are you not going to call me?

(They will answer, "Mama D.")

For that you get detention. I will see you today after school. Oh, you think I'm unreasonable? You think I am unreasonable. Well, you just wait a few weeks into the semester. You just wait. And if you're still fed up, then you just go to the principal. You just turn me in. You just do it. And if anyone else wants a detention today, you just say, "Mama D" where I can hear it.

(BELL rings.)

Wait!

(Silence. A drawing of Emily Dickinson appears superimposed over the classroom.)

Someone recite an Emily Dickinson poem.

(Wait. Then whether or not someone does, she says...)

Well. Of course. This class is dismissed.

(Audience member starts from the stage.)

MAMA D (continued)

(to audience member)

You. What does it say on that detention slip?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

(reading)

It says, "Special Detention. Room 204."

MAMA D

You are supposed to be here immediately after school today. But. You are not to come here unless you choose to, because it is my opinion that the best discipline is self-discipline. So, your attendance at my detention is entirely up to you. Do you understand?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Yes.

MAMA D

What is your last name?

(Audience member gives name.)

MAMA D (continued)

Thank you (Mr. or Ms. _____). You are dismissed.

(Audience member begins to leave. MAMA D grabs him/her by the arm.)

MAMA D (continued)

(to audience)

The next day, after lunch, I catch (him/her) in the hallway and I say, (Mr./Ms.) _____, stop!

(Audience member stops.)

MAMA D (continued)

I did not see you in detention yesterday after school. Perhaps you do not have the same high regard for self-discipline that I have. Or perhaps you have higher regard, and you spent your time wisely without my assistance. Did you learn a new poem overnight? Perhaps you went to an art gallery? A play? No, don't tell me...you read a book. You read a book. You drew a picture. You played a musical instrument. No, you have no idea what you did. The time just slipped away. How much television did you watch? What level of gaming did you achieve? Do you know what I did? I wrote a poem about you. And if you come to detention today, you may hear it. If you don't, I'm going to burn it. In fact, I might just burn down the whole school just to show everyone how sick I am at just how much you don't care. Just. Just. Just run along. Tell someone I'm an arsonist. Tell someone I'm verbose. Just—

(She makes a gesture meaning, "shoo." Audience member leaves. MAMA D gets her clipboard from under an audience member's seat and hangs it around her neck. A page on it says, "Ask me why I wore the same clothes today." She crosses into the hallway.)

DEEBO

Mrs. Delaney.

(MAMA D stops and looks at DEEBO, a student.)

DEEBO (continued)

What's on your...?

(MAMA D rips off the sign and hands it to DEEBO.)

DEEBO (continued)

“Ask me I why wore the same clothes today.”

(DEEBO starts to giggle and walk away. MAMA D trips him, picks him up and points to the sign, prompting.)

DEEBO (continued)

Why did you wear the same clothes today?

MAMA D

(taking back her sign)

Because I’m on strike.

DEEBO

What for?

MAMA D

(wads up the paper and throws it, exiting)

When you can construct that question without ending it with a preposition, I’ll answer it.

(JACKIE and S.G. enter chattering.)

DEEBO

What’s a preposition?

JACKIE

How would I know?

DEEBO

Do you know what Mrs. Delaney’s on strike for?

S.G.

Mama D’s on strike?

DEEBO

That’s what she said.

S.G.

For what?

DEEBO

I just asked you.

S.G.

Cool. I hope she wins.

(BELL rings. Students run for class. MAMA D comes to the front of the room.)

MAMA D

You're here again, I see. I suppose this means I'm going to have to try for one more day. Some day, perhaps you will turn truants, run away from home and spare me the agony. If you will look inside the papers on your desks, you may find a note from me. Will someone read the note please?

(Someone in audience reads aloud a note inside their program. The note says, "Mrs. Delaney is on strike until further notice. When the strike is over, you will notice.")

MAMA D

Would you stand and state your last name please?

(Audience member does so.)

MAMA D

I observe, (Mr./Ms. _____) that you have learned to read. How did you learn to read?

(Audience member responds in some way, perhaps with additional coaxing.)

MAMA D

I thought maybe you might say, "Well, Mrs. Delaney, I learned to read by watching books. I went to the library and I watched the books. I went to the bookstore and I watched the books. I went to the newsstand and watched the magazines.

(Pulls a magazine out of her clothes.)

I saw a man buy a magazine and I followed him. I watched his magazine until he went into his house and I couldn't see him or his magazine anymore. But I had learned to read, simply by watching. So, I went and bought a magazine of my own.

(She puts the magazine on the floor.)

And I put it in my house. And I watched it. And sometimes I moved it around from one place to another. Sometimes so I could dust it, but usually so I could watch it somewhere else, in the bathroom, in the bedroom, over breakfast. I can even watch and drive! Sometimes I watch it from the front.

(Flips the magazine over.)

Sometimes I watch it from the back. I am a reader. A literate person of my world.

What's wrong with that statement? Anyone.

(Someone gives some sort of answer.)

MAMA D

If reading is not like watching, what is reading like?

(Someone answers. MAMA D perhaps repeats the answer so all can hear.)

MAMA D

What else is reading like?
(Someone answers.)

MAMA D

What else is reading like?

(Someone answers.)

MAMA D

When we say that reading is like something, what literary device are we using? I am looking for a one word answer.

(Someone says, "Simile.")

MAMA D

Who can provide us all an example of a metaphor?

(Someone says one.)

MAMA D

Find the simile in this Tennyson. Its title is "The Eagle."

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Listen again.

(During this time through, the color changes onstage. There may be music or sounds.)

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

(The lights change back to normal classroom.)

Where was the simile?

(Someone answers. And now MAMA D's questions come fast, and she may hold for answers, but if answers are given, she doesn't tell people whether they are right or wrong.)

MAMA D

If a simile is typically an explicit comparison using “like” or “as” why did the poet use “like?” Why didn’t Lord Tennyson write “...as a thunderbolt he falls.”?

(An answer.)

Why did the poet write, “The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls.”? Why didn’t Lord Tennyson write, “The wrinkled sea beneath him rages.”?

(An answer.)

What’s the metaphor in, “He clasps the crag with crooked hands.”?

(An answer.)

Why didn’t Lord Tennyson write “She clasps the crag with crooked hands.”? Nevermind. Don’t answer that. I don’t want to know. Who does he think he is, calling himself Lord? If he’s the Lord, then I’m the Mama, and I fall like thunder and I clasp the crag, and I stand in the azure atmosphere with oceans on their knees beneath me. And I watch you, and you and you. And in my mountaintop kitchen, I pray. I pray that if you could care less, I will never know. If you are passionless, I will never know. I pray. I pray. I pray. But I do know. I see it even now. My prayer is not answered. Not yesterday. Not today. It is a foolish, an impossible prayer. And so I return to this classroom and say one more poem and ask you if you know why you have been given the power of language.

(She wonders away. Returns.)

That’s a good question for your essay today. Why do you have the power of language? 500 words. You may begin.

(Beat.)

Before you start here’s a clue.

INTERCOM

Mrs. Delaney.

MAMA D

(to the class)

Shh, shh, shhh. It’s the Top Dog.

INTERCOM

Mrs. Delaney?

MAMA D

(to the intercom)

Is that God, or just the principal?

INTERCOM

Very funny, Mrs. Delaney. Can you, can you...please report to the office.

MAMA D

(to class)

Free time. Gotta go see Top Dog. Hey! Please don’t burn down the school while I’m gone. I want to be here.

(As she goes, mimicking what we will come to discover is a verbal tick of the Principal's.)
Going. Going. Going. Going. Walking down the, walking down the, walking down, down, down, down.

T. DOG

(entering)
Mrs. Delaney.

MAMA D

T. Dog.

T. DOG

You got a call from me, you got a call from me on the...I wish you wouldn't call me that. Can't you just—

MAMA D

I did, yes, I did receive an intercom communication...it sounded a lot like you, but as the speaker did not identify—call you what?

T. DOG

Fine. Fine. Fine, fine, fine. I'm sorry. I'm not. I'm not in the mood, Mrs. Delaney.

MAMA D

(conspiratorial aside to the audience)
“She clasps the crag with crooked hands.”

T. DOG

I'm. I'm. We've got a problem. There's a boy that's been writing notes, and we have to take him to the police station.

