

A Band of Angels

By Myla Churchill

Musical arrangements by Kristen Rosenfeld

Revised with permission of the estate by Colman Domingo

Based upon the book
"A Band of Angels"
by Debra Hopkinson

New York City Children's Theater
340 East 46th Street
New York, NY 10017
212.573.8791

PROLOGUE

PLACE: THE FAMILY ROOM

AT RISE: Aunt Beth's family room, a "museum" filled with relics. These props will be used in a journey through time. Upstage, three large empty frames loom overhead.

The Ancestors are present in silhouette. Each one represents a stage of history and is "themed" by an instrument.

KING/CARGO is the glorious past and the indignity of the middle passage. He is in shackles. He takes his place behind the first frame.

CHATTEL, the shame of slavery, holds a whip. She takes her place behind the second frame.

JUBILEE, the hope of the future, holding a Union flag, takes her place behind the third.

Once the Ancestors are "framed", AUNT BETH, the curator of history, enters singing *Oshun Bal-I-Aye*. She speaks to the Ancestors as she dusts. They remain still and silent.

AUNT BETH

(Intersperses her speech with spaces in which she listens to the ancestor's responses.)

Greetings, Ancestors! Did you get some rest? Hundreds of years worth, huh? Me? I'm fine, I'm still in the number.

(She does a little dance step.)

Yes, yes, I know you're going to be very happy because we have a visitor today...Why yes, it is Ella. How'd you guess?... Because of the cheerful way I'm speaking? She's just coming for a visit. Okay well yeah, she has been here a couple of times before and she has a little attitude, but everybody's entitled to make a mistake now and then, right? She didn't mean to break the heirloom, she just thought that she could swipe it, like on a touch screen? A touch screen? You guys have to get out more!

(The doorbell RINGS. Lights on Ella waiting at the door.)

ELLA

Aunt Beth!

(She sucks her teeth.)

It's me, Ella.

(The ancestors shudder.)

AUNT BETH

No, no, she's not a problem child.

(The ancestors turn their backs.)

Well you're certainly not going to help matters with that attitude!

(The doorbell rings again.)

She needs you!

(The ancestors turn back around.)

That's better. Now please, do me a favor and be on your best behavior, okay?...Thank you.

(She bows to the Ancestors and opens the door.)

ACT I

SCENE 1

(ELLA reluctantly wanders into the room. Bored, she fiddles around with various relics/instruments until she feels the Ancestors' eyes upon her.)

ELLA

Hi, Aunt Beth.

(She hands her a letter.)

Mom said she wanted to give you this to read.

AUNT BETH

What is it?

ELLA

(She mumbles.)

A letter from my teacher.

AUNT BETH

(Didn't hear her.)

What's that?

ELLA

(Mumbles again.)

A letter from my teacher.

AUNT BETH

I can't seem to make out what you're saying.

ELLA

(Shouts.)

A LETTER FROM MY TEACHER!

AUNT BETH

Oh, how wonderful! A letter from you teacher! Did you make the honor roll? Class president? Let me just go and find my glasses. Make yourself at home.

(To the ancestors.)

Play nice!

(She exits.)

ELLA

(To the audience.)

Who's she talking to? Anyway. My Aunt Beth is a treasure keeper. At least that's what my mom says.

(Ella picks up another relic and eyes it with disdain.)

Treasure keeper, yeah right! All she does is collect a bunch of dusty old junk that nobody wants anymore. And she keeps it all in this "Family Room."

(The Ancestors shudder as Ella tosses the relic to the floor.)

ELLA

You see those portraits back there? Those are "THE ANCESTORS." Aunt Beth says they watch over us. And they do! Look at their eyes. It's like they follow you wherever you go. Watch.

(Ella moves around the room trying, but unable to escape the all-seeing eyes of the Ancestors.)

ELLA

Creepy, right?! Whenever a kid in my family gets in trouble, we get sent over to Aunt Beth's. And you can bet she's gonna tell ya some old boring story about the days of past glory. "When I was a girl, folks hadta walk to school. Ten miles there, ten miles back."

