

Pocahontas and the Room Beneath the Cellar

A Musical Scene

By R. Cheeksunkun

*Lights up on a flute player standing center stage. He is surrounded by a row of pow-wow dancers in full regalia. A little girl in a red jingle dress runs and plays before them. She is laughing and giggling, oblivious to the formal stance they take as she skips by. The scene is suddenly shattered by gunfire. Bullets fly. The adults frantically scoop up their children and move to the back of the stage: two at a time, one simultaneously from each end of the line until only the flute player in the center is left. When he walks away playing a sad song, a woman is revealed standing behind him. She wears a red, Victorian style dress and looks confused. Mr. Debreaux, a well-dressed man, walks up to her and pulls off her corset. Something clinks to the floor. He picks it up.*

Mr. Debreaux

*(Studying it)* A bullet. Stopped by your corset. We have saved you once again, Nenaju. What do you have to say about that?

Nenaju

*(Still dazed, trying to process what just happened)* Thank you? *(Pause)* I'm sorry?

Mr. Debreaux

Right you are, dear girl. Right you are.

Nenaju

*(Holding her side where the bullet glanced her ribs, then looking at her hand, blood covers her fingertips)*

I used to dream of escape. Sometimes, I can still hear the drums. Can you hear them?

*(A drumbeat, like a little pulsing heart can be heard, it's coming from a corner of the stage where the dancers and flute player have gathered)*

Mr. Debreaux

One mustn't waste their time on silly dreams. Let's begin our lesson. What have you written for me today?

Nenaju

It was too late  
For he'd snuck a peek behind the door  
And was no good for this world . . .  
Anymore

Mr. Debreaux

Ignoramus moron! You're the trait of your tribe! That rubbish doesn't warrant a response! And so it shall have none. Recite me another. Again!

Nenaju

*(Flute music begins to play, Nenaju chants)*  
Cold November rain  
Always warmer than the snow  
See how she falls

Mr. Debreaux

*(The music stops and Mr. Debreaux begins to sing, a cappella)*  
You call that Haiku? *(Circling her)*  
What is wrong with you  
One syllable short  
One day late  
I'm lucky if you can  
Enunciate!  
I try to teach you language  
Enlighten you with song  
But *(slowly)*  
You're a mockery to me, to my civility  
That is no Haiku  
What am I to do  
With you, with you, with you  
My frustration only grows  
With you, with you, with you

Nenaju

*(Pulling away from him, flute music begins again, she sings to audience)*  
Procured in a chamber of this Swiss chalet  
Contorted lines of light grow dark within my mind  
Etched there by the sun as if by stylus  
And suddenly, my reflection seems so clear  
Even effulgent with his blood upon my lips

Though it's his wine that's put the sparkle in my eye  
 And the rouge upon my cheek  
 The rouge upon my cheek  
 As by wine, and . . .

Mr. Debreaux

*(Grabs her arm and spins her toward him, chanting)*  
 It's my burgundy brew!  
 My mental stew!  
 For I lose hope in my derision for you!

Nenaju

*(Pulling away with exaggerated movements and mock ballet)*  
 The rouge upon my cheek  
 As by wine . . .

*(Trails off as the child wearing the red jingle dress wanders stage front, whimsically dancing across it)*

Mr. Debreaux

*(Shaking her violently)*  
 My toes be numb from whiskey and rum  
 So there'll be no dancing today, dear  
 There'll be no dancing today  
 There'll be no dancing today

*(The little girl in the red jingle dress runs and hides behind the flute player and drummers in the corner)*

Nenaju

*(Looking into his eyes)*  
 The rouge upon my cheek  
 As by wine . . .

*(Turning to the audience)*  
 And the blood of Mr. Debreaux  
 In the room beneath the cellar  
 In the room beneath the cellar

Mr. Debreaux

Enough of this monosyllabic jabber. Come *(grabs her arm and tries to pull her away)*. You've a lesson to learn.

Nenaju

*(Resisting)* I dare not acquiesce - if for nothing more than the sake of my proctologist.

Mr. Debreaux

Tonight you dare(*putting a feather in her hair*).Just like Pocahontas.