MAMA D

Oh. My goodness. The police. Notes. Wait. Alright, I've made up my mind.

T. DOG

Please, Mrs. Delaney. Please. I need you to. Please. We. Actually they. They're here now.

MAMA D

I'll do it.

T. DOG

I was thinking that maybe they'd just want to know about it, which is why I called. We weren't planning to press charges. There's not a. I don't think we have a. What do you mean you'll do it?

MAMA D

Whatever you want, T. Dog. I'm your woman. I'm here to support your cause. I think we can save the world together. Sir.

T. DOG

Alright. Look. Myra. They want to take him. To the police station. So. His parents are not. But he said. He told me. He would feel better if a teacher went with him. And the police have said okay. And he said you.

MAMA D

I'm here to save the day. Who?

T. DOG

Now listen. Don't.

MAMA D

Who is it?

T. DOG

I'm getting.

MAMA D

Are the police?

T. DOG

Ren Fieldhouse.

MAMA D

Rax?

T. DOG

What?

MAMA D

Rax?

T. DOG

What?

MAMA D

(getting close, very secretive)

Rax.

T. DOG

(also quiet)
I heard you, Myra.
(normal voice)
Can you go with him? Go with Rax. Go with Ren?

MAMA D

His nickname is Rax. I think we should go with the local culture on this one. Sir.
(False panic.)
I have a class.

T. DOG

I'll take your, you just. Go with the. Go.

MAMA D

(change of character)
Alright. You take the class.

T. DOG

I said I'd. I. Yes.

MAMA D

(fierce cynicism)
Good. Teach them how to read and write!
(German accent)
No, vait! Zzey are on zee verge of mastering metaphor and zimile. You can, you know,
"Zzere is no frigate like a book."
(grabbing him, as movie starlette)
"My love is like a red, red...."
(French accent)
Share with zzem zzees precious gift. Zzees unearned gift.

T. DOG

Um. Um.

MAMA D

(dropping the attitude and backing off)
You're right. Give 'em study hall. What was in the notes?
(Beat.)
Rax's notes.

T. DOG

I can't keep up with you.

MAMA D

Why did you call the police?

T. DOG

He wrote some. He was threatening to burn down the school.

MAMA D

Oh.

(Beat.)

Is that a problem?

T. DOG

Doesn't that seem like a problem to you?

MAMA D

I'd like a new school, wouldn't you like a new school?

T. DOG

This is not a laughing—this is a serious.

MAMA D

Oh. He was serious. Yikes. Jeez Louise. He was serious. This puts a different spin. This is serious. How do we know that?

T. DOG

Are you going with him or not?

MAMA D

I was just curious. How do we know he was serious? The notes that he wrote, the serious ones.

T. DOG

If you're. I need you to. Are you going to trust me on this?

MAMA D

(seeming to back down)

No, I'm not—it's just that—

(Beat.)

Because if it's just Rax fooling around, that's one thing. Then frankly, metaphors and similes are a whole lot more interesting to me. But if it's Rax the Serious...then shouldn't we be asking someone...more serious? I mean, am I serious? Do you think of me as someone for a serious...not that I don't want to be helpful. But seriously. I'm just asking the question.

T. DOG

He asked for Mrs. Delaney.

MAMA D

Right. Well, that's another problem, T. Dog, since when do terrorists get to pick their own—assuming that he's serious.

T. DOG

Mr. Bailey.

MAMA D

I know your name, Bob. Look, it's not that I don't trust you—I assume you've thought this through. I'm asking the question. I need your help here. I'm just processing. This is a lot. I don't like this. You're making me serious. May I see the notes?

T. DOG

The police. I gave them. They took them. You can ask the police.

MAMA D

Won't you tell me?

T. DOG

They said he wanted to burn down the school. He wrote, "I'd like to burn this place down." Stuff like that.

MAMA D

Where did you—? How—?

T. DOG

Another student brought them in. A friend of his. Who was concerned.

MAMA D

This can't be serious, Bob. Rax is in—he's not like that.

T. DOG

I'm sorry, Myra. How do we—it's—we have to. We don't have a choice. I didn't want to. But the police are here.

MAMA D

Alright, fine, I'll go.

T. DOG

You don't think this is serious. But you don't know. And if you don't know.

MAMA D

You take the study hall. I'll take the station. He's in your office?

T. DOG

He's in the. The police are there.

MAMA D

(German Nazi)

Zzanks for all your help. Ve'll make him crack.

(thrilled)
How amazing. A squad for a boy with notes. Words are dangerous.
(gesturing to him)
Go. Go with the. Go.

T. DOG

(smiling, but shaking his head resignedly)
I know what you're doing, Mrs. Delaney. I know you're making fun of me. "Sticks and stones...."

MAMA D

You do not have a prayer, T. Dog!

(He exits.)

MAMA D (continued)

(excited, to the audience)
The ride in the squad car. My first. Guns galore. Radios. Locks. Chicken wire. Edible silence. A child would giggle or cry. Big people pretend not to care, but this is the time of your life. Pulling up to a station. Sitting in here with your life at the crossroads.

(MAMA D sits. Plops a magazine on her lap. Gets out her cellphone and dials, getting voicemail.)

MAMA D (continued)

I'm going to be a little late tonight. Itty bitty school incident. No big deal. Sorta fun actually. Something new. I'm sure it'll blow over.

(She turns and sees RAX as he enters.)

MAMA D (continued)

Story at six!

(She hangs up as RAX sits.)

MAMA D (continued)

How'd it go in there?

RAX

(seems shy)
Fine.

MAMA D

Well, good then. Do we get to leave now?

RAX

You don't want to stay with me?

MAMA D

No, I didn't mean...I was just wondering if we're permitted to get out of here. Oh. You mean your parents are on the way.

RAX

I'm...I'm...

MAMA D

Are they pressing charges?

RAX

I don't know.

MAMA D

Did they read you your rights?

RAX

No.

MAMA D

What's next?

RAX

Sit here and wait.

MAMA D

Have they reached your parents?

RAX

It's too early.

MAMA D

I'm sorry.

RAX

I don't want them here yet.

MAMA D

Because they'll....

RAX

No.

MAMA D

Why don't you want them here yet?

RAX

It's not time.

MAMA D

Did you call them?

RAX

They're not home.

MAMA D

Did you try their work?

RAX

They don't like me to call them at work.

MAMA D

I think this might be one of those exceptional moments.

RAX

I don't want to risk it.

MAMA D

In such a case as this, you may be risking more by not calling. Would you like me to call?

RAX

No. I'll call.

MAMA D

I'll wait until they get here.

RAX

I'm not really going to call.

MAMA D

(nodding)

Would you like me to see you home?

RAX

That's very nice of you. It's very nice of you to come here with me.

MAMA D

It was nice of you to invite me. Thank you.

RAX

You're welcome, I guess.

MAMA D

This is my first police station visit. I've enjoyed it very much.

RAX

It's my first one, too.

MAMA D

Well, then, we've all experienced something new. That makes this a special day. I have something here for special days.

(She takes out some gum.)

Would you like half a piece of some special gum?

RAX

What's special about it?

MAMA D

My experience is that if you chew it on a special day, it won't hurt you. And it sometimes helps. I have tried chewing it on a non-special day, and that didn't hurt either. I don't know what happens if it's a special day and you don't chew it. So, pick your risk.

(She tears the gum in half and holds it out to him.)

RAX

Okay.

(He takes the gum. They chew.)

RAX (continued)

You're kinda weird. In a nice way.

MAMA D

That's all? Kinda?

RAX

Okay, you're real weird.

MAMA D

In a nice way. Thank you. Same to you.

RAX

People told me about you. That's why....

(Beat.)

I think I'd like to get to know you better.

MAMA D

Oh. Well. Ask me anything in the world.

(Pause.)

So, what time is it exactly?

RAX

You don't have a watch?

(Beat.)

You want to leave? You can go.

MAMA D

You want me to?

(She gets up and starts out. He stands.)

RAX

Mrs. Delaney...

MAMA D

What?

(He sits.)

MAMA D (continued)

You're playing a little game with me, aren't you.

RAX

What.

MAMA D

(crossing back and sitting)

You know what. I don't care. I think I'll stay the night. Maybe catch some lobby TV. Want to catch some lobby TV?

RAX

I'm sorry. I know you need to go.