(yawning)

Whatever. Aunt Beth's kinda crazy and talks to herself but she's still my favorite aunt. She makes the best sweet potato pie and ginger tea! "Good for cleansing out the system." You wanna know why *I* got sent over here, today? Well...a letter...got sent home from school.

Aunt Beth enters with a letter in hand. She pulls off her reading glasses and peers at Ella.

AUNT BETH

"Promotion In Doubt?!" Wanna tell me what this means, Ella?

(spewing)

ELLA

It means I'm not doing so well in math...and reading...and I talk too much in class...and I can't keep focused...and if I don't do better I might get...left back.

(The Ancestors are aghast.)

ANCESTORS

(in unison)

LEFT BACK?!!!

KING/CARGO

You see...I told you she was a problem child!

AUNT BETH

HUSH!

Left back, sweetie?

(Ella jumps, unclear whether Aunt Beth is yelling at her or not.)

ELLA

Well, not for sure! I mean, it's more like a warning letter. No big

deal, really. Half the kids in my class got 'em.

(The Ancestors shake their heads in shame.)

JUBILEE

Half the kids in her class?!

AUNT BETH

Humph. Seems to me that you and your classmates have forgotten what you're there for.

CHATTEL

They got it too easy.

KING/CARGO

Tell her how it used to be.

AUNT BETH

You know when I was a girl, folks hadta walk to school...

AUNT BETH & ELLA

(in unison)

...Ten miles there, ten miles back.

AUNT BETH

Told you that one, huh?

ELLA

More times than I can count.

KING/CARGO

Maybe she could count better if she paid attention in math.

ANCESTORS

Uh huh!

ELLA

Anyway school's not that important because I can sing. And when I grow up I'm gonna be rich and famous like Beyonce.

CHATTEL

School's not important?!

JUBILEE

She can't mean that!

KING/CARGO

Who's Beyonce?

AUNT BETH

Oh, she's a very good singer. I like her too. The love of music runs deep our family. In fact, your mom named you after your great-great grandmother Ella, Ella Sheppard. She had the gift of song, just like you. Difference is...she used her gift to get an education, not as a reason why she shouldn't.

ELLA

Well, that was long time ago, Aunt Beth. Times have changed.

AUNT BETH

It seems they have.

(Aunt Beth turns to face the Ancestors and begins a call and response.)

SANKOFA SUITE

AUNT BETH

ANCESTORS, I'M CALLING ON YOU. WE GOTTA CHILD IN NEED. WE GOTTA CHILD IN NEED. HOW DO WE MAKE HER SEE? YES, HOW DO WE MAKE HER SEE?

(The Ancestors sing their reply but clearly Ella can't hear them and thinks Aunt Beth is crazy.)

KING/CARGO

SANKOFA.

AUNT BETH

Sankofa? Whatcha mean go back and fetch it?

CHATTEL

SANKOFA.

AUNT BETH

Naw, I don't think she's ready for that.

JUBILEE

SANKOFA.

AUNT BETH

Let the past be a guide for the future.

KING/CARGO

SANKOFA.

AUNT BETH

Just might work now that I think about it.

ANCESTORS

(in harmony)

SANKOFA. SANKOFA. SANKOFA.

SANKOFA. SANKOFA. SANKOFA!

AUNT BETH

Awright, awright, you don't have to yell. I ain't deaf!

ELLA

(to the audience)

Did I mention that my Aunt Beth is crazy and talks to herself?

AUNT BETH

Listen child, it's clear to me
That you don't know your history.
Too much tv time on the sofa!
So today you're gonna sankofa.

ELLA

Sankofa?

AUNT BETH

It means to go back and get what you need. A journey through the past can help us build a better future.

ANCESTORS

SANKOFA...

ALL THAT'S FORGOTTEN... MUST BE REMEMBERED...

TO MOVE FORWARD.

AUNT BETH

We didn't always live in the Bronx, you know. There was a time when we were Queens and Kings.

(King/Cargo steps from his frame and comes down from the raised platform.)

(**Heritage:** As the Ancestors sing, King dances to the rhythm of drums. As he sweeps Ella up in the dance, Aunt Beth stalks them.)

