

IN THE VOODOO PARLOUR
OF MARIE LAVEAU

(An unsung voodoo chamber opera
by FRANK GAGLIANO)

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It is 1900, on the eve of Mardi Gras.

In her New Orleans Parlour, the legendary Marie Laveau is in crisis; her once-sacred powers have degenerated to “mere theatrics” and, tonight, she has discovered that she’s been cursed. In order to prove to the gods that she can still play God and fight off the curse, Marie manipulates the two desperate people who came to her for help that night and turns one against the other.

But the entangled web Marie attempts to weave for her own ends, unravels, and each character’s painful confrontations entangle Marie as well.

Mixing Nineteenth Century revenge operatic conventions and voodoo rhythms, playwright Gagliano counterpoints the larger-than-life theatricality with lyricism, humor and compassion, and shapes the heightened, lurid language into unsung spoken arias; mixing, finally, sexual encounters with voodoo ritual and propelling each character toward a climax of redemption — and murder.

Characters

Marie Laveau
The Tied-Up Woman In The Mask
The Tied-Up Man In The Mask
The Drummer

Time

1900

Place

New Orleans:
In the voodoo parlour of Marie Laveau

PROLOGUE

A tent-like space within a space.

A center pole.

Hanging on the pole, like a clothes rack for the grotesque, are masks, skulls, bizarre headgear, a huge neck-to-ankle purple cloak and other items that will be used throughout.

Also in the space:

a) Marie Laveau's wicker throne

b) an altar with Christian and Voodoo artifacts

c) Voodoo artifacts hanging from the ceiling.

BEFORE CURTAIN: The sounds of the Mardi Gras. They crescendo.

As the sounds abruptly cut off, a special light reveals Marie Laveau. She is holding a little leather pouch by a string.

MARIE LAVEAU

A gris-gris. . . .Somebody's put a gris-gris in the voodoo parlour of Marie Laveau. . . .Who would dare? . . .

(She lets the pouch dangle slowly
in front of her eyes. Then she drops the pouch.
All lights **bump up** to eerie full)

I know who'd dare! . . . Papa "Doc" Yah-Yah would dare. Cecilia Lily would dare. Henry "the corpse" Boho-Vi would dare. *And* that caramel bitch Malvina LaTour would certainly dare. Anyone of those other living Houngans and Mambos the "artist" Marie Laveau surpassed would dare. . . .But in the past they'd never dare. . . .Now they dare!

(She has begun to sit on her
Wicker throne. **Jumps away!**)

MARIE LAVEAU

(Continued)

ANOTHER GRIS-GRIS!

(Flings it away. Falls to her knees.

To the hanging voodoo artifacts:)

O, Mystere Petro Lou—protect me! O, Maitresse Erzuli—preserve me! O, Grande Flueriso—mount me!

(Pause. She slowly rises)

But why should you Voodoo Gods—you Loas—mount me? Now! After all these years?

. . . Marie Laveau is a Mambo--a Voodoo Priestess—

(Discovery)

. . .who has never been mounted. Marie Laveau is a voodoo Priestess

(Discovery)

. . .who has become all theatrics

(Discovery)

. . .nothing more! . . .Marie Laveau is a Voodoo Priestess who has never taken Kanzo even!

(Panic)

YesYES! Kanzo! I'll show whoever made these gris-gris! I can take Kanzo! --The spike!

That's right! I need the spike! What did I do—? Where—? . . . —Ah! The pole!

(She runs to the center pole;

takes down a spike and

stabs it into the ground)

Ogoun Badagri! Map plantè! Ogoun Badagri! I'm planting the post! . . . Now the kettle

. . . the kettle . . . I need the damned kettle—NoNo! I mean, I need the "blessed" kettle-

-the ZIN — yes, that's what it's called — the ZIN — but I can't remember where. . .

—AH!

(She runs to another pile of artifacts;

digs out a black, dusty kettle.

Blows off the dust)

Ogoun Badagr—I've found the ZIN--the blessed kettle.

(Thinks harder)

Ah! The oil! Next—the oil!

(Runs to the altar. Rummages.

Finds the oil)

See? SEE? I'm getting the oil to pour into the ZIN.

(She does so)

What?! What else?! Spices? I forget. What next? Sacrifices?

Chickens? WHAT?!

(Remembering)

--The oil, yes. Light the fire oil, Marie Laveau. Then the Kanzo ceremony will begin.

In that sizzling hell I'll place my hands, yes.

MARIE LAVEAU

(Continued. Remembering)

And because I'm one of them, the Loas, yes, will protect me, yes; and keep my skin from being scarred, O yes. Ahhhhhh. And then . . . and then. . . the blessed voices of the dead will be heard. And then I'll know . . . then I'll be a proper Mambo. THEN I'LL FIGHT OFF THIS GRIS-GRIS CURSE!

(She drops in a match)

Nothing happens.

(She drops in another match)

The oil doesn't flame!

(She drops in another match)

The Loas are angry! Still!

(She backs up into an object. Screams)

Another one! ANOTHER GRIS-GRIS!!!

(She flings herself onto the altar;
picks up a Christian artifact)

Oh, God of Gods — protect me!

Oh, Son of God — preserve me!

Oh, Mother of the blessed womb — save me! Make these gris-gris disappear!

(Long pause; sees all the gris-gris)

The gris-gris stay. . . .And Marie Laveau may not live forever. . . .The Christ God and his family have deserted Marie Laveau.

(Flings Christian artifact onto the altar.
Picks up a Shakarè — a gourd instrument
with seeds inside—moves around the space shaking it)

You Voodoo gods help me . . . or I may not live beyond this night! . . . But what will please you? — What?!

(Slowly stops shaking the Shakarè)

(Long pause. Then, quietly)

Diiiviiiine cruueeeeltyyyy.

(Slowly, she replaces the
Shakarè on the altar)

MARIE LEVEAU

(Continued)

With compassion excluded, yes, you Loas will mount me; and, unscarred, yes, I'll keep my hands in the Kanzo flame. And, with my new power, I *will* hear the blessed voices of the dead, oh oh yes.

(She controls her panic.
Then she collects all the gris-gris and,
with great bravado, hangs them in
a prominent place)

MARIE LAVEAU

So be it!

(Claps her hands)

The Voodoo Priestess, Marie Laveau, sets her own scene! The supreme artist Marie Laveau sets the time! The last day of Mardi Gras!

(She pulls from the upstage pole
a large ornate, purple, shoulder-to-floor cloak;
fastens the high collar at the throat --
all in one long swoop. **AN ANNOUNCEMENT**)

Background! The history of Mardi Gras!

(GONG! She sits on her wicker throne.

Abrupt light change.

She smiles)

Centuries and centuries ago, my friends, celebrations were celebrated to insure the growing of the crops of Spring. Sacrifices were made for the earth's fecundity; and sometimes couples, coupled in the fields,

(Wink to audience)

to help Nature get the point.

(An even bigger, amiable, smile)

Later, Mardi Gras became a day of blood when those being admitted to the priesthood had their testicles cut off as sacrifice; and testicles and blood were spattered on the altars. Still later, the carnival known as the Lupercalia in Rome, gave the citizens free reign to let themselves go.

(Smile gone)

And behind the masks of concealment, all laws were abandoned so that men could, in one great orgy, sweat the evil from their pores. That was the carnival day when crimes of vengeance and rape and murder were done—as well as public executions. So you see, sex, murder, vengeance and religion have been the antecedents of all carnivals whose aim —as now— has always been to force the corruption out, before the next corrupt cycle begins again.

(**GONG!** Abrupt light change back)

MARIE LAVEAU

(Continued)

End of history. On to my masterpiece.

(She rises from her wicker throne as she latches on to a new idea that has just dropped in)

For tonight Marie Laveau will save herself — will rise above her mere "theatrics" — will choose the perfect classic "form" for this violent show she needs to show — for you cruel voodoo gods — so that you'll know I'm one of you. . . .But what form? what? . . . Recall the two desperate people coming here; and the content of their confrontation, Marie Laveau. That will give you the form.

(Pause)

Ahhh, yes. . . .Yes! YES!! An opera! Of course. The "form" of my masterpiece shall be **an opera**; you voodoo gods will soon see why — an opera, yeeees. Something refined and elegant; to sugarcoat the violence that must come, yes!

(She takes various ornaments from the pole and places them on her cloak, hands and arms)

And now I'm ready; ready for my opening — **aria.**"

(**AN ANNOUNCEMENT**)

ARIA: "A TIME FOR PUNISHMENT"

(*Drums in and under*)

A time for punishment comes to us all.
It even came to Christ, the Savior.
But I believe it came to him--not because of his behavior--
(which had been scripted, as you'll recall,
to save us all from a hellish fall)--
No! I believe that Christ was nailed
because the third of him
that wrote that script had failed
to understand (as you and I do at a glance)
that his judgment was a kind of fantasy romance.

Someone's was.

MARIE LAVEAU

(continued)

For how do you save a land erupting
 from the carryings on of those who are corrupting?
 I mean -- of evil unfurled:
 Corruption being the way of the world.

Well, I'll give you the answer free:
 Instead of *His* being punished,
He should have punished thee and me.

Yes, Christ, above all, in his celestial den,
 should have known that since corruption is man's regimen,
 all you can do then, is do the corrupting thing: GET EVEN!
 Yes, "getting even" is what it's all about.