MAMA D

You don't own the police station.

RAX

Alright. Thank you.

MAMA D

Why are you here?

RAX

Don't you know?

MAMA D

I know what they told me. Excuse me. What he told me. T. Dog.

(RAX gives her a blank stare.)

MAMA D (continued)

Mr. Bailey. The principal.

RAX

Oh.

MAMA D

But I don't tend to believe everything I hear, so I collect evidence from both sides whenever possible. I find that it leads one closer to the truth. Have you found that to be true? In your own experience?

RAX

I think you're the one who's dancing around.

MAMA D

You do, do you. Well then you're pretty smart for a seventeen year old. I do like to dance. Keeps one young. Is that how old you are, seventeen? I can look it up. I have access. Other people have access too. Mr. Bailey. The other teachers. The janitor. Anyone with a key.

RAX

Why did you come with me?

MAMA D

You invited me.

RAX

You came.

MAMA D

You invited me.

RAX

You came.

MAMA D

You invited me.

RAX

I wanted to get to know you better.

MAMA D

Really.

(Sudden switch as she gets up.)

Time to go.

RAX

Figures.

MAMA D

What does?

RAX

Does what?

MAMA D

Figures. What figures?

RAX

You. Running away from being known.

MAMA D

Oh. Oh. You think you have it figured. What do you want to know? What is it you want to know?

RAX

Lotta stuff.

MAMA D

What stuff?

RAX

I'll tell you.

MAMA D

Tell me now.

RAX

Like have you ever done anything bad enough to get arrested?

MAMA D

As I already told you I've never been to a police station.

RAX

I asked if you've ever done something bad enough to get arrested.

MAMA D

Okay, smarty. Yes.

RAX

What?

MAMA D

Can you keep a secret?

RAX

I wouldn't trust me if I were you.

MAMA D

Well that's a difference between you and me. I don't actually care how you answer that question. It's rhetorical.

RAX

Like I said.

MAMA D

I stole a book once. Emily Dickinson.

(The drawing of Emily Dickinson returns, superimposed over the police station.)

RAX

You stole something.

MAMA D

I stole a book. Emily Dickinson. Poet? I stole a book of her poetry.

RAX

What happened?

MAMA D

I fell in love poetry.

RAX

Did you get caught?

MAMA D

Yes.

RAX

What happened?

MAMA D

Well, I had to return the book.

RAX

That's all.

MAMA D

I had already written in it.

RAX

Then it was ruined.

MAMA D

I walked into the store and handed it to the clerk and said, "Here I stole this, and my mother wants me to give it back, but since I wrote it in, I'd like to say I'm sorry and buy the book." And the store owner says, "Forget it, but thanks for being honest." And he takes the book. And I say, "I've already written in it." And he says, "I know." And he throws it in the trash. And I'm just a girl, standing there. And he says, "Anything else?" And I shake my head. And I leave.

(The drawing of Emily Dickinson fades away.)

RAX

Did you make that up?

MAMA D

No. It's the truth. I was really mad.

(RAX laughs, secretly delighted with himself.)

MAMA D (continued)

I guess it is funny. But I wanted that book. And I was too embarrassed to ask him to take it back out of the trash. It's one of the great regrets of my life. Your turn.

(Long pause.)

RAX

I did something once. Something bad, but they haven't figured out how to arrest you for it. I was, I got in a conversation with somebody and it wasn't that I said anything bad. It was just that I pretended to want to hear what they were saying so they'd tell me stuff. Something personal, the way people will do if they think you give a crap. More than on the surface stuff, but stuff that mattered to them that they wouldn't tell just anybody. That you could hurt them

with if you wanted to. But it was a set up. Just for a laugh. They had no idea that the whole time I was listening, inside I was laughing at them.

MAMA D

Huh.

RAX

I did it. It's really amazing how easy it was.

MAMA D

When was this?

RAX

Today. It was today.

MAMA D

When?

RAX

Three minutes ago.

(MAMA D gets up to leave.)

RAX (continued)

Are you mad?

MAMA D

You've hurt me, Rax.

RAX

Wow. I thought you'd tell me I was just hurting myself. Would you like to swear at me?

MAMA D

No thanks. I'm saving up.

(RAX snorts.)

MAMA D (continued)

Because no one cares that common use knocks the breath out of an obscenity, turning it into the meaninglessness of "Hi, how are you." I am not on the side of common use.

(In animation, the drawing of the police station wads up.)

There will come a day that I require a word with real jolt. But it's not today. Goodbye, Rax.

RAX

Okay. Thanks for coming.

(MAMA D takes out a detention pad and brings it to RAX.)

MAMA D

Truth is, I don't really want to do this. But maybe I'm wrong. Detention. After school. Room 204.

(As she leaves, he looks at the detention.)

RAX

Detention? School's over today.

MAMA D

(yelling from off)

Pick a day.

(An old lady rolls on in a wheelchair. She is in MAMA D's kitchen. RAX exits.)

MOM

Is that you see tie eye?

MAMA D

(off)

Yeah, Mom.

MOM

How was your day?

MAMA D

How was yours?

MOM

Good. Dad had a good day. I made eggs for lunch.

MAMA D

(entering)

Good. Eggs. That's good. Did he eat them?

MOM

No, but he thought he might be able to, so that was good.

MAMA D

That's wonderful. That's good news. Maybe tomorrow he'll eat something.

MOM

Don't get your hopes.

MAMA D

Did he drink one of his shakes?

MOM

Half a can.

MAMA D

Good.

MOM

Maybe a third. Those are hard to make. I can't push the buttons on the. You'd.

MAMA D

I'll make one before I leave in the mornings.

MOM

That's good seeie. You're such a sweetie. Sweet seeie.

MAMA D

No.

MOM

I'm hungry tonight.

MAMA D

What sounds good?

MOM

I don't know. Nothing. Maybe I'll drink the rest of Dad's shake. Microwave his eggs.

(Pause. Notices that her daughter is lost in thought.)

Are you okay?

MAMA D

Oh, Mom.

(PEANUT and RAX enter.)

PEANUT

Come in here. It's very private. Nobody hears anything.

(PEANUT exits. RAX sits.)

MAMA D

(to MOM)

Do you know what I did today? I remembered the day I started loving poetry.

MOM

You did? That's wonderful. How can you remember something like that?

MAMA D

Somebody, one of the school boys, asked me something that took me back to a specific time, and there it was. I'm very grateful. It was a beautiful moment.

MOM

Can you tell me about it?

MAMA D

Let me get your supper. You play me something.

MOM

Aren't you going to...

MAMA D

I'll tell you. It'll make you sad. But I'll tell you all about it.

MOM

I'll play something happy.

(MOM exits. Offstage, we hear a piano playing "When the Red, Red Robin." After a moment, there is terrible coughing. It's dad. The piano halts as the coughing goes on.)

MOM (continued)

Seetie, can you?

MAMA D

I'm going, Mom.

(MAMA D exits.)

PEANUT

(entering with legal pad and briefcase)

Off the record, did you write them? Anything you say in this office is confidential. They can't make me tell them. That's our privilege. So, did you write them?

RAX

Did the police show them to you?

PEANUT

Yes. I have the photocopies.

(Gets them out of the briefcase.)

Here.

RAX

Yeah. That looks like mine.

PEANUT

Did you mean it?

RAX

No. It's a set up.

PEANUT

Somebody set you up?

RAX

No. Me and my friend set them up. We made a plan. Can I tell you this?

PEANUT

You need to tell me.

RAX

You're not going to wreck it or get us in trouble?

PEANUT

Your father's paying me nighttime rates to get you out of trouble, not get you into more trouble.

RAX

You're not going to tell anybody?

PEANUT

No. I don't ever have to tell and I won't.

RAX

Not my parents?

PEANUT

You're underage. I have to tell your parents whatever they want to know.

(Pause.)

They're paying the bill.

(Pause.)

If you want, I can decide to tell them what you and I decide to tell them.

RAX

That's, I want.

PEANUT

Fair enough. It's between you and me then.

RAX

Between us? How can I be sure?

PEANUT

Well, you trust me or you don't trust me. You decide.

RAX

That's not a very good deal.

PEANUT

That's not a very good deal?

RAX

No.

PEANUT

Okay, we're done then. I'm going to walk out there and tell your dad to get a different lawyer, and I'll tell him why.