OSHUN BAL-I-AYE

ANCESTORS

OSHUN BAL-I-AYE, OSHUN BAL-I-AYE

OSHUN BAL-I-AYE, BAL-I-AYE, BAL-I-AYE OSHUN.

OSHUN BAL-I-AYE, OSHUN BAL-I-AYE
OSHUN BAL-I-AYE, BAL-I-AYE, BAL-I-AYE OSHUN.

OSHUN BAL-I-AYE, OSHUN
OSHUN BAL-I-AYE, OSHUN
OSHUN BAL-I-AYE, BAL-I-AYE, BAL-I-AYE OSHUN.

KING/CARGO

We were builders
 Who raised the pyramids on the Nile.
 We were teachers
 And traders who traveled many a mile.
 We were fishermen
 And children who liked to laugh and play.
 We were proud.
 Until the day that we were stolen and dragged away.

(Capture: Aunt Beth picks up an old flint rifle and holds Ella at bay while a WHITE SLAVER enters and captures King/Cargo.)

KING/CARGO

The story's sad but now you know How Kings and Queens became Cargo.

(Bondage: As the Ancestors' wail a haunting lament, King/Cargo and Ella are corralled CS and stripped of their adornments.)

(Aunt Beth clamps shackles on them.)

KING/CARGO

They made us strip
 Then chained us in the belly of a ship.
 For many moons
 We sailed the sea wedged together like spoons.
 Day and night we cried.
 Some got sick and died.
 When finally we reached dock
 We were sold on the auction block.

AUNT BETH

BID... 'EM... IN!

(Auction: Ella is snatched away and shoved on the block. Aunt Beth auctions her off.)

AUCTION

AUNT BETH

BID 'EM IN. BID 'EM
IN. BID 'EM IN. BID 'EM IN.

**WHATCHA GONNA GIVE ME?
WHATCHA GONNA GIVE ME?
FOR THIS YOUNG GIRL,
12 YEARS-OLD. I SAID 12...12!
12! 12 YEARS-OLD!**

**SHE'S STRONG.
CAN WORK LIKE A MAN IN THE FIELD.
SHE CAN WORK IN THE HOUSE TOO.
SHE COOK, SHE CLEAN, SHE WASH,
SHE IRON, SHE TAKE CARE OF MASSA'S BABIES
SUN UP TO SUNDOWN.**

**DO I HEAR \$900?
DO I HEAR \$900?
DO I HEAR \$925?
\$900 ONCE!
\$900 TWICE!
\$900 THREE TIMES...
I SAID SOLD!**

ANCESTORS

SOLD!

AUNT BETH

SOLD!

ANCESTORS

SOLD!

AUNT BETH

SOLD!

ANCESTORS

SOLD!

AUNT BETH

I SAID SOLD!

(Ella is dragged off the block by the White Slaver.)

KING/CARGO

Yes, we were sold like sheep and cattle
And that's how Cargo became Chattel.

(Chattel's steps from his frame.)

(Slavery: Aunt Beth picks up a whip and becomes the overseer. When she cracks the whip, the slaves line up to be inspected by the MASTER.)

CHATTEL

Once you are sold into slavery
 You're no longer a person, you're property.
 So from the crack of dawn 'til the end of day
 We worked and worked without any pay.
 We were forbidden to learn how to read or write.
 We were beaten if we tried to run or fight.
 Everyday we prayed for the strength to survive But it was our songs
 that kept us alive.

(Field Work: When Aunt Beth cracks the whip again, the work begins.)

WORK SONG

ANCESTORS

PICK DIS COTTON! HEH!
PICK DIS COTTON! HEH!
PICK DIS COTTON! HEH!
WID ALL YO' MIGHT! HEH!

KEEP ON WORKIN'! HEH!
KEEP ON WORKIN'! HEH!
KEEP ON WORKIN'! HEH!
DO IT RIGHT! HEH!

CHATTEL

Then in 1863
 After 300 years of slavery
 The Emancipation Proclamation said, "You're free!"
 And there came a time of Jubilee!

(Jubilee's steps from her frame.)

(Celebration: Aunt Beth picks up a Union flag and begins to wave it. It's a stomp down freedom day! And everyone celebrates.)