That's why the great opera composers had such clout.
 They knew -- from the gypsy world of "Trovatore,"
 to Norma, the Druid at Stonehenge
 —that the only way to beat the corrupted,
 was to *be* corrupted as well,
 and get revenge!

(She plucks an elaborate purple head mask
 from the pole and places the mask over her head.

Drums faster. Louder)

So stage your opera, Marie Laveau!

"Get even" in it, Marie Laveau.
 And when your victims, Marie Laveau,
 begin to snivel and rant and crow;
 you'll steel your heart, so the Loas will know
 that your bone-deep cruelty has started to show.

Then my power divine,
 from above and below,
 will spark the kettle to blaze and glow;
 and the gris-gris curse, I'll overthrow,
 in this year of nineteen 0 and 0 —

IN THE VOODOO PARLOUR OF MARIE LAVEAU!

(Drums out.

Blackout.

End of Prologue.

**And in the blackout we hear
the last crashing sung phrases
and music from Verdi's, IL Trovatore)**

LIGHTS BUMP UP.

A man on his knees,
as if he's just been pushed
into the room. He's impeccably dressed
in the best New Orleans gentleman style
of the year 1900.

There's a goat mask on his face;
a blindfold around the eyes of the mask;
his hands tied behind his back.

Also in the room,
a Woman in an elaborate white ball gown
and white mask. There's a blindfold around
her mask, too; but her hands are untied.

MARIE LAVEAU weaves in and out
of the space throughout
but is not seen by the two characters;
until she chooses to make her presence known)

MARIE LAVEAU
(AN ANNOUNCEMENT)

Part one: The Woman in the Mask. Dialogue and Recitativo; "Is there someone else here?"

TIED-UP MAN
(Southern accent. Cultured)

Is there someone else here?!

(The woman, who has been inching
away from him, stops. Then she moves again)

Marie Laveau?! Is that Marie Laveau?! . . .There is someone else here. Who are you!?
And why was I pushed into this place!? Why have I been pushed all day!?! Pushed
through that Mardi Gras crowd!? Pushed all the way here and pushed into this place!?
I'm not used to being pushed! I've never been pushed! You know I wanted to come
here of my own free will!

WOMAN IN THE MASK

(Southern accent. A Lady)

Oh, my God, how do I get out of here?

TIED-UP MAN

What? Ah—someone here! Who are you?

WOMAN IN THE MASK

Please; please don't hurt me!

TIED-UP MAN

What?

WOMAN IN THE MASK

She said for me to wait; that someone would come along to help me. So I have waited. For hours it seems. I mean, I have waited patiently in this room. So don't violate me! Please!

TIED UP MAN

How in the name of hell can I violate you? My hands are tied behind my back. And my mask is blindfolded.

WOMAN IN THE MASK

My mask is blindfolded, too.

TIED UP MAN

And your hands? What about your hands? Are they tied?

WOMAN IN THE MASK

No.

TIED UP MAN

Why?

WOMAN IN THE MASK

Because I don't have hands.

TIED UP MAN

Oh, my God! I'm sorry!

MARIE LAVEAU

You're lying, woman. You do have hands.

TIED-UP MAN

Marie Laveau! Is that you?

MARIE LAVEAU

(Takes the Shakarè and moves in on him)

Fermè la bouche!

(He stiffens. Marie Laveau drives him into a corner.
He collapses in a catatonic state)

MARIE LAVEAU

You will hear, but you will not be able to speak! Or move! Until I allow it! *Then* you will speak! And move! Plenty!

W OMAN

Is . . . is that you, Marie Laveau?

MARIE LAVEAU

(Soothingly)

Yes, woman; I'm here, woman. And you must tell me why you lie about your hands?

WOMAN

I don't lie. I— . . . Oh, how can I explain it?

MARIE LAVEAU

In an aria: "They tend to flutter."

WOMAN .

Yes. They tend to flutter around my face, my hands do; as if to hide the blackheads and the blemishes I developed some years back. —Well! My time of the month has always been irregular. The blemishes must be due to that. Which, when you stop to think of it, should make my problem simple. But it doesn't. All I ever give birth to is a pimple here and there.

MARIE LAVEAU

Beware! At this point birth and pimples don't belong. Continue now with your blemishes song.

WOMAN

Blemishes. Yes. As if anyone could hide them. I mean, blemishes are a part of you. And if you are to be accepted, you should not be judged for your blemishes, too. Or, rather, your blemishes should be judged as a part of you, and accepted, too. But they're not. So to hide them, my hands, like a physical stutter, flutter.

MARIE LAVEAU

(Shaking Shakarè)

In a trance, a deeper aria: "Once I saw a pair of hands floating in the gutter."

(The Woman tries to fight going into the trance.
But she succumbs and goes under)

WOMAN

Once I saw a pair of hands floating in the gutter. There, in a terrible New Orleans rain I saw them . . . hands like chicken feet in the gutter rapids, tumbling toward the sewer pit right outside of town. Until they smashed into a little pile; a panic-levee of apple cores and fish heads-with-eyes and broken bottles, and bits of meat and a dead rat; things like that, that the hands could not claw through. And I'm not so sure they wanted to. Because finally, when that hill of debris flushed free, the chicken-feet hands clawed at the street; tried to clutch on . . . as people do . . . even though they've come un-clawed, too. But there was nothing the chicken-feet hands could do to stop it. And the force of the rapids flushed them down to the sewer pit, with all the rest of that shit!

(Marie Laveau stops shaking
the Shakarè)

What?! I thought I heard myself say foul language. Oh, my God, I never say foul language. I'm always the lady. I'm . . . "too much the lady," the judge always says.
— No! That wasn't me. It's my hands. Yes, they're the ones. See? Even now they cover my eyes, my hands do; as if my eyes could see. And they even cover my ears when I should be hearing perfectly...

(MARIE LAVEAU shakes the Shakarè again)

perfectly . . . perfectly. . .

MARIE LAVEAU

In a trance, your true feelings.

WOMAN

(After succumbing)

And sometimes, sometimes in my bath, they pretend to want to pick the lint out from my belly button. But that's a ruse. My belly has an outsy, with hardly any lint at all. So they're really there to embarrass me and probe my pubes. I'm onto these rotten hands.

MAN

(With superhuman effort)

STOP IT!

MARIE LAVEAU

End of aria.

(Stops shaking the Shakarè)

WOMAN

Oh, God, I didn't mean to say such a . . .such a personal thing.

MAN

Why couldn't I yell out.? My vocal cords were paralyzed.

WOMAN

I mean, I knew, while I was saying it, that I should not be saying it. . .even though it was true.

MAN

If it's true, I especially don't want to hear it.

WOMAN

I'm sorry.

MAN

Look, Miss—

WOMAN

—Mrs.!

MAN

Mrs. *who*?

MARIE LAVEAU

No names yet! This is the day of Mardi Gras. Faces and names stay hidden.

MAN

Was that her? Was that Marie Laveau?

WOMAN

I don't know.

MAN

Don't you know anything!? Doesn't anything sensible go on in that fluttering brain of yours!? You're untied, and still—!

WOMAN

Don't yell at me! My hands can't bare to be yelled at! See? They're covering my ears.

MAN

No, I don't see! I can't see! But you can—could—if you'd just . . . I mean . . . if you'd speak nicely to your hands; ask them to remove your blindfold; perhaps then; perhaps you could remove my—

WOMAN

NO!

MAN

Why not? She only said the faces had to be hidden. The masks do that.

WOMAN

But if I removed the blindfold, I might see that this is a closed-in space. I have a feeling it is a closed-in space. and I have a fear of closed-in spaces.

MARIE LAVEAU

Tell us why.

MAN

I don't want—!

MARIE LAVEAU

Fermè la bouche!

(Shakes Shakarè at him.
He's paralyzed once again)

WOMAN

My husband, the prominent judge, sometimes locks me in a tiny room. He makes me play with myself, while he looks through a keyhole. That makes him more excited, more potent. He thinks. So closed-in places frighten me. I don't want to know I'm in one. Even if I feel I am.

MARIE LAVEAU

What's the difference between your *feeling* it's a closed-in place and it actually *being* a closed-in place.

WOMAN

None. But without actually seeing it, I can push out feelings of terror and pretend.

Pretend what? MARIE LAVEAU

That I'm —I'm— WOMAN

Yes? MARIE LAVEAU

WOMAN
In a large room: A Ballroom. And I'm a sought-after Quadroon, at an old Quadroon Ball.

MARIE LAVEAU
Contrast of two waltz songs! Waltz song one: a fantasy; "At the top of the stairway."

(Drums and Shakarè accompany)

WOMAN
At the top of the stairway
I'm proud and tall;
the most beautiful,
light-skinned,
Quadroon of them all.

Under the rhinestone chandelier,
with my rhinestone tiara, I reign;
and look down on my Creole suitors
with just the proper amount of disdain.

Then with a SNAP! of my fan

(but with an inner glee-)

I'd swoooooop down the stairway,
and I'd be free
to choose any suitor
who's waiting for me.

One hundred penguins,
each six-feet tall;
a hundred on each side—
a human hall I'll dance through,
and laugh through,

but I'll be cruel;

I'll smile on occasion,
to give someone fuel
to think that I've chosen *him* . . .

then glide on, keep glancing. . .
until I pick my true love,
and he takes me dancing
(Oh, I know the consequence of being cruel;
under the Spanish moss they duel). . .

But

I
keep
on *da*-ncing
without fear

UNDER THAT RHINESTONE CHANDELIER!