RAX

No.

(Beat.)

I don't want to. I trust you.

PEANUT

You trust me?

RAX

Between you and me?

PEANUT

Between you and me.

RAX

Not my parents.

PEANUT

I've got to tell 'em something. Just not the good stuff.

RAX

Okay.

PEANUT

Okay?

RAX

I said.

PEANUT

Good. We can move forward. What was the set up?

RAX

Okay. Well. I don't know whose idea it was in the beginning.

PEANUT

Probably yours.

RAX

Yeah. Probably mine.

PEANUT

Probably?

RAX

Yeah. It was mine.

(Lights crossfade to the school hallway the next afternoon. RAX and PEANUT exit as MAMA D enters with a sign that says, "Please join me in my Strike!")

DEEBO

Mrs. Delaney, we missed you at detention yesterday.

MAMA D

Oh, yes. I was riding around in a police car. My apologies. I'll see if I can get the police to make it up to you.

DEEBO

There was somebody there that said you wrote a poem for them.

MAMA D

Oh, shoot! I forgot. (Mr./Ms. name of person).

DEEBO

Oh, yeah, (first name of person, if known). We call... (him/her)... (his/her) nickname's (made up nickname).

MAMA D

Was (he/she) upset?

JACKIE

Didn't seem like it. Said (she/he'd) come back some other time. Do we have detention today?

MAMA D

No, we have a special teacher's meeting.

DEEBO

What about tomorrow?

MAMA D

(remembering something)

Oh no.

DEEBO

What?

MAMA D

I invited Rax.

JACKIE

You gave Rax a detention?

MAMA D

Yeah. What if he shows up today? Are you guys going to be there?

JACKIE

I guess she hasn't heard.

DEEBO

Yeah. I guess you haven't heard.

MAMA D

What?

(Silence.)

You people aren't about to tell me some gossip, are you?

JACKIE

No.

DEEBO

No.

JACKIE

Well, maybe. But we thought you knew it all, since you went to the police with him and everything. Anyway, people say you went.

DEEBO

We thought you probably knew it all already, since...you know...and everything.

MAMA D

Don't say "and everything." Don't say "you know." Don't say "people say." Knew what?

DEEBO

Jackie said it first.

JACKIE

Well, this is what happened.

MAMA D

I don't want to hear gossip.

JACKIE

Okay, we won't tell you any gossip.

DEEBO

We won't tell no gossip.

MAMA D

Don't use a double negative.

DEEBO

What's double negative?

JACKIE

When you say "no" twice.

DEEBO

I only said "no" once!

JACKIE

But if other people were gossiping, would you like to know what they were saying?

MAMA D

Of course. That's different. What?

JACKIE

Well. Rax, he wrote some notes to somebody.

MAMA D

Don't say "Rax, he."

JACKIE

Alright, Rax. He. I'm sorry, it's hard.

MAMA D

Of course it's hard. Everything worth doing is hard.

DEEBO

Mrs. Delaney, do you want to not know the gossip or not?

MAMA D

Not really. Go ahead.

JACKIE

Okay, Rax, he—Rax, he—Rax...wrote some notes to somebody.

DEEBO

Good job, Jackie.

JACKIE

Nobody in particular. You probably know this part.

MAMA D

If you're gonna tell it, tell it all.

JACKIE

Okay. And then he left them.

DEEBO

That was stupid. He let himself get caught.

JACKIE

Or so they say. Or maybe he left them on purpose.

DEEBO

Who would do that? That's dumb. He left them right on a lunch table.

JACKIE

With his name on them.

DEEBO

He should have known he'd get caught. Rax is dumb.

JACKIE

Yeah, dumb like a fox.

DEEBO

And Bailey got them.

JACKIE

And thought he was a terrorist.

DEEBO

Like Columbine.

MAMA D

Don't even say that.

JACKIE

You have to respond.

DEEBO

It's okay to talk about it. It's in a movie.

JACKIE

Bailey couldn't just do nothing. So he calls the police.

DEEBO

Bailey calls the police.

JACKIE

And the police take Rax downtown.

DEEBO

And Bailey told your class you were called away from school.

JACKIE

So we figured it was to take Rax downtown.

DEEBO

And you weren't there for detention. That's not like you.

(S.G. comes over to them.)

JACKIE

And then this morning, S.G.'s in the office, and Rax comes in with his lawyer. Some guy with a briefcase. Whose name is Peanut. And they left together and Rax didn't come back to school. So some people think the T. Dog suspended him. But that's not yet definitive.

DEEBO

And just now at lunch, people are saying that Rax is suing the school.

MAMA D

Right. And he's also burning it down. So you think he wants to burn it down?

(Silent stares for a long moment.)

JACKIE

I don't think anybody believes that. Except Bailey.

DEEBO

Does Bailey believe him? Adults will believe anything.

JACKIE

Well, they had to, on principle, Deebo, because of Colombine, you know. Sorry, Mama D, I mean Mrs. Delaney.

MAMA D

Thanks for not gossiping.

DEEBO

You're welcome.

(JACKIE and DEEBO leave chattering. MAMA D raises her sign and starts to leave the other way.)

S.G.

Mrs. Delaney.

MAMA D

Yeah.

S.G.

I don't think Rax cares what happens to him in this.

MAMA D

You don't think Rax cares what happens to him?

S.G.

No.

MAMA D

So we should be careful.

S.G.

I don't know. Yeah, I guess.

MAMA D

Did you know that Mr. Bailey quoted a poem to me yesterday?

S.G.

He did?

MAMA D

Yeah. It was only three words, and doggerel, and untrue, but it's a start.

S.G.

What was it?

MAMA D

"Sticks and stones."

S.G.

I don't get it.

MAMA D

I guess you had to be there.

S.G.

You seem tired.

MAMA D

I'm in a culture war, makes you look hungover.

S.G.

Oh, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." I get it.

(S.G. sits in the audience. BELL rings. DEEBO and JACKIE race to audience and sit, chattering.)

MAMA D

Late. Quiet.

INTERCOM

Mrs. Delaney please come to Mr. Bailey's office at your first class break.

MAMA D

Well. A friendly beginning to another class day. Let's see how long this can last.

DEEBO

Mrs. Delaney?

MAMA D

Raise your hand.

(DEEBO raises hand.)

MAMA D (continued)

What is it, Deebo?

DEEBO

(being somewhat distracted by JACKIE)

On the first day of class...

MAMA D

Yes.

DEEBO

You said, you said...

MAMA D

Don't repeat yourself. You're the future, you know. The mistakes of the present are adequate the first time over. I'll come back to you tomorrow.

DEEBO

What?

MAMA D

Think about it.

DEEBO

But I didn't get a chance. I didn't get a chance.

MAMA D

Now class. Tomorrow, which they claim never comes, has arrived after all, today. And this young scholar, on the road to greatness, has arrived at an opportunity to redeem himself. You were asking?

DEEBO

What? What?

MAMA D

Ohhhhh! So close, and yet so far. Open your notebooks and copy down a quatrain.

DEEBO

What'd I do? What?

MAMA D

You may write your own quatrain, or treat us to a classic. Wouldn't that be something!

JACKIE

What's a quatrain?

(MAMA D gives JACKIE a look. JACKIE raises a hand.
MAMA D nods.)

JACKIE (continued)

What's a quatrain?

MAMA D

What do you think I am, a dictionary?

JACKIE

(raising a hand)

Where are we supposed to find a dictionary?

DEEBO

There's no dictionaries in here.

MAMA D

What do you think I am, a library?

S.G.

Can we go to the library?

(MAMA D gives a shrug.)

DEEBO

What are you going to do give us all hall passes?

MAMA D

No.

JACKIE

Field trip!

MAMA D

No.

DEEBO

Just flunk us now.

MAMA D

No.

JACKIE

Just give us all detentions now.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

(holding up detention)

I already have one.

MAMA D

No.

S.G.

What do you want us to do?

MAMA D

(character voice)

Deductive reasoning.

S.G.

She's not going to tell us.

DEEBO

So we can't do anything.

JACKIE

She can't make us do an assignment we can't possibly do.

DEEBO

Why don't you just tell us the answer?

JACKIE

Yeah, that's what you're paid to do.

MAMA D

Am I paid to do your work?

JACKIE

No, you're paid to teach us.

MAMA D

And I'm doing a bad job?