(Marie Laveau *slaps* the Shakarè,
indicating end of fantasy waltz.
But she shakes it under the following)

MARIE LAVEAU

Transition between waltzes: "My husband, the prominent judge."

WOMAN

My husband, the prominent judge, likes to "shake me up." Yes, that's how he puts it. Likes to "rattle my composure." What little is left. Likes to give me the flutters. He's a cruel man, my judge. I can't remember a recent time when I wasn't always on the verge of tears—or in them. But I never show him; never allow him to push me over the verge. And in a way, my judge —my husband— is proud of that ice ability in me to *not* react to the terrible things that any imbecile can see are going on.

(Marie stops shaking the shakarè)

Oh! That's so exhausting! Please, please don't let me go through that again. I —oh! You took my blindfold off. Thank you; and—and, look at him!

MARIE LAVEAU

Yes?

WOMAN

I've never seen a man tied up before. And on his knees. And why is he . . . pulsating like that?

MARIE LAVEAU

He's trying to talk again, but can't. He's used to being heard and, once heard, have people shake. For a man like that, *not* being heard is a body quake.

WOMAN

Why can't he talk?

MARIE LAVEAU

Tell me: this room you're in; does it suffocate you?

WOMAN

No. It comforts me.

MARIE LAVEAU

Even a violent picture? LIKE THIS?!

(Reveals picture)

WOMAN

(Turns and covers the eyes
of her mask)

No! NO!

MARIE LAVEAU

My favorite is the purple parrot being strangled. See? Even in the drawing you can tell that the Massa, having sexual congress with the Parrot —see? —he's reached his climax.

WOMAN

Please! I can't look on things like that.

MARIE LAVEAU

(Hiding picture again)

You can! You have before!

WOMAN

The blindfold! I want it again!

(She spots it on the floor.)

As she's about to snatch it up,
the blindfold is flown offstage)

Oh, why can't I have it?!

MARIE LAVEAU

Because you're about to sing of a real Ball; a real Ball you recently attended. And I want you to recall it clearly, with no hindrance to your eyes.

WOMAN

No no! I can't tell about that. I don't want to remember. Let me pretend another fairytale Ball!

MARIE LAVEAU

NO!

WOMAN

Hands! Cover my mouth and stop me from going all queer!
(Marie Laveau shakes the Shakarè)

MARIE LAVEAU

Waltz song two: a reality; "There was a chandelier."

(Drums and Shakarè accompany)

WOMAN

There *was* a chandelier
in that relic of a room;
in that peeling musty hall,
in the recent Quadroon Ball
that my judge dragged me to.

The rhinestones were gone
on the chandelier that day.
But each rusty iron ring,
where the rhinestones used to cling
still hung together by wires
in the shape of a chandelier.
And you could hear
the center rusty chain
begin to squeak and sway;

WOMAN

(Continued)

high above that sick dance floor;
that sick day.

It took courage to descend that broken stair.
Half the curved *banister* wasn't even there.
But the black girl we had come to see
seemed unafraid
and walked with her head in the air.

But she shivered from the damp
—from the wall cracks everywhere.

You see, she was naked: blue-black bare.

And down below,
a naked giant Buddha with no hair,
and rolls and rolls of fat everywhere,
waited for her,
and we were aware
that a sweaty lust was now in the air.

Oh, I could feel the smile of my judge in back of me;
waiting for the inner ice to crack in me.

It almost did
when the Buddha pointed to the door.

That's when the black girl-dwarf
and donkey came onto the floor.

The Buddha took the girl-dwarf,
whose clothes he tore off!
The donkey was for the stairway girl
who began to explore
the donkey's soft underbelly;
the heavy, hanging sack—

MAN

(Breaking through the paralysis)

—stop it!

WOMAN
 A series of halters and stirrups
 were hung from the donkey's back!

MAN
 Stop it!

W OMAN
 But with all that went on,
 I didn't crack!
 I didn't let on
 that I wished that was me,
 being humped by a donkey,
 while the chic of New Orleans
 marveled at me!
 With the donkey on top
 and me on my back—

MAN
Stop it stop It stop it!!!

WOMAN
 Yes, with all that went on,
 I didn't crack—

MAN
STOP IT!

WOMAN
I DIDN'T CRACK! I DIDN'T CRACK!

MARIE LAVEAU
 End of reality waltz.

(Drums and Shakarè out)

You are now ready to tell us why you're here.

WOMAN
 I can't. . . .God, I can't. . . .I don't know what's happening to me. I go into these
 trances, and I I say things I never ever thought I'd ever think. I'm tired and frightened
 and—

MAN
 Marie Laveau, please. . . .don't let her say anymore of those. . . things. I don't want to
 hear them.

MARIE LAVEAU

You *will* hear them!

MAN

Then put me under! Put me under!

MARIE LAVEAU

No! You will listen!

(Aims his face at the Woman)

And you will not be under!

(Shakes the Shakarè at the Woman)

TELL US WHY YOU'RE HERE!

(Pause)

W OMAN

(In the trance)

I'm here because I once gave up a way of life which was successful, but unnatural. . .to lead a "natural" woman's life. That is to say, I married well. I married the judge. Only to find that I was still unnatural; that my eggs were "scrambled." That's what my husband, the judge, calls it. He means I'm barren. Can't give forth issue. Can't make baby. Scrambled eggs. And my husband, the judge, laughs. A wicked laugh. The judge requires an heir and he's desperate. There's a tradition in his family, you see: If there's no heir by Mardi Gras in the wife's thirtieth year, then the wife must be let go. . . or, the judge loses his inheritance. . . ."Let go" is the family phrase. And the way the judge says it, I know he means to murder me. And this is my 30th year. And today is the last day of Mardi Gras; Shrove Tuesday; the end of carnival. By Ash Wednesday, tomorrow morning, when the priest thumbs my forehead with dirt, I must be pregnant. And I'm told the Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau has a potion that you rub on your private parts to unscramble your eggs. Oh, God, I hope so. I hope there's such a potion and if the potion works, maybe the judge will leave me alone. And maybe his mouth will stay away. You see, as some men crave tobacco and drink, the judge craves cherry tarts. So his teeth are half rotten, and his breath smells of farts.

MAN

(Who has been struggling to break free from Marie Laveau's face-grip)

Marie Laveau! Make her stop! Please!

(Laveau releases him;
stops shaking the Shakarè)

MARIE LAVEAU

Everything must be said in the Voodoo Parlour of Marie Laveau.

MAN

Then listen to me. Listen to *me!* I'm the important one here.

MARIE LAVEAU

Yes. And what is it you want us to listen to, Important One Here. . . .Speak.

MAN

I . . .I—

W OMAN

Is it so terrible? Well, I've said terrible things. You say them, too. I know this isn't a nice thing to do; but I'd feel better if I knew that, inside, *you* were rotten, too. Marie Laveau, couldn't you shake that thing at him?

MAN

No!

MARIE LAVEAU

Yes.

(She shakes the Shakarè
The Man struggles mightily
not to succumb to the trance.

He succumbs)

MAN

(In a trance)

I want . . . I want my Angelica back. And . . . and I want. . . I want a man murdered!

(Marie Laveau stops shaking
the Shakarè)

(GONGI)

MARIE LAVEAU

(After a pause. An Announcement)

Part two: The Tied-Up Man in the Mask and Blindfold. Rapid parlando section; beginning with the rage arietta— "Not true! Not true! Angelica will return!"

MAN

(Out of trance)

Not true! Not true! Angelica will return! And—it's me—- *me* they want to murder! That damned shaking of the Shakarè. If murderous thoughts are coming out of my mouth, you know who put them there, Marie Laveau. You. You! And I can't understand why. I came here of my own free will. Sent word through the Voodoo channels that I had to see you. All arrangements seemed proper; everything seemed sound. There was no need to blindfold me and have me bound.

MARIE LAVEAU

Everyone gets blindfolded when they come here.

WOMAN

Yes, that's true. I was blindfolded, too.

MARIE LAVEAU

But some, in addition, need to be bound.

MAN

Oh, I realize that coming here was a silly thing to do; one of those desperate acts. Still, if you hear my story Miss—

WOMAN

—Mrs.!

MAN

—Mrs. Fluttering Hands! You'll see that some one wants to murder me. That's right. Or scare me to death. . . .You see . . . I found a dirty leather pouch on the end of a dirty leather string. It was filled with dirty, powdery stuff; brick, yellow ochre, cayenne pepper —ugh! — toenails, hair and bits of reptile skin.

MARIE LAVEAU

(Suddenly distant)

Mixed together with the semen from an epileptic midget. . .and some shavings of rust from a rusty tin.

MAN

I didn't know what it was; so I ignored the first pouch left near my door. But the next day there were two pouches more. That was the day Angelica left. And that was the day the one remaining, faithful servant I could still afford, came to clean my house and screamed! and backed away! — and all she could say, before she turned and ran from me, was, "Gris-Gris! Gris-Gris! Dey's gonna' gettcha caus'a gris-gris!"

WOMAN

Gris-gris? Gris-gris? What's a gris-gris/

(DRUMS: Soft roll, under)

MARIE LAVEAU

(Moving weakly to her throne)

A Voodoo charm. When it's left on your door or doorstep, in the dark of the moon, it means some terrible harm will come to you.

(She sits on her wicker throne)

(Drums *out*)

MAN

So it's clear — you see? you see? —he plans to murder *me!*

WOMAN

Who plans to murder you?

MAN

The man who stole my job.

MARIE LAVEAU

Why does he plan to murder you?

MAN

Because he knows I'll get my job back --if I live.

WOMAN

I once had a job; a very important limelight-of-a-job. But I *wanted* people to steal it; my limelight. Because I was mediocre. Were you mediocre, too?

MAN

Never! Never mediocre! My column was first rate!

MARIE LAVEAU

Perhaps you were once first rate; but now—

MAN

I was *always* first rate! I'm still first rate! It was treachery, treachery, that made that man steal—!

MARIE LAVEAU

You were fired before the man you say "stole your job" even considered it. It's common knowledge.

MAN

Common *gossip!* And who are the gossips to judge me?!

MARIE LAVEAU

Important One Here; you have come for Voodoo help from Marie Laveau. If that's so, you've got to know the truth; no matter how sad: At the end, *the work you did was bad!*

MAN

Don't you dare judge me! I won't listen! Oh, God, this is so stupid; a mistake! I've always been warned; "Never go to the Chicken Plucker!"

MARIE LAVEAU

(LEAPING from her throne!
and grabbing him by the throat)

The "*Chicken Plucker?!?!!*" Is that what they think a Voodoo Queen is? *A CHICKEN PLUCKER?!?!?!?*

WOMAN

Look what you've done now! You've made her angry!

MAN

(Choking)

I don't care! I can-not-take-this-any-**more!**

(He breaks free from Marie Laveau,
knocking her back onto her throne)

I must get out of here! I *will* get out of here!

WOMAN

You can't! You're tied, blindfolded, and the doors are locked!

MAN

LET ME OOOOOUT!

(Man turns and blindly stumbles away.
A strong blinding flash upstage.
Woman screams. Man stumbles back)

MAN

No mouths! I saw them — through the blindfold! They had no mouths! Like in my dreams lately. Since Angelica left. . .all of them moving in. . .all of them. . .instead of mouths—a hole. . .as big as a fist. . .sand filled with blood. And they were either screaming, or — or—

WOMAN

(Suddenly distant)

Singing?

(Pause)

MAN

Why did you say that?

WOMAN

(Distant)

Singing? You said it had no mouth. I knew a tenor once who used to open his mouth so wide that, in a funny way, his face became all hole.

MAN

(Suddenly interested)

What do you know about tenors?

WOMAN

(Distant)

They sweat a lot; and clear their throats a lot; and I've known some to belch a lot; and most rarely looked at you when they sang to you.

MAN

You were a singer?

WOMAN

(Distant)

Yes.

MAN

In New Orleans?

WOMAN

(Distant)

Yes.

MAN

Then I must have heard of you.

WOMAN

(Breaking from it)

I don't know. I doubt it. It was a long time ago. Why are you so interested?

MAN

I am — was. . .a music critic.

(Man and Woman freeze)

MARIE LAVEAU

Threads! Threads! The pattern comes clear as the threads come together. Two people, once patched to the same art; music; so—YES! —opera *is* the proper form, the proper pattern for these two! —Do you see!? You Voodoo Gods MUST now see what kind of SUPERIOR artist Marie Laveau's become! OH! —there are other threads — other patterns. Their identities, for example. But not now! Not here! *That* important weaving of threads is still to come in my *opera*—*after* all the other motif patterns have been sewn! And never fear; they *will* be sewn; no matter how much blood spatters my stitching hand.

(Man and Woman unfreeze)

MAN

I am. . .was. . .a critic of music. You must have heard of me.

WOMAN

No. And don't tell me who you are. My hands are on the move again, trying to push away the bad vibrations. Promise me you won't tell me who you are! What I was doesn't matter. It was a long time ago. Anyway, I never read anything. They kept newspapers, everything away from me. All I did— in my mediocre way — was sing. I was a singing machine. *No!* A singing whore! Grinding out tunes for the glory of managers, and all those other pimps who frightened me; frightened me. Making demands. Not caring if I ruined my voice; just as long as I sang, sang, sang! . . .But, that was long ago in my unnatural life.

MAN

Singing was "unnatural?"

WOMAN

Please. I don't want to talk about it

MAN

But I do! It's at the heart of my problem. People are fast forgetting me. Angelica won't come back until they start remembering me again. Don't you see? I've got to know that someone knows me, and my worth; and ,if *you* know my name, I'm certain—

WOMAN

—If you stop this talk I'll remove your blindfold. Is that all right Marie Laveau? Marie Laveau?

(Marie Laveau seems
to have dematerialized)

WOMAN

Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau, are you here?

(No answer)

MAN

(Whispering)

She's gone. Yes. Remove the blindfold and the mask.

(They whisper the next;
always aware that Marie
may return any minute)

WOMAN

Yes. No! Not the mask.

MAN

Why not?

WOMAN

She said not to, so I'm afraid to.

MAN

All right. All right. The blindfold. Then the rope around my wrists.

WOMAN

No!

MAN

She said nothing about untying the rope, did she?

WOMAN

That's true, but—

MAN

But what? You really want to get out of here, don't you? Untie me and I'll lead you out. Like me, you must realize by now it was all a mistake — and that this is a mad house.

WOMAN

Yes—

MAN

So?

WOMAN

—and no! I mean I don't know. Oh, God, I don't know. Look! My hands are having a wringing spasm.

MAN

All right all right. Don't think about anything else. Relax. Relax. One thing at a time. The blindfold. Please.

(The Woman takes off his blindfold
as Marie Laveau materializes)

MARIE LAVEAU

Now get on him!

(Shakes Shakarè.

The Woman knocks The Man
off balance and when he is on the
floor, she kisses him on the mouth.
Stays glued to his lips)

MARIE LAVEAU

Look at that! Look at that! Well, each dramatic work of art is a quick journey. It begins in one emotional spot and moves in an arc to another. It starts in one country of the soul and moves to another. The same is true of opera. Only more so. More intense; more compressed.

(Woman stops kissing him)

Note the journey of that woman in my chamber opera.

(Woman kisses him again)

MARIE LAVEAU

(Continued)

She entered with a fluttering dance and see how far she's journeyed, even though she's in a trance. Well, before her journey's over — and *without* the aid of the Shakarè — it's possible. . .it is truly possible, that she will speed to her corruption. . .

(An insight. It horrifies her)

the land of murder.

WOMAN

(Stops kissing him)

Your breath is gardenias; your saliva, rose water. And when I run my tongue over your gums, and the fillings of your teeth, it's like sliding over sweet rock candy. Ah, your kind of mouth still exists! Your kind of mouth —

(Marie Laveau stops shaking
the Shakarè.

Gestures.

MUSIC: Over. A soprano singing the aria, "Addio del
Passato" from Verdi's *La Traviata*)

WOMAN

(No longer in a trance)

Oh, listen. . . listen. . .

(She releases him)

MAN

Ugh! Your tongue is like a dagger! Disgusting!

WOMAN

That singing . . . I know that voice. . .

(While the Woman and the Man listen
to the Soprano, Marie Laveau
appears to dematerialize.)

WOMAN

. . . It's a soprano I recall; the soprano known as Adrienne.

MAN

The soprano Adrienne?

WOMAN

Talk about mediocrity. The soprano Adrienne was mediocrity incarnate.

MAN

Blasphemy. The soprano Adrienne was great!

WOMAN

(Very lost in listening)

But this Adrienne that's singing . . . isn't mediocre . . . she's an older Adrienne. It's as if all the suffering and disillusion she's lived through has been put into this performance.

MAN

(After listening hard)

No! No. There's something strange about this voice. The soprano Adrienne was not strange. She—oh, if only it were she. But it can't be. Yes, get it out of your head. The soprano Adrienne is dead; she's been dead many years.

(Singing cut off and OUT)

WOMAN

(Gravitates to Marie Laveau's throne and sits on it)

I remember the quotes on the opera house posters: "Finally a star to light our lifeless lyric stage. Last night the soprano Adrienne as Violetta was ravishing, accomplished, radiant, stunning, delicious."

MAN

She was. She was pure; a goddess; fragile; vulnerable. She was a woman I happened to have adored. My fantasy was to preserve her in alabaster and keep her on my mantel next to the photo of Angelica.

WOMAN

(Still lost in her own thoughts)

Only someone profoundly stupid could have said such stupid things. The soprano Adrienne that night was dull, in poor voice, unclear of diction, using her old tricks and unpalatable. For the first time I was determined to find out who could write such nonsense and —

MAN

Now I understand! You didn't want someone to steal your— how did you put it? — oh, yes. . . "your limelight of a job," but someone did: The soprano Adrienne. Oh yes. And is that why you're really here — Mrs. Mediocrity? for Marie Laveau to mortar and pestle

MAN

(Continued)

a pestilent gris-gris dust for —who? — what? — there is no grave, you know. The body was never found. So what will you do with the gris-gris? Sprinkle the dust in the air to try to poison that poor artist's ghost? Because that's the only way you'll get your revenge and—

MARIE LAVEAU

(Who has materialized)

WOMAN! Get off my throne!

(LAVEAU and WOMAN
look at each other.

FACE OFF.

Hold.

The WOMAN jumps from the throne.
MARIE LAVEAU moves to her throne. Sits)

Now. Untie him.

WOMAN

Yes. Oh, yes.

MAN

No! Stay away! You'll do disgusting things again.

MARIE LAVEAU

Not if I don't want her to.

WOMAN

I don't mean to do disgusting things.

(Pause)

MAN

Marie Laveau; promise me you'll control her.