JACKIE

Right now you are.

MAMA D

Alright, you're it. You're the teacher.

JACKIE

(standing, moving to stage)

Fine. Study hall everyone.

(MAMA D moves off the stage to take JACKIE's seat.)

MAMA D

Teacher.

JACKIE

Raise your hand. Nevermind. You get a detention.

(MAMA D raises her hand.)

JACKIE

What?

MAMA D

Teacher, the lesson plan for today is quatrain.

JACKIE

Okay, okay. Does anybody know what a quatrain is?

DEEBO

I only know what a quarter is, not a quatrain.

S.G.

Maybe they have something to do with each other.

DEEBO

That's stupid. What makes you think something stupid like that.

S.G.

Well, you're stupid.

DEEBO

You're stupid.

S.G.

You're stupid.

JACKIE
Class. Class.

MAMA D
Can I have a bathroom pass?

JACKIE
Yes, here. Sign it yourself.

MAMA D
You're the teacher.

JACKIE
I don't want this job.

MAMA D
Fine. Who else wants it? You. You?

(MAMA D could point to members of the audience. If they try, go with it. But MAMA D will have to be ready to take control again. Eventually MAMA D appoints S.G. as the guest teacher.)

S.G.
Okay. Quatrains. I think it's a fourth of something.

JACKIE
Why?

S.G.
Raise your hand, Jackie.

JACKIE
Step in a pile, S.G.

S.G.
I think it's a fourth, because the French word for four is quatre, and it seems to be connected to quarter and quatrain.

DEEBO
It has something to do with poetry.

S.G.
Why do you think that, Deebo?

DEEBO
Because we're studying poetry this unit.

JACKIE

I'm not saying you're right, but what if a quatrain has something to do with four lines of poetry.

S.G.

All in favor of quatrain meaning four lines of poetry raise your hands.

(Everyone does. MAMA D waves her hand to get S.G.'s attention.)

S.G. (continued)

You. New Girl.

MAMA D

Do we have enough of a quorum to face down the autocracy of the dictionary?

S.G. and JACKIE

What?

DEEBO

Yeah. What?

MAMA D

Can this little class vote out the dictionary.

S.G.

All in favor of voting out the dictionary?

(All hands go up. MAMA D's head collapses into her hands.)

MAMA D

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

S.G.

All opposed?

(MAMA D puts up her hand.)

S.G. (continued)

You lose.

(DEEBO raises his hand, and S.G. acknowledges him.)

DEEBO

I think you're a lousy teacher.

S.G.

You think you can do better?

JACKIE and DEEBO

No.

(MAMA D waves her hand in the air.)

S.G.

Go ahead New Girl Smarty Pants.

MAMA D

I think we've got enough people here to create a secret intelligence corps that can find a way to get to the library without getting caught and check the dictionary. And just in case you do get caught, I know how to forge Mrs. Delaney's signature. Who wants to go with me?

(MAMA D writes on some papers. DEEBO and JACKIE throw up their hands. S.G. picks them and also a couple of audience members. They all leap onto the stage with MAMA D. MAMA D gathers them up into a huddle.)

MAMA D (continued)

All right here's what we do.

(MAMA D passes out the hall passes. All five students head off stage, where they will get quatrains and instructions for cueing.)

MAMAD (continued)

Never in the history of education has a group of students been more eager to get to the library and learn something while at the same time being totally oblivious to their own eagerness. Amazing. I tell the remaining students the answer. It's any four lines of poetry, usually rhyming. Then I head down the hall to make sure the quatrain squad is not in T. Dog jail.

(She takes her strike sign with her.)

JOON

(entering)

Myra!

MAMA D

(what a relief to see a good friend)

Hi, Joon.

JOON

How was the policescapade?

MAMA D

It was good. I liked it.

JOON

Did they remember which one of you was the crook?

MAMA D

Mostly I sat there and read old magazines. Waitin' for Rax.

JOON

Same as being in jail. Did they bring in a lawyer?

MAMA D

Nobody showed. Not that I saw. I suppose they could have.

JOON

Not his parents?

MAMA D

No.

JOON

Did you learn anything new?

MAMA D

(yes, something terrible)

Maybe.

JOON

(finally has noticed, starting to giggle)

What's with the...

(Pointing to MAMA D's clothes.)

MAMA D

What? What's wrong?

JOON

Nothin'. It's just the third day in a row.

MAMA D

I'm tired of changing my clothes everyday. I want someone to change that rule. There. I've decided.

(Holding up her strike sign.)

I'm against so much clothes changing! That's why I'm on strike!

JOON

(joining the strike by holding up her hand)

I'm for that!

(To MAMA D.)
But I don't do body odor. That's why I'm Math and not P.E.

MAMA D
You're not P.E. 'cause you're afraid they'd give you driver's ed.

JOON
That, too.

MAMA D
I change my underwear. Do I stink?

JOON
Don't worry, I'd let you know.

MAMA D
Whew.

JOON
(getting back to what's bothering Myra)
What about Fieldhouse?

MAMA D
(not yet ready to talk about it)
I don't know.
(Switch to strike voice and sign again.)
I would also like someone to get rid of my dad's cancer! And I want my husband back!
(To JOON, laughing.)
Only fixed. Without the male problem.

JOON
Striking for the moon, huh. How about...
(taking the sign and holding it up)
World peace!

MAMA D
(taking the sign back)
No. The beauty queens are taking care of that.

JOON
Which we are definitely not.

MAMA D
Which we are definitely not.

JOON

Let me know how it comes out. I better go. I want to hear about Fieldhouse.

MAMA D

(it's a sad, sorry subject)

No, you don't.

JOON

Yes, I do.

(JOON exits, calling out "World Peace!" and giggling. The quatrain squad returns and lines up to read their poems. Applause after each one.)

S.G.

Quatrain: poetic stanza consisting of four lines. Example:

I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Quatrain: poetic stanza consisting of four lines. This is by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Cruel children, cruel babies
All grow up as geese and gabies,
Hated as their age increases
By their nephews and their nieces.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Quatrain.

Last night when I came home
As drunk as I could be,
I thought I saw another hat
Where my hat ought to be.

(Others makes a big vocal response: "Whoa!!!")

DEEBO

Okay. Okay. Okay.

Roses are red
And carnations pink.
Kitchens smell
But bathrooms stink.

JACKIE

Quatrains: sometimes quatrains are in rhyming verse. But they can be in blank verse. Like this.

(She steps forward and speaks with authentic maturity.)
The soldier died without a friend
to hearse him from the field.
So God's black-winged servants undertake the eulogy
and lower him gently into gravely gullets.

MAMA D

Who wrote that?

(JACKIE makes a shrug.)

DEEBO

(He/she) did.

MAMA D

You did?

JACKIE

Shut up, Deebo.

MAMA D

Jackie. You did?

JACKIE

Yeah.

MAMA D

Wow.

(MAMA D gives JACKIE a hug, and JACKIE sits.)

MAMA D

I don't think I'll burn down the school today.

(MAMA D's cellphone starts vibrating.)

DEEBO

Your cellphone's ringing.

JACKIE

It's called vibrating, idiot.

(Class BELL rings.)

DEEBO

(startled)

Whoa!

S.G.

(joking)
Deebo, your cellphone's ringing.

MAMA D

Wait!

(Beat.)
I'm proud of you all. Dismissed.

(Students exit as MAMA D answers her phone. MOM rolls on in her wheelchair, phone to her ear.)

MAMA D (continued)

Hi, Mom.

MOM

Hi, Seetie. Is your class over?

MAMA D

Yeah. Perfect timing. You're fine.

MOM

I'm sorry to bother you, honey.

MAMA D

Is it dad?

MOM

Oh. No. Dad's fine. It's the TV. The cable's out.

MAMA D

Oh. What do you want me to do?

MOM

I don't know. It's just frustrating.

MAMA D

Do you want to call the cable company?

MOM

No. I don't need to.

MAMA D

Do you want me to call the cable company?

MOM

Would you? That's so sweet of you. Thank you, Seetie. I'll see you tonight. Tell them there's no rush. We don't watch it anymore anyway. But as long as we're paying, I'd like it to work.

MAMA D

Okay.

(Beat.)

Love you, Mom. Give Dad a kiss for me.

MOM

I will, Seetie. I will. You be careful.