MARIE LAVEAU

(After a pause. Very fatigued)

I promise.

MAN

All right. Untie me.

(Woman unties him)

MARIE LAVEAU

Now get on him!

(Just as his hands are untied
the Woman kicks the Man
behind the knees and pulls his hands back.
He falls to his knees and she kisses his fingers)

WOMAN

Your fingertips are lime cologne. Your nails, your nails. . . I sniff their glossy lacquer and I get drunk.

MAN

Marie Laveau, she's doing disgusting things!

MARIE LAVEAU

So I lied.

MAN

What do you want from me!?

WOMAN

I want . . . I want . . . I want you to make me pregnant. —No! —No! I didn't mean that.

(She breaks away)

MARIE LAVEAU

You *did* mean that! And *without* the Shakarè. From here on out for you, the truth will out — and without the need of the Shakarè.

(Pause)

WOMAN

Yes. Yes. I did mean that.

MARIE LAVEAU

Arietta: "Because I've tried."

WOMAN

Because I've tried. I have tried. *God how I've tried.* With every man I've come in contact with, I've dreamt about his making love to me. Handsome men, ugly men, laborers and artists; professional men, politicians — even close friends of the judge. *But* somehow I knew that none of his friends had the energy to get my eggs to budge. *But* I dreamt about it, thought about it with all of them. . . even with a black man — that's how desperate I was. . . There's a handsome barber who plays the cornet. His skin is deep, deep golden. His name is Buddy Bolden; a handsome man who plays barbaric music; a music that puts people in an orgiastic state. And the sounds he makes are so high, so strong, so hard, that once, naked on my balcony overlooking Congo Square, when he was playing, I held myself open to try to get that cornet's sound to enter me, and shatter loose just one of those clinging eggs. *But* music like that has to be close. Right on top of you. How do I know that? Strange. . . Anyway. And as usual. I was out of range.

MARIE LAVEAU

End of Arietta.

MAN

Absurd! Absurd!

MARIE LAVEAU

Why? Why absurd, Important One Here.

MAN

It's impossible overnight to do what she wants.

MARIE LAVEAU

Remember where you are. There's nothing that doesn't go in the Voodoo Parlour of Marie Laveau.

MAN

Why should I help her? She can't help me.

MARIE LAVEAU

No? Let's see. Why are you here?

MAN

Oh, it doesn't matter anymore. I'm tired. I want to go. And unless you plan to murder me, or stick pins in me, or force me to sniff some gris-gris dust, you must agree that this has all been a waste of time with me. I want to go. I must go. Please.

MARIE LAVEAU

Then, yes. I choose to let you go.

(Light upstage)

MARIE LAVEAU

There. That's the way out for you.

(Pause)

MAN

(To the Lost-In-Thought Woman)

Miss . . . Mrs. . . . I'm sorry, I can't help you. Truly. I . . . goodbye.

(He goes upstage. Lights flash!
Man is **thrown back** into the room!)

Them again. . .with the bloody holes in their faces. Why are they always there? And I—

MARIE LAVEAU

Yes?

MAN

—was about—

WOMAN

Yes?

MAN

—to recognize them— *him!*

LAVEAU

You can.

MAN

How?

LAVEAU

In your grand aria. It is time now for your grand aria.

MAN

Oh, you'll get no aria from me. I'm tone deaf. You know that. And I can't read music. I'm sure you know that. Everyone else does. I also know that my lack of formal training has been used to vilify me. But I was above all that. For I was good. Am good. I was brought up with good music. It was always—

(Laveau shakes her *Shakarè* at him)

MAN

(Continued)

No! No! Please! Please!

LAVEAU

Grand aria: “Once the rage was over, I fell into the void of deep despair.”

(The Man struggles mightily to overcome the effects of the Shakarè. But he can't. He goes under. While in his trance he focuses on Marie Laveau throughout his grand aria — as if she were his mother confessor)

MAN

Once the rage was over, I fell into the void of deep despair. It was gone. Finished. I was fired from a job I had held for fifteen years, and no one seemed to care. I was forty years old, and fifteen of those forty years, a way of life I depended on, were gone. And what a life! With Angelica on my arm I walked into Antoine's, and all heads would turn. A fish dish was named after me. That impressed her. I was asked to be King Rex in one Mardi Gras parade. Oh, she glowed in that. Artists, they say, would tremble when they turned the pages to see my review of their work. Critics on other papers only lived to get my job. The bastards! And once, when I was held up in traffic, in a rainfall so heavy, you could hardly see, they held the curtain for me. For *me*! Talk about the power of the arts! The opera was Don Giovanni, and that night my power was greater than Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's!

(Pause)

Gone. . .all gone. . .and also the music. . .gone. And that's the most terrible thing of all. I love great music; understand it; studied all the theories of all the past great minds and saw how great music was shaped — *must* be shaped.

(Pause)

And of the very great I was awed. And I learned to hate what was flawed; to attack what was flawed; to run off the concert stage those who were flawed!

(Pause)

Gone. All gone. Because I was shamed; I felt such shame; could never set foot in a concert hall or opera house again.

(Remembers: It just drops in))

Only once — after I was fired—I did go, yes. And the isolation was intolerable in the midst of that fashionable crowd.

(Pause)

Pain like that shouldn't be allowed.

(Pause)

I was cut off, alone, miserable. . . .And there were times I wished I could create; take that time of isolation, to find a new start. Order chaos, and make a work of art

MAN

(Continued)

I always felt, you see, that, since I couldn't make music—and it was in the literary tradition that I seemed to belong—that I, at least, could write some verses—verses to be set to song. *But* no matter how I tried, in my despairing way, I couldn't write those lyrical words; because I soon discovered that I have little . . . or nothing at all. . .to say. . . .So I'd sit all day in my dark study and think about what I had had, and what I had lost. And I was powerless; totally, completely powerless.

(Pause)

And slowly, Angelica . . .Angelica of the coal-black eyes and hair . . .Angelica, of the eggnog-tinted skin . . . slowly, slowly Angelica — daughter of my insane wife — the wife I had to put away . . .Angelica; always proud to drape onto the critic's arm — her stepfather's arm — the powerful arm, the respected arm that parted the sea of awed audience and artists; Angelica, the only one I truly loved, the only human being I'd make myself a mat for her to walk on . . . first backed off, Angelica did. . .then away. . . then out for good. I can't recall the moment when she left; but I recall the moment when I discovered she had left. Because I cried. The only time I ever cried.

(Pause)

But not for long. Because soon the hate began — against *all* artists— against the man who fired me, and the man who took my place. I ate with hate, slept with hate, I walked the streets all night with hate. And everything I did, every move I made, everything I drank or ate turned sour. Night after night. . .day after day. . .hour after hour after hour

(diminuendo)

. . . after hour after hour.

(Pause)

Oh, Marie Laveau . . . please. . .please. . .please, I need Angelica. . .so, please get me back my power.

(He sobs.

Pause.)

MARIE LAVEAU

End of grand aria.

(Shakarè out, as Marie Laveau looks hard and long at the sobbing Man. Moves to him. Stops. **Aside**.

Don't let me comfit him. Cruel. Cruel. I must be cruel.

She gestures.)

(Music: Sneak in; a tenor singing,
"il Mio Tesoro" from the opera, *"Don Giovanni."*
 Out of the trance, the Man listens to the singing;
 tries hard to identify the voice.
 Finally does.)

MAN

Matrangal That's Matranga's voice!

(MUSIC: Out!)

Enrico Matrangal A tenor I hated—a tenor who'd do things in performance—instinctive, edgy things—find something in the music that I *could not understand*—*that* would put me in a *rage*! So my reviews, I'm delighted to say, DROVE MATRANGA FROM THE STAGE! . . . But this new , "so-called" critic—my replacement—has praised Matranga—praises him everyday, it seems, NON STOPI So once again Matranga is ON TOPI —Oh! God! Of course! —I passed Matranga on my way here—watching those slaves dance themselves into a frenzy, there, in the center of Congo Square! My God—YES! — he even tipped his hat to me! Smug bastard! So now I see: Matranga — and others like him—all the artists my honest judgments put out of business — they see I'm at my weakest — place the gris gris on my doorstep floor — AND THEY'RE THE BLOODY MOUTHS BEHIND YOUR DOOR!

MARIE LAVEAU

Are you sure?

MAN

Oh, yes, I'm sure. What a relief. I'm not about to worry anymore about angry artists looking to get revenge on me.

MARIE LAVEAU

So there is no way I can be of help?

MAN

You know you can —Get me *back my power!*

MARIE LAVEAU

—I can't! I can get rid of the man who took your place; see that his career is through. *But* I cannot guarantee that *that* man will be replaced by you.

MAN

It's true. The Editor who hired him has it in for me. He'll never rehire me.

MARIE LAVEAU

What if we get rid of the Editor, too? The one who fired you?

MAN

Yes! Yes! —No. He and the junior Editor below were great friends.
The junior Editor would never take me back.

MARIE LAVEAU

The next one down?

MAN

Would definitely give me the sack.

MARIE LAVEAU

The one beneath him?

MAN

A Cretan hack who sided with the one above.

MARIE LAVEAU

And the next rung down?

MAN

A hateful moron! God, what a pack.

MARIE LAVEAU

If, by default and ascension, he had to assume the top authority. . .is there a copy boy who might take you back?

MAN

Those copy boys formed a cabal against me and — Oh god, there's no one. . .no way.

WOMAN

Marie Laveau. I'd like to point out something, if I may. I've stood here, staring ahead, trying to figure out what I'll say in my grand aria. Then I heard his, and felt sorrier and sorrier for him. This tenor, Matranga, must have been before my time. If it's revenge the tenor feels, that doesn't seem a crime. Funny. I used to think of revenge as a kind of crime; or at least an ugly emotion. But now, as I think of it, It seems like a soothing lotion. What I guess I'm trying to say is: The only thing the critic can do is get revenge, too.

MARIE LAVEAU

What about that, Important One Here? This may be true. Getting revenge for you is something I can do.

Well? (Pause)

(Pause)

MAN

That so-called critic who took my place has composed a string quartette and a group of art songs. Inferior, flawed pieces. But he wrote them, and so sets a precedent that might affect my getting back my power. . . .yes! Yes! Make him suffer! Make them all suffer! *I want them all to suffer!*

MARIE LAVEAU

Revenge arietta, "But don't just get them fired."

MAN

But don't just get them fired! They're likely to get rehired somewhere else! No. Hurt them! Crush them! Smash them! Let them run through a gauntlet and beat them with rolled-up Sunday editions! Stuff every orifice of their bodies with tapers made from the comic pages, and strike a match to each! Then send them through the presses for their last remaining breath — *and headline and ink them all to death!*

W OMAN

Oh God, something stirred! Something in my bin stirred! As you were talking something nice — Don't stop! Don't stop! Keep talking revenge!

MAN

Do it, Marie Laveau! Show them what it means to trifle with a man like me! How do we do it? With a gris-gris?

MARIE LAVEAU

No!

MAN

With what, then?

MARIE LAVEAU

With her!

(Man and Woman face each other)

MARIE LAVEAU

(continued)

The goddess of revenge is Manman Brigitte, wife of Baron Samedi. The spirit of Manman Brigitte needs a woman's body to enter and from that surrogate the series of revenges can be effectuated. But this woman must know that it will rack her soul and frame. For it is not one revenge you require, Important One Here—but five! Five, whom you don't want to survive. *Will she do it?*

MAN

(To Woman)

Will you do it?

MARIE LAVEAU

Will she put herself through such a purge?

MAN

(To Woman)

Will you put yourself through such a purge?

MARIE LAVEAU

*Will the ebb and surge of this exhausting deed
plant in her body the stirring seed?*

(Pause)

WOMAN

I'll work it out in my grand aria.

MARIE LAVEAU

No. Time is running out.

W OMAN

There are things I must work through.

MARIE LAVEAU

I've made you work through enough. Now I want—

WOMAN

I want my own grand aria! He had his; now I want mine. *Or there might not be a surrogate in this voodoo parlour tonight.*

(The Woman and Marie Laveau
stare at each other)

MARIE LAVEAU

(Fatigued)

All right.

WOMAN

And since everything I learned about life was through the opera world, and the concert hall, I'll begin my grand aria with -- "*In 'Traviata' I recall.*"

(MUSIC from Verdi's, "*La Traviata*"
in and held under)

WOMAN

In *Traviata*, I recall, the courtesan Violetta entertains in a room as large as our New Orleans opera stage, where she leads a dissolute life. She has tuberculosis and, on occasion, she coughs on pitch. And when she dies, she expires to the most beautiful tune ever written.

(Music out.
Marie Laveau hums)

I got to know a whore, from the Basin Street bagnio of Miss Lulu White, who used to cough up blood and put on airs. She entertained the bagnio members in a closet-sized room with no air. She was famous for her "cough" jobs — guaranteeing her customers at least one coughing fit during what I believe they call an act of oral contact. She died when she once spit blood on a member's member and he, in a rage, strangled her to death.

(Humming out.

(Music: From "*Fidelio*" in; held under)

In "*Fidelio*," I recall, the revolutionary Florestan is chained to a papier machè wall in a dungeon where the evil Pizzaro has put him. He sings of his despair and hunger and weakness with great tenor power while Florestan's lover, Leonora, dressed as a man, has fooled everyone with her disguise and, confronting Pizzaro with a pistol, saves her man.

("Fidelio" music out.
Marie Laveau hums again)

I heard about a Negress whose black lover plotted a slave insurrection. Another slave sold him out; and the dungeon he was placed in smelled of human urine; and the wall

WOMAN

(Continued)

that *he* was hurled against and shackled to, was jagged, sharp—like stalactites on their sides. His lover also went to save him with a gun; *not* disguised as a man, but staying every inch a woman. And when she was overpowered, she was raped by the guards, white prisoners, and two judges on a tour. *No!* — just one of the judges. The other one — my husband's great grandfather — just stood by as the Negress was repeatedly raped, in front of her shackled lover, to whose bloody belly a hungry rat had been strapped to gnaw into the black man's guts. I'm told the screams the black man made had no discernable pitch.

(Marie Laveau stops humming)

(Pause)

I sometimes think a rat in me keeps eating all my eggs as they are made. And why should I care? There's a very good chance, in the way of the world, that any son I have will also be shackled to a wall by some fart-mouthed judge. And my fragile world would shatter. Because I'm no Salome, who could look on her son's guts, served up on a porcelain platter. Not yet. And yet I die if I don't have a son. . . .And I don't want to die. . . . There's the thing; *I* don't want to die. . . .What I really want . . . what I wanted all along . . .yes . . . yes! . . . *YES!* What I wanted all along was to keep on living in that opera world of painless pain; where I always knew that once it fell, the curtain would rise again, and I'd get off my death divan and take my bows; pounded by waves of applause, for making death seem so wistful and enchanting. Oh, to be washed and drowned in those tidal waves again. . . .If only I had stuck it out! Too late! Because now I'm stuck in *life*, where whores are strangled and black men tossed against the rocks, and there's real blood, and where this "has-been" soprano is no Leonora, and my husband, the judge, no Pizarro getting caught. *No!* My Pizarro would get away with the murder of me—the murder he wants to try. And *I*, I don't want to die. So it all comes back to that. I'm afraid. Because I don't want to die.

MARIE LAVEAU

Then you'll help this desperate man? you'll try? Even if your body is racked and bent?

WOMAN

if—

MARIE LAVEAU

Yes?

WOMAN

If he makes me preg nant!

End of aria. MARIE LAVEAU

No. MAN

Yes. WOMAN

I don't know if I can. MAN

Why? Are you impotent? WOMAN

No! MAN

Well then? MARIE LAVEAU

It's just so —so—not an easy thing to do. MAN

WOMAN
Neither is using my body as a conduit to murder five people. The way I was brought up, even thinking naughty thoughts was a sin. But I'm willing to act out — plunge deeply into sin — to use my body as it's needed — anything to get that stir to occur in my bin again.

But I'd be cheating. MAN

Cheating? WOMAN

On whom? Angelica? MARIE LAVEAU

MAN

Of course not. But she knows me as pure. I have been pure. I had to be pure. To set an example. Don't you see: It was her mother's impurity that had me put her away. Her mother dared to be unfaithful to me. Had to be crazy, in fact, to display such poor judgment.

MARIE LAVEAU

Does all this matter? That was then and this is now and we are coming close to the caballetta of this opera. It must come, so choices must be made.

WOMAN

Yes. I don't want to die. That's the important choice. I must stick to that.

MAN

But I don't want to be impure.

WOMAN

You must.

MARIE LAVEAU

We all must. That's the way of the world.

WOMAN

If we get through the ritual you will have your revenge and your enemies will be gone and you may get your power back.

MAN

Yes—"may"—not "will."

WOMAN

And with your power back Angelica may return.

MAN

Yes —"may"—not "will."

MARIE LAVEAU

But there is one thing you will certainly get.

WOMAN

(Taking off her mask)

You'll get me. The soprano Adrienne.

(Pause)

MAN

(Mesmerized)

Is it really you?

ADRIENNE

Yes.

(Pause)

MAN

Are you really alive?

ADRIENNE

Yes.

(Pause)

MAN

Is it allowed to have her?

MARIE LAVEAU

Yes.

(Pause)

MAN

Then I agree.

ENSEMBLE

Trio: "The Agreement. "

MARIE LAVEAU

Then you.

ADRIENNE

Then you

MAN

Then I

Then he agrees

LAVEAU

Then I agree

MAN

Then you agree

ADRIENNE

LAVEAU
to try to see

ADRIENNE
To try to see

MAN
To try to see

LAVEAU
that in your sin

ADRIENNE
That in our sin

MAN
That in our sin

LAVEAU
You'll try to fill her bin

ADRIENNE
You'll try to fill my bin

MAN
I'll try to fill your bin

LAVEAU
And she

ADRIENNE
And I

MAN
And you

LAVEAU
Agree

ADRIENNE
And I agree

MAN
And you agree

LAVEAU
To let the spirit
of Manman Brigitte

ADRIENNE

Lodge in me

LAVEAU
Lodge in you

MAN
Lodge in you

LAVEAU
Now come together family.
La Fanmi semble, non.

ADRIENNE
La Fanmi semble, non.

MAN
La Fanmi semble, non.

LAVEAU
We shall call Papa Loko.
Na'pa hin'de o, Papa Loko.

ADRIENNE
Na'pa hin'de o, Papa Loko

MAN
Na'pa hin'de o, Papa Loko.

(Repeat under)

LAVEAU
Then with the spirit of the Loa who guards this sacred temple — the Loa, Papa Loko—who wants to see this violence to bud—I now pronounce you *Murderess and Stud!*

(SOUND: GONG!)