MAMA D

I will, Mom. I will.

(MOM hangs up and rolls off. MAMA D hangs up, gets her strike sign and steps into the hall.)

MAMA D

Strike! Strike! Strike!

END OF ACT I

(There may be an intermission or the play may continue without a scene break.)

ACT II

(LIGHTS come up on MAMA D still carrying her “Join Me in My Strike” sign.)

MAMA D

Strike today. Right here. Right now.

(BELL rings.)

DEEBO

(running across)

Mrs. Delaney, what are you striking for?

(MAMA D just looks at him and then shakes her head.)

DEEBO (continued)

Shoot.

T. DOG

(entering, to DEEBO)

Get to your next class.

(to MAMA D)

Mrs. Delaney.

DEEBO

(calling back)

I know what a preposition is!

MAMA D

Keep trying!

T. DOG

Myra!

MAMA D

Yes.

T. DOG

I asked, I asked. I asked you to come to the office at your first class break.

MAMA D

You're not at your office.

T. DOG

Because. I. That's. I knew you wouldn't come there.

MAMA D

And I didn't come there because I knew you wouldn't be there.

T. DOG

Alright. Look.

MAMA D

It's a chicken and egg thing isn't it.

T. DOG

Look! Is it true that you. You. You left Ren alone at the police station?

MAMA D

Yes.

T. DOG

Why?

MAMA D

Why?

T. DOG

Because I asked you to stay with him.

MAMA D

No you didn't. You asked me to go with him. In fact, he asked you to ask me to go with him. I wasn't aware that you had any say in the matter.

T. DOG

When I asked you to go with him, I thought you would naturally assume that I meant to stay with him.

MAMA D

Until what?

T. DOG

As long as necessary.

MAMA D

How long is that?

T. DOG

I assume you're able to figure that out.

(Pause.)

MAMA D

Can't you see I'm on strike here?

T. DOG

What for?

MAMA D

Don't worry. It's not about you. Or Rax. Or the school. I'm striking about important stuff that nobody can do anything about. Because I want somebody to fix something that nobody can fix, so there's nothing to do but strike. For one, I'm striking so we don't have to change clothes everyday. None of us. If I have my way, the fashion police get chased out of school, and we can wear the same thing everyday.

T. DOG

Oh.

(Beat.)

So, you're in favor of school uniforms?

MAMA D

No. I'm in favor of freedom.

T. DOG

Well, see, that's where you're wrong. School uniforms are not anti-freedom. They'd bring more freedom. They'd bring freedom from fear and, and freedom from conformity, because no one has to worry about trying to live up to a false standard of fashion.

MAMA D

What?

T. DOG

School uniforms are not, they bring freedom, no one has to—

MAMA D

I heard you. I just couldn't believe you. You sound like—so you want us to get school uniforms?

T. DOG

I never said that. I'm just expressing a position. Pointing to one side of the argument. I haven't made up. I don't know what I think.

MAMA D

Can we make the uniforms ugly?

T. DOG

Yes. No!

MAMA D

(after a moment)

How do you feel right now, T. Dog?

T. DOG

We've gotten off the subject. What are we talking about?

MAMA D

I—

(Beat.)

You were telling me that I should have sat in the police station until a high school junior who was arrested for arson or smarting off or cruelty or just plain stupidity, I'm not sure which, gave me his royal permission to go home to my patient family. Is that the subject from which we've strayed? Because if it is, I'd be willing to argue that we never left the subject at all. You don't seem able to admit, even though you are the Top Dog, that you have the power to shape the culture by expressing your ideals in the glory of language, but instead you choose to avoid direct discourse, because you might have to, God forbid, take a position. So you give your power away. But you're going to have to ask yourself, in your heart of hearts, if you believe in the power of language. Because if you believe in the power of language, you and I can have a conversation, but if you don't believe in the power of language, then we don't have a thing to talk about.

T. DOG

I've made you serious again, haven't I.

MAMA D

Sorta. Sorry.

T. DOG

No, it's entirely my fault.

MAMA D

Good. Good for you. No, it's my fault. My Mom wants me to call the cable company. Drives me nuts.

T. DOG

Call the cable company?

MAMA D

Yeah.

T. DOG

You watch cable?

MAMA D

No. Nobody does. Dad's dying, and Mom doesn't like cable, and I hate it.

T. DOG

So, you want it disconnected?

MAMA D

It doesn't work. Mom wants it to work. Because we're paying for it.

T. DOG

Oh.

(Beat.)

I see your problem.

(Beat.)

Want me to call them for you?

MAMA D

That would be great.

T. DOG

What should I tell them?

MAMA D

Anything you want.

T. DOG

In the meantime, here could I hold this for a second?

(MAMA D gives him the sign. He pretends with it. Does a couple of feints.)

T. DOG (continued)

One of these days, these little stunts of yours are going to come back and bite you.

(Pause. T. DOG puts the sign down.)

He's got a lawyer. Ren does. Some guy goes by the name Peanut.

MAMA D

So, we're getting serious.

T. DOG

Says he's going to sue the school.

MAMA D

For what?

T. DOG

Because I suspended him for three days. Says I can't do that. Says it's not fair because...

MAMA D

Bob. What did the boy do?

T. DOG

He threatened to burn down the school.

MAMA D

Right. So.

T. DOG

And you threaten to burn down the school nearly every day. I've heard you. The students have heard you.

MAMA D

And everyone laughs. I'm not serious.

T. DOG

Was Rax serious?

MAMA D

I don't—.

T. DOG

We don't have a clear policy on this.

MAMA D

And you called the police. You weren't taking chances. You can't tell.

T. DOG

But Peanut says it's not fair. Because other people are not treated the same.

MAMA D

Other people have a history.

T. DOG

But you've said the same things that he said.

MAMA D

So because I say, I want to burn down the school, anybody who wants to can say they want to burn down the school?

T. DOG

Yep.

MAMA D

That doesn't seem fair.

T. DOG

Myra.

MAMA D

Communication is always based on context, history. What history does Rax have? He's not—. I'm—. There's a difference. You treat people differently depending on what you know, what you believe to be true based on what you know. If you know more, you believe more, and if you know less you believe less. That's what trust is all about. Am I getting through here?

T. DOG

Myra—

MAMA D

Almost everyone is longing for gracious understanding. Communication is tough. Tough! But if you will paint in the context and then put on your goggles to see through to my intent, then maybe you. Can. Hear. Me. Otherwise it's just words. And then you can say whatever it is you say I said, and you can win in court, but it won't be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but. It'll be anything but. Because that's what you're being right now, T. Dog. A big. Anything. Butt!

T. DOG

I'm in trouble, Myra. Do you see the trouble I'm in? You and I can.... but they, the law. Peanut.

MAMA D

You can't be serious.

T. DOG

I am very serious.

MAMA D

You can't be.

T. DOG

I am.

MAMA D

You can't.

(T. DOG shakes his head. MAMA D takes her sign and holds it up.)

MAMA D

Doesn't intent have anything to do with anything?

T. DOG

Anyway. It'd be good if you laid low. For a little while.

MAMA D

What do you mean?

T. DOG

Just lay off the talking about, you know.

MAMA D

Lay off the fiery rhetoric?

T. DOG

Mrs.—. Please, don't do that.

MAMA D

No nuances, no double meanings, no literary devices?

(Beat.)

I am an English teacher.

T. DOG

Myra, please. Help me out here. Just help me out.

(He starts to leave.)

MAMA D

No heated speech.

(He stops. She covers her mouth to keep from laughing. He turns, repressing his fury.)

T. DOG

Can, can you stop by my office before the teacher's meeting?

MAMA D

I'm not coming to the teacher's meeting. I have detention right after school today.

T. DOG

(His fury makes him cruel when he says "poetry club.")

It's not detention. It's just poetry club. Can't it wait?

MAMA D

No.

T. DOG

Can't someone cover it for you?

MAMA D

No.

T. DOG

I'm asking you once more.

MAMA D

It's Thursday. It's a big detention day. If you want to see me, come to detention.

T. DOG

You're making this very difficult, Myra. I need to insist. Please.

MAMA D

I gave a detention to Rax. I need to be there, in case he shows.

T. DOG

Ren Fieldhouse is not going to be there, Myra. He's on suspension. I would appreciate it if you could just come to my office as soon as school is out. No detentions today.