MARIE LAVEAU

Part Three: The Ritual of Revenge!

Surrogate Brigitte, stand in the center of the room.

(Adrienne does so)

Important One Here, it's quite clear her gown will interfere. You've got to take the manly tack! Rip that gown from her back!

(He does so)

Surrogate Brigitte, throw back your head and fling wide your arms.

(Adrienne does so)

Surrogate Brigitte, clench and unclench your hands.

(Adrienne does so)

MARIE LAVEAU

(Continued)

Oh, Manman Brigitte, wife of Baron Samedi, Lord of the cemetery, tend to the needs of your surrogate who pleads with all her glands for you to fill her needy hands. And in the name of all the gods, it's time to feed her with the voodoo spirits -- Danbhalah and Aida.

(Marie Laveau takes two wrought-iron,
snake-like figures from the wall)

Important One Here, in accordance with the astral plans, place those voodoo spirits in those clenching hands.

(The Critic does so and steps back)

Surrogate Brigitte: Like Cleopatra laid to rest, cross your arms across your breast.

(Adrienne does so)

All the doors of this voodoo parlour open wide and face the west.

(Shafts of light pierce the space)

Echo my words through the corridors of the world and in every cemetery where Manman Brigitte's curses are hurled.

Now let the vèves come around:
designs traced upon the ground.

(She sprinkles the
floor with powder)

MARIE LAVEAU

(Continued)

Let them be your most powerful revenge sources, representing figures of the astral forces.

(With her foot she traces
a design on the floor)

the vève used most often; design in the form of a coffin. . .

(She traces another design with her foot)

And there — the masterpiece of a sort: Vève of the boulez-zains-les-morts. That's the one that gives the most dread: pots boiling for the dead.

Marie Laveau
(Continued. She picks up what look
like stalks of wheat)

Manman Brigitte! Manman Brigitte! These are your favorite stalks of Bayahonde,
through which you will slip into her body, when the stalks are used as a whip.

Important One Here, Important One Here; take those stalks and settle her hash. Beat
Manman Brigitte into her with that Bayahonde lash. . . .Don't hesitate! Don't waste time!
No time to want to be gentle! Now it's your guts that have got to be mental. Beat her!
Beat her! Beat her!

(The Critic beats her with
the stalks of Bayahonde)

That's it, Surrogate Brigitte, contract and writhe.
Absorb Manman Brigitte and make her body loose and lithe.
Now, let the voodoo rhythms in from all the astral corridors and vents
and add the ritual instruments.
First the Ogan...

(Sound of an iron rod struck
against an instrument
that resembles a flattened bell
without a clapper)

. . . Then the Triangle . . .

(Sound: Triangle. Mix)

. . .Then the beating of the rada drums!

(Sound: Drums. **All mix**)

MARIE LAVEAU
(Continued)

Now let it be heard from New Orleans to France as Manman Brigitte enters this
surrogate in the whipping dance.

(Whipping dance. THEN--)

(Adrienne **hurls** away the wrought-iron figures
and **jumps** onto the Critic.

All sounds out)

MARIE LAVEAU

(Continued)

Yes! She has climbed him as a monkey climbs the sacred banana tree. See how far back she leans, as he holds her lower back! Almost level with the ground, she is. And see how slowly he revolves her. That's because the spirit of Manman Brigitte has entered her, and now they must find the proper spot — for only the proper spot will suffice — in which to receive the blood of the animal sacrifice.

(Marie Laveau goes to the altar and picks up a ritual jar filled with blood of a recent chicken sacrifice and sprinkles the blood onto the face of Adrienne)

Now is the time for the heavens to rend, as the black lamps descend.

(Sound: Thunderclap.
As a wheel holding five candles descends.
Marie Laveau lights each candle)

It is now the moment of truth, Surrogate Brigitte and Important One Here. Each lamp represents a soul; a soul you want to snuff out. If you blow each out, you'll first hear a cosmic hiss and the scream of a human soul as it tumbles into the abyss. There is still time to pull back and out from such a snuff-out. Surrogate Brigitte: What will you do?

(Pause)

(Then Adrienne glides to the lamps and blows out each candle. As each flame is extinguished, we hear an echoing hiss and an agonizing scream that reverbs and fades.

(Pause)

MARIE LAVEAU

Baron Samedi . . . il est fini.

(Music: *The Love Duet* from Puccini's "*Madama Butterfly*" plus the "*Liebesto*" from "*Tristan Und Isolde*."

During it, Adrienne and The Critic passionately embrace and kiss. Then Adrienne collapses against him. He picks her up and slowly, slowly, exits with her. And while all this is happening, the lamps ascend and Marie Laveau sing-speaks:)

MARIE LAVEAU

Glide. Gliiiiiiiiide. Gliiiiiiiiide to the Chamber of Ecstasy, and make love under the
maaaaaaaaaagicaal banaaaaaanaaaaaaaaaa treeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

**(The drums have been included and all music
and rhythm build and explode;
ending with a loud gong!)**

Cruelty! Cruelty! It has begun tonight. Instead of waiting for God to choose, I've made-judgments as to who will win and who will lose. And from now on there'll be clients I'll refuse. And, like God, after the damage is done, I'll bitter the pill by claiming that it isn't my fault; that everyone has free will. And so it is with the opera lady and the critic in this chamber opera of revenge. I've made all the arrangements. I've forced those two to face their desperate truths, and danced them in a whipping fury to this erotic point. I've set them up for whatever violent final end you gods have planned for them. So now I want my divinity. Make the kanzo kettle blaze!

(She attempts to light
the kanzo kettle)

It still won't flame! I still haven't won! Something more has to be done! What? What?

(She pulls off her robe which seems to be pressing the air out of her body;
rips off her mask and falls back into her wicker throne. She places the
mask on the ground. Simply dressed now in the usual white voodoo
priestess dress, she laces a white kerchief on her head)

Grand aria: When I was a girl.

When I was a girl...when I was a girl...over the shoulders of the bouncing voodoo priest raping me; getting even with me for not giving myself to him willingly . . . over the shoulders of the bouncing charlatan of a voodoo priest raping me under the banana tree; my bouncing eyes could see the huge, purple banana pod get bigger and bigger and purple red. But somehow that pod wasn't part of the tree but seemed to be nailed to the tree. And suddenly it tore free and like a deflating balloon, zigzagged drunkenly, diminished to a tiny burst of intense purple liquid, dived through a thousand miles of bouncing airy moat, hit my bouncing face, and slid straight down my bouncing throat. That was God I swallowed.

. . ."Why, why, why, God," I said, "must I suffer so to receive you?" God said, "I have chosen you to do my work; have forged a holy alliance which only you can sever. But if you *do* do God's work, you will live forever."

MARIE LAVEAU

(Continued)

And suddenly something made me stiffen and my bouncing joints were steel. I became God's holy wrecker, and I locked together my thighs and that phony priest inside, and only let him go when I'd gangrened his bouncing pecker! -- Yes, God helped me get revenge on that man and my power was immense. And the voodoo queen Marie Laveau, they say, was born that day.

But what could I, a woman from the islands — a black woman now divine — become in the Christ-God's church? Nothing. *But* a Voodoo Priestess — Ah! — *That* I could become. For the Voodoo Religion, I knew, was all mixed up with the Christian Religion, too; and, maybe, as a Voodoo Priestess I *could* do God's work. Yes, of that I was sure. *But* what was that work? I don't remember anymore! For somehow — oh, so soon— it was all about stabbed dolls with pins—and making people suffer for all kinds of imagined insults — for all kinds of imagined sins. And I helped the wicked to prosper. And soon I prospered, too. And it all got mixed up, because I wanted to believe that these were the things I was meant to do. And I did it all with great theatrical zest. And I became the best. . . .Do you see now why I truly believed that I would never die? . . . *But* you saw—today: Three gris-gris were placed inside my sacred door. *But*, how could I be cursed—be made to die? . . .

The God I swallowed abandoned me; went back on his word, that's how.

And I should have known. When the liver spots came and the hair fell out and the titties sagged and the constant fatigue I couldn't shake and the sleepless nights when I couldn't care less about the men who shared my bed — yes, I should have looked into the mirror and said, "There's no use lying, girl; like everyone else, you're dying, girl."

(Chants)

Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison. ...Oh why, why, why,
my Christ God, have you turned your back on me?

. . . —oh! Could it be? . . . have I really deserted. . . and turned *my* back on thee? What am I doing? I don't know. I'm confused. . . .

But if I'm to become divine again, it must be in you Voodoo gods I place my trust and choose.

(Chants)

Ogoun Badagri ... Ogoun Badagri...come to me, you Voodoo gods. You'll make the kanzo kettle blaze and make me one of you; you can't refuse. Because when tonight is over, I will have paid my voodoo dues. —But what will those dues be?

(Chants)

Ogoun Badagri! Ogoun Badagri!

MARIE LAVEAU
(Continued. Stops chanting)

Oh . . . the uncertainty. . . the fatigue. . . *the energy it takes to play God.*

ADRIENNE

(Off)

Marie Laveau. Marie Laveau.

MARIE LAVEAU
(A *fatigued* Announcement)

Part Four: The unknown violent resolution.

(GONG!

Adrienne and The Critic enter)

MARIE LAVEAU
(Trying to compose herself)

Well. How was his performance?

ADRIENNE

Flawed.

MARIE LAVEAU

Was he impotent?

ADRIENNE

No. He was as hard as an ankle.

MARIE LAVEAU

Well, then—?