(T. DOG exits taking her sign with him.)

MAMA D

Mr. Bailey. That's my sign.

T. DOG

Not today.

(MAMA D is furious.)

MAMA D

(pointing to someone in the front row)

Help me.

(She writes on large paper; asks audience member to write something, which they do. She pins to the front of her dress, "They say he wants to burn the place down." Onto the back, she pins, "I want to help him.")

MAMA D (continued)

(referring to her front, having these conversations with audience members)

What does this say? What does it mean? How do you know? Who is this referring to? How do you know for certain? How could you find out for certain?

(turning around)

What does this say? What does it mean? How do you know? Who is this referring to? How do you know for certain?

(Change of tone. Now MAMA D is talking to the audience itself, not audience as class. If audience members respond, she lives with them in conversation for awhile.)

I once heard a Shakespeare scholar say that he felt he had the way to stop nuclear war. He said, "Study Shakespeare." He said if we keep studying Shakespeare, we will know the power of words. And if we will use the power of words, we will avoid using bombs.

I used to believe this was a happy idea. Until I learned the power of words. Then I learned that words can destroy you as cleanly as a bomb. Words are time bombs. Words will cut you. They can make you bleed. Have you heard of an ulcer? Words do that. But words will heal you, too. Words will enlighten you. Words will blind you. Words will close doors. Words will open doors. With words, you will fall in love. And with words, you will be estranged. Words are the satchels that tote your most precious equipment for living – your knowledge, your beliefs, and your memories.

(A drawing of her father appears superimposed over the classroom.)

When my dad was a little boy, in grade school, he memorized a lot of poetry. They don't do that so much anymore. Do they? Do you have poems in your memory? I'll bet you have some. Let's get into small groups right where you're sitting. I mean it. This is part of the play. Turn around in groups of four or five. And see if it's possible that each one of you has at least one poem that you can say from memory. If it's a long poem, maybe you can say at least a stanza or two.

(This will take a little time, and maybe a bit more coaxing. After a while, MAMA D gets everyone's attention .)

MAMA D

Would a few of you be willing to say a poem for the entire room?

(Again, take a little time. Depending on the size of the space, MAMA D may need to provide a microphone. Perhaps MAMA D can even ask these people how they learned this poem – under what circumstances. This moment of community sharing of poetry is much of the reason for the existence of this play, so it should not be rushed. After these conversations of simply celebrating poetry together, MAMA D recites a poem from memory, probably to a specific young man in the audience. For example...)

This poem is called "Mother to Son." It is by Mr. Langston Hughes.

(She recites the poem mentioned above or some other equally appropriate poem as the lights change and music plays.)

Silence. Then the BELL.)

Back to reality.

(S.G. dashes into the room.)

S.G.

Mama...Mrs. Delaney. Did you see Rax in the Hall?

MAMA D

Rax?

S.G.

He's in the hall. He's got somebody with him. He's getting stuff out of his locker.

(MAMA D goes into the hall, where she sees RAX with PEANUT.)

Rax. MAMA D

Hi. RAX

Is it true that you were suspended? MAMA D

Don't you know? RAX

Well, Mr. Bailey told me.... MAMA D

Well, he would know. RAX

I'm sorry. MAMA D

You're going to regret this. You're laughing at me now. But I'm going to be laughing at you. RAX

That's enough, Ren. PEANUT

Shut up. I can say this. RAX

I think it'd be wise if you'd just collect your things and we got out of here. PEANUT

(MAMA D turns away. PEANUT takes out the camera and takes a picture behind her back.)

Mrs. Delaney. RAX

(She turns and they take a picture of her front. She looks down. They laugh. She takes off the sign.)

MAMA D

I wasn't making fun, Rax. I was trying to make a point. A point about this whole thing. See, I have this other sign on my back.

RAX

We already took a picture of that.

MAMA D

I wasn't making fun, Rax.

RAX

Some people are really gullible.

MAMA D

I wasn't saying, I wasn't accusing you of being gullible.

RAX

I don't care what you were saying. I'm saying you're gullible, and you can't even see that.

(MAMA D suddenly puts out her hand toward PEANUT.)

MAMA D

Hello. We haven't had the opportunity to meet. I'm Mrs. Delaney.

PEANUT

Hi. I'm Mr. Allman. You can call me Peanut.

MAMA D

(shaking his hand)

Mr. Allman.

PEANUT

No, you can call me Peanut. That's what everyone calls me. Even judges call me that. I forget that my last name is Allman.

MAMA D

You like peanuts better than almonds?

PEANUT

No. I like almonds fine. But my name is Allman like "all man." But it's pronounced like the nut, so I just go by peanut. Have all my life.

MAMA D

What's your first name Mr. Almond.

PEANUT

Pete.

(Pause.)

It's really Peter, but I've gone by Pete all my life. Until I started going by Peanut, and then I forgot about Pete, too. We don't need to be talking about this.

MAMA D

I'm finding it very interesting.

PEANUT

Well, it's not.

MAMA D

No, it is. It's language. It draws us into community. It makes us fall in love with each other. It makes us human. It sets us apart from other creatures.

PEANUT

Well. I wouldn't go that far.

MAMA D

Yes, you would.

PEANUT

No, actually, I happen to believe that dolphins and whales are able to communicate in languages just as much as humans, other animals too, maybe even plants. I read an interesting article about that.

MAMA D

Have you seen the anthology *The Great Poet Whales?*

PEANUT

No. Sounds fascinating.

(MAMA D rolls her eyes in exasperation at his obtuseness.)

MAMA D

Mr. Almond.

PEANUT

Peanut.

MAMA D

I don't like nuts.

PEANUT

Well, I'm not a real nut. It's just a name. You'll get used to it.

MAMA D

No, I won't. But I'll call you Peanut if you'll call me Nipple.

PEANUT

What?

MAMA D

Nipple.

PEANUT

That's what I thought you said. Is that your nickname?

MAMA D

It's a new one.

PEANUT

Can I have an old one?

MAMA D

Well, there's Mama D, but nobody calls me that.

PEANUT

Well, I'd rather call you Mama D.

MAMA D

If you do, I'll have to give you a detention.

PEANUT

Well, you can give me one, but I won't serve.

MAMA D

That would be a mistake.

PEANUT

I'm not too worried. Mama D.

MAMA D

Are you sure you won't call me Nipple?

PEANUT

No, I won't call you that.

MAMA D

Why not?

PEANUT

Well, for starters, I don't trust you.

RAX

Man, that's the truth.

PEANUT

And then there's the possibility of misunderstanding.

MAMA D

Double meanings?

PEANUT

I'd say so.

MAMA D

And there's no possibility of double meaning in...

(gesture of the size of a peanut)

...Peanut?

PEANUT

I don't think so. I think most people know what a peanut is, plain and simple.

MAMA D

So you're saying it's alright if I call you Peanut.

PEANUT

Suits me.

MAMA D

Suits you? Suits you. And if I don't want to call you Peanut, I can suit myself, can't I?

PEANUT

Sure.

MAMA D

But if I want to be called Nipple, you don't find that suitable.

PEANUT

No.

MAMA D

I suppose you could leave and file a suit over this, or we could suit up and finish it right now. Unless you're afraid that'd wrinkle your suit.

PEANUT

(exiting, to RAX)

I see what you mean.

(RAX looks at MAMA D and makes her "peanut" gesture, smiling, and exits.)

MAMA D

I go into my classroom. Where's Rax? Class? Where's Rax?

(The following audience members have been given cue sheets and lines to say. Their instructions include MAMA D's line above and then their lines.)

SOMEONE IN THE AUDIENCE #1

He got suspended.

SOMEONE IN THE AUDIENCE #2

I heard they kicked him out for a month.

SOMEONE IN THE AUDIENCE #3

I heard he's suing the school for a million dollars.

MAMA D

Raise your hands!

(SOMEONE IN THE AUDIENCE #4 raises his/her hand.)

MAMA D (continued)

Yes.

SOMEONE IN THE AUDIENCE #4

May I go to the bathroom?

MAMA D

No! The play is almost over. What did Rax do to get suspended?

S. G.

He wrote notes about burning down the school.

DEEBO

No. He got caught writing notes about burning down the school.

JACKIE

I still say he meant to get caught.

MAMA D

I talk about burning down the school all the time. Should I be detained by the police?

DEEBO

Did they ask him if he was serious?

MAMA D

Why am I talking to you. Excuse me.

(She presses the intercom button.)

Mr. Bailey.

T. DOG

Yes, Mrs. Delaney.

MAMA D

About Rax.

T. DOG

Do you mean Ren Fieldhouse?

MAMA D

Yes. He is not here. Has he called in sick?

T. DOG

No.

MAMA D

Then why is he not here?

T. DOG

You know why. And I don't think we should discuss this on the school intercom.

MAMA D

Is it true that he tried to burn down the school?

T. DOG

I don't know what you're trying to pull. But I'm not here.

(Click.)

DEEBO

Mrs. Delaney, are you still doing the strike?

JACKIE
What are you striking for?

DEEBO
No. The preposition.

(MAMA D'S phone starts vibrating.)

DEEBO (continued)
Your phone's ringing.

JACKIE
Vibrating, stupid.

S.G.
Mama D!

MAMA D
What!

S. G.
I'm sorry. But I smell smoke.

DEEBO
It's your phone.

(MAMA D looks at the phone. FIRE ALARM goes off.)

DEEBO
Whoa! That's not your phone.

MAMA D
Don't run!

(SMOKE. SIRENS. LIGHTS fade to focus on MAMA D and MOM in her wheelchair. There is color in the light on the smoke; it is fantastic. The two women are talking on their cellphones, with off stage focus. The ALARM and SIRENS fade.)

MAMA D
I get the students out and call my mother back.

(MAMA D calls. Mom's phone rings. She digs for it next to her leg.)

MOM
Honey.

MAMA D
Mom?

MOM
Is it okay to talk?

MAMA D
Sure. The school seems to be on fire, but everybody's out. Nothing to do but stand here and watch it burn. So go ahead.

MOM
Well. I'm sorry, honey.
(She cries.)

MAMA D
Oh, Mom.

MOM
Yeah.

(Pause.)

MAMA D
How did he go?

MOM
I was there. He breathed. And then he didn't. Pretty fast.

MAMA D
Did he say anything?

MOM
He said, "Tell Seetie I never saw a moor." I guess he was out of his head.

MAMA D
No.

(MAMA D turns and looks directly at her mother, lowering her phone. The drawing of her father returns upstage.)

MAMA D
(to MOM as she crosses to stand behind her)
I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.

I never spoke with God,
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given.

(MAMA D embraces MOM from behind. MOM sobs.)

MOM

(still on the phone)
Well, you get back to the children.

MAMA D

I'll be right there.

MOM

I'll see you soon.

MAMA D

I love you, Mom.

MOM

You be careful.

MAMA D

I will.

(MOM rolls away. MAMA D watches her leave.)

MAMA D

(with objectivity, to attempt to control her emotion)
There is a space in which my beloved words forsake me.
It is a drawing without lines.
A painting without color.
Chewing without swallowing.
Plot without story.
And a broken-legged dance.

If I'm out walking late
And I pass a house
As the lights go off inside,
All the lights,
And the house gets dark,
It means nothing.
The people are going to sleep.
The day is done.

But if I were in a boat
On deep water
Under a darkening sky
And a rising wind
Struggling to reach land
With my eyes on a single light on the shore
And then that one light goes out
And I no longer even know which direction
To look for light
I can only heave my anchor overboard
And pray with a mouth full of tears
That I can hold where I am
until the morning.

(She weeps.

T. DOG rushes across.)

MAMA D (continued)

Mr. Bailey.

T. DOG

No special teacher's meeting today.

(He exits.)

MAMA D

The buses and parents come. And take the kids.

(JOON enters with mocha in paper cups.)

MAMA D (continued)

Joon buys me a mocha, and we stand in front of the coffee shop before she rushes me home.

JOON

(handing over a cup)

It's very hot.

(They stand there. Staring straight ahead, not drinking.)

JOON (continued)

So, did you burn down the school?

MAMA D

Of course.

JOON

Did he?

MAMA D

No. Maybe.

(Shakes her head.)

I painted him with the brush he handed me. I forgot that the hand giving me the brush was a boy's hand. I'm supposed to be a grown up.

JOON

What's that?

MAMA D

Someone who can see the world from more than one set of eyes.

JOON

You're asking too much. Your father was dying, Myra. Nobody can see through that many tears.

MAMA D

Well. I still know a good friend when I see one.

JOON

(touching her)

You don't have to see me.

(MAMA D crosses closer to the audience. JOON remains, listening. As MAMA D concludes her play, others enter and listen as well.)

MAMA D

If you threaten to burn something down, and it burns down without your help, they can't arrest you. They suspect you like crazy. They still grill you at special meetings, but unless they can prove sticks and stones, your words themselves have lost their power. Faulty wiring. Beat me and Rax to it. You can't arrest faulty wiring. It gets old. It cracks. It burns things down.

My husband came back for Dad's funeral. He was kind enough to hide the other woman at the Super 8. We cancelled the cable. I'm going to buy myself a new dress. Our classes meet in the public library. And churches. Poetry club meets at the fire station. Yep.

(To the first AUDIENCE MEMBER.)

I wrote you a poem. It burned up in the school. So I'll give you the poem I said to the poetry club...

(By now all the other characters are gathered onstage. MAMA D says a poem, perhaps something like "Listen to the Mustn'ts" by Shel Silverstein.)

MAMA D (continued)

...the day Rax finally showed up for detention.

(MAMA D says the poem. Then all characters move upstage to take their place within the silhouette. Once they freeze, the title of the play returns.)

END OF PLAY

A Note From the Director

The play is funny, poignant and rich. Audiences have loved it and were entranced the entire way through. There was never a dull moment.

But what is *Mama D* about? And what does this play mean? There are several things that drive the plot. There is the arrest of a student for using threatening language and the ensuing legal struggle. There is Mama D's struggle with her homelife (caring for her ailing parents as well as her husband's betrayal.) There is Mama D's life calling to attempt to get her students to care about poetry, art, and even the everyday crafting of casual speech. Here's where I've finally landed. *Mama D* is a picture of how one woman finds help in poetry at one of the most painful times of her life. Ultimately, she is brought to the brink of wordlessness, and even at such a time, when her grief is the greatest, the very struggle for words is helpful to her.

As I write these words, the society in which I live and work is a fearful society. One of the great fears is that our words will be used against us. Anyone's and everyone's words can be spread around the world in a matter of seconds. Their context can be lost, and misunderstandings can persist. We are aware of the negative power of words with the result that we have, perhaps, begun to grow cynical about the power of words to bless and heal. But *Mama D* is a model to us, a hero who fights for a world in which artful words have power to encourage love and hope.

A word about each of the characters:

Mama D – She is a very real woman. She is fierce, and while she lets her fierceness show, she guards some of her vulnerability. This guardedness makes it remarkable when she reveals pieces of herself to Rax, T. Dog, Joon and finally us.

T. Dog – His fits and starts of language are a language of their own. They should be played with very little hesitation, causing us to have to run to keep up with understanding his thought process. Ultimately, his singularity of thought (but jumping around thoughts) make it difficult for him to see the big picture of things. But he's not a bad guy. He's just a beleaguered guy. We feel sorry for him even as we laugh at him.

Joon – Here's a true friend for Mama D. They trust each other enough to tease each other.

Mom – She's a fairly old and confined woman who loves her daughter but doesn't see the big picture that Mama D sees.

Peanut – A pleasant, smart lawyer. The more reasonable he is, the more dangerous he is.

S.G. – She's sorta Mama D in training.

Jackie – A cheerful, follow-along student. If played by a female, she maybe is in love with Deebo.

Deebo – He’s positive and eager. But he will take a long time figuring things out.

Rax – He’s quite smart, but he’s not using his smarts to benefit others. He initially draws Mama D (and us) to believe that he is not cruel. In other words, he uses words duplicitously. But he is capable of being quite cruel when he wishes.

A few words about design. For furniture, we only used two chairs for the premiere. These functioned for the police station and the conference room in Act I. The remaining scenes were created by the upstage drawings projected from behind large sheets of rolled-out paper scotch-taped together and treated with flame-proofing. It was cheap and magic. We used colored light on the projection surface whenever poetry was spoken, along with simple music. Finally, we hung four old-style lighting fixtures over the edge of the audience closest to the stage, lit up only for the classroom scenes.