ADRIENNE

But he had no final act. He couldn't come to orgasm. He rarely does. That's his curse.

CRITIC

I'm sorry; truly sorry. I wanted it to work. Not only because of the bargain, but because of you—because of what *you* needed.

MARIE LAVEAU

Perhaps I can help.

ADRIENNE
 Good! Anything.

MARIE LAVEAU
But it will take time.

ADRIENNE
 How much time?

MARIE LAVEAU
 (To Critic)
 How long have you had this problem?

CRITIC
 To some it's not a problem: I can go all night.

ADRIENNE
 It's a problem for me. I don't have all night.

MARIE LAVEAU
 It will take many days.

ADRIENNE
 So. I'm not impregnated. And tomorrow I die.

CRITIC
 I'm sorry.

ADRIENNE
Sorry's not enough.

CRITIC
 You can run.

ADRIENNE
 I've seen what the judge's bloodhounds can do. No, there's only one thing left.

CRITIC
 What?

LAVEAU
 What?

ADRIENNE

(Suddenly so clear)

You must kill the judge for me. You must kill my husband.

CRITIC

No! Can't we get a surrogate, Marie Laveau?

MARIE LAVEAU

(Bone weary; some terror)

To find someone else will take time. And the night is nearly gone; the Mardi Gras will soon be over.

ADRIENNE

I have no more time.

CRITIC

Take the time. Please. Don't you see; it's important to me. How can I say it? ... I know. In a lyrical arietta...

Before, something sweet began.
I thought it was the ecstasy
of punishing my enemy.
But no, that passed on through,
and what remained was you.

Before, something grand began.
I thought It was the hope again
of getting back my fame again.
But, no, that passed on through;
and what remained was you.

I used to think that all I needed to survive,
was power to —

ADRIENNE

Shut up! No more arias! No more crap! If you really want to know what remains—what remains is someone very bitter. Spattered with chicken blood. Half naked. Well, we struck a bargain. I kept mine. Marie Laveau, are his enemies really dead?

MARIE LAVEAU

Yes.

ADRIENNE

As a result of what I went through?

MARIE LAVEAU

Yes.

ADRIENNE

Then goddamn it, I want my due! And you'll give it to me.

CRITIC

But I can't. Being detached — using surrogates is one thing. Actually doing it is—

ADRIENNE

Why not? You're a critic, aren't you? Just pretend my judge is a talent whose talent has offended you, and you are about to annihilate him in a printed review.

CRITIC

I never stooped to that kind of review!

ADRIENNE

The critic Beauregard! Oh, I knew your name all right. The critic who signed his name "B" and—

BEAUREGARD

— and made you a star! And what was wrong with that? It's those others — like Matranga — those others I destroyed — those bloody mouths out there waiting—they, *they* are the ones who have a right to hate me. Not you.

MARIE LAVEAU

No, no, *no!* You have got it all wrong, Critic Beauregard. The bloody mouths waiting for you, are not only the ones you *destroyed*; those outside my parlour door are also the mediocre ones *you made famous* by your judgments.

BEAUREGARD

No!

ADRIENNE

Yes! Like me! The so-called "artist" Adrienne. Who feigned a suicide to get me away from an intolerable career I could not sustain because of you! . . . Oh, did you know I'd vomit before every performance? Because I knew I really could not sing the roles? And, oh, how I wanted the audience to hiss me off the stage. But they wouldn't. Because they believed *you*— your notices. And did you know that the judge pursued me because of you? *God's rare virginal gift to New Orleans*. And I believed it, too. Oh, I was so frightened of a career that I clung to the judge like a life raft. — The Critic

ADRIENNE

(Continued)

"B!" . . . Good Christ! And I had to go out there with you before—under that banana tree! —to pump you! jiggle you! let you grunt all over me—while I detested you, and every grunt you made! Well, make no mistake! For that, you'll kill my judge all right!

BEAUREGARD

(Weary laugh)

I'll burn my notices. There. There. Will that make it all better? Oh, Angelica, Angelica, I'm coming to find you. It's all over—the power thing. All gone. But there's still you and me.

MARIE LAVEAU

Not true. Not true. There's only you. Oh, oh, oh, Critic Beauregard—don't you know yet who placed the gris-gris on your door?

(She becomes Angelica)

I did, Step Daddy! I did!

BEAUREGARD

Angelica?

LAVEAU/ANGELICA

Yes, I'd let you nibble on your Angelica cake all those years; sometimes playfully picking up my own Angelica crumbs, on my own, wet, Angelica finger tips, and pressed them to your mouth, to let you lick off the Angelica bits . . . Powerful step daddy . . . important step daddy. . . *impressive* step daddy!

BEAUREGARD

Please . . . Marie Laveau. . . . don't . . .

LAVEAU/ANGELICA

Your Angelica cake was all pink icing. Even while she waited to get revenge on you for what you did to my mother!

(Adrienne hums the Addio del Passairo)

BEAUREGARD

No . . . please . . . please . . .

LAVEAU/ANGELICA

— waiting for you to hit bottom, so that I could see you totally crushed. Waiting for the moment when I could put my last judgment on you; when I could put a gris-gris on your door.

BEAUREGARD

Wasn't there ever a time . . . a moment, even . . . when my love touched you?

MARIE LAVEAU

Never a moment . . . never a second . . .

(Long pause)

ADRIENNE

(Stops humming)

So there's nothing—nothing for you to look forward to but that gauntlet of the bloody mouths. Unless I call them off.

MARIE LAVEAU

You can't call them off, Adrienne! Only I can.

ADRIENNE

(Ignoring Marie Laveau)

We made a pact. I kept my end of the bargain. You couldn't keep yours. You must make up for it. Kill my husband. Kill my judge.

(Pause)

BEAUREGARD

(Discovery! All discovery!)

"He had no final act." That's what you said, Adrienne. I also admire your other gem. "His performance was flawed." . . .As if any human being. . .by definition, flawed . . . can ever make an unflawed thing. . . ."Hard as an ankle." That one stays with me. Yes, you turn a memorable superficial phrase, Adrienne. It judges while not understanding the pain and cost beneath those flaws. . . . My god! How sad. In the end the work I did was bad.

(Bows to Marie Laveau)

Goodbye.

ADRIENNE

You will be punished.

BEAUREGARD

Get out of my way, Adrienne. I've got verses to write, verses to be sung.

ADRIENNE

(Pushing him back into the room)

Marie Laveau, make the bloody mouths kill him!

MARIE LAVEAU

—No! . . .He's suffered enough.

ADRIENNE

Compassion, from Marie Laveau? Not from Adrienne. I haven't felt that stir again!

BEAUREGARD

(Trying to get by her)

Please, Adrienne, let it go.

ADRIENNE

(Pushing him back into the room again)

No!

(She knocks over the Zin.
Pulls up the sharp spike)

MARIE LAVEAU

(Rushing in front of Beauregard to stop Adrienne)

No! Not the sacred Zin!

(Laveau and Adrienne struggle)

ADRIENNE

Get away from me!

(She wounds Marie Laveau)

BEAUREGARD

Marie Laveau!

(He goes to help Marie Laveau and Adrienne stabs him with the spike;
repeatedly—until he's dead)

ADRIENNE

There! There! And there! Dress rehearsal for what my judge will get! For what I must do to my husband! **I'm all alone! No one will help me!**

(SOUND: Voices sounding like a soft wind)

MARIE LAVEAU

(Wounded)

Oh. . . the blessed voices . . . of the dead . . . And look . . . look! . . . the Zin! Something made the zZn glow. . . . The Loas. The Loas dropped in the match. They have shown compassion for Marie Laveau. Yes . . . yes . . . all you gods . . . what you wanted . . . what you all wanted, was compassion . . . compassion . . .
End of Marie Laveau's grand aria. . .

(She crawls over to the Zin
and places her hands in the fire.

The voices fade away.

Adrienne, still with the bloody spike in her hand,
has a stomach contraction)

(MUSIC: the soprano singing, *Addio del Passato*)

ADRIENNE

That *is* me singing, isn't it? What I'm to become, now that I've tasted blood. What stirred in me, what is born in me. is my true talent. Isn't that so? A talent that will make me a real star; give me a star's power. Oh, yes. Conceived in violence, revenge and blood, that stardom is infinitely more important for me to spawn than a baby. And, oh yes, I will nourish it, love it, *make them all love it.*

MARIE LAVEAU

(Lifting her hands from the Zin)

My hands are unscarred. . . . Place the bloody spike in my unscarred hands, Adrienne. Place the blame on Marie Laveau. No matter. I'm not afraid anymore. And from the heavens I'll see who puts the gris-gris on *your* doorstep, Adrienne. For someone will, Adrienne. Someone always does, Adrienne.

(Adrienne places the bloody spike in Marie Laveau's hands. Then
Adrienne sits on Marie Laveau's throne, all the while absorbed in the
Addio del Passato)

ADRIENNE

Beautiful, isn't it! A voice blossoming out of the corruption of the world, and because of that — set free. So—so beautiful. And God help those who try to stop something so beautiful from staying in my power.

MARIE LAVEAU

(Two last cries)

Ogoun Badagri! Jesus!

(Marie Laveau dies)

ADRIENNE

So beautiful.

(The lights slowly dim on the dead critic . . . on the dead and beatific Marie Laveau . . . and on Adrienne:

Totally confident . . .
 luminously beautiful. . .
 magnificently corrupt now —
A Star!

The music plays out)