Nenaju

(*Flute music plays again, chanting to audience*)

Unspeakable things  
Had I merely pretended  
Not to see them coming?  
I - the chameleon of his making  
His ever-changing changeling

Mr. Debreaux

Come, Pocahontas.

Nenaju

(*Flute music, chanting to audience*)

Many ways have been his passions  
And many ways will be his fall  
And I've learned them all  
In the room beneath the cellar  
In the room beneath the cellar

(*To Mr. Debreaux*)

I've read your books  
I've uttered your words  
Betraying my own  
For your wanting  
And all within the tapestry  
Of the burthen of my fathers

(*Speaking now*)

Have I learned nothing of my history?  
Nothing of my culture?

Mr. Debreaux

You have a new culture now. Why, you could almost pass for Dutchman.

Nenaju

I am Mohican. I am Lenape.

Mr. Debreaux

You are what I say you are. You are Dutchman.  
Tell me what you've learned!  
Tell me what you've read!

Nenaju

A victorious tome about a people from the waters that are never still.

Mr. Debreaux

What did you just say?

Nenaju

A book about Will, of course.

Mr. Debreaux

Ahh, Will! I love a good Shakespearean tragedy. Read it to me.

Nenaju

*(Flute music begins, Nenaju sings)*

Words!Words!

Nothing but

A stolen luxury

To you

Loot without meaning

Taken from the burial mounds

Of those who have gone before

Of those who have meant even something less

Than their words

To you . . .

You, you stole my words.

Mr. Debreaux

Blasphemy! I cannot teach a creature culture!

Nenaju

*(Singing)*

Have I finally crossed the threshold

Of your tolerance?

Oh, fractured indifference

Has your annoyance finally surpassed my use?

Finally!

Finally!

Finally!

Could this possibly

Possibly!

Possibly!

Mean freedom from you?

From you!

From you!

Mr. Debreaux

Shut your mouth  
 You ignoramus moron, the trait of your tribe  
 Have you no shame  
 Inside  
 Shut your mouth  
 Your unruly, ungrateful, unyielding mouth  
 Shut your mouth  
 I have clothed you and fed you and offered you life  
 Shut your mouth  
 Shut your mouth

Nenaju

*(The little girl in the jingle dress frolics in the background, her jingles are getting louder)*

Non, good man. Haven't you heard? Every time a jingle jings, Nenaju gets to sing.

Mr. Debreaux

*(A measured pause)* Pocahontas?

Nenaju

Yes, professor?

Mr. Debreaux

Why is there no feather in your hair?

Nenaju

Nenaju—I mean Pocahontas, no like feather in hair.

Mr. Debreaux

Then what does Pocahontas like?

Nenaju

Pocahontas given to the Red Rage, Mr. Debreaux.

Mr. Debreaux

And what is that, m'dear?

Nenaju

A gift. From me to you.

Mr. Debreaux

You? Give a gift? You have nothing.

Nenaju

This thing you've adduced may be nothing. I must indulge some quality of life from time to time, even if I am later made to suffer for it.

Mr. Debreaux

Then indulge you I will.

Nenaju

*(Sarcastically)*

Thanks-s-s. You're every bit the gentleman I have heard.

Mr. Debreaux

It's apparent to all.

Nenaju

One need only look as far as your fedora.

Mr. Debreaux

Excuse me?

Nenaju

What I wonder is this . . .

What are you doing here  
I don't understand  
Are you a monster . . . or a man  
In this room beneath the cellar

Many days I longed for the light  
Many days and many nights  
But there's none here  
In this room beneath the cellar

What are you doing here  
I don't understand  
Are you a monster . . . or a man  
In this room beneath the cellar

Mr. Debreaux

How dare you!

Nenaju

Why are you doing this to us  
I don't understand  
Are you a monster . . . or a man  
In this room beneath the cellar

Mr. Debreaux

I have come for the children!

Nenaju

So it's you who need them?

Mr. Debreaux

They are nothing without me!

Chorus

*(Chanted as an eerie symphony, which comes from the flute player and the circle of dancers drumming in the corner)*

The crimes imputed to us

To us

Have finally reached catharsis

Finally!

Finally!

Finally!

As we wait for your pendulum

Of madness

To lose its swing

As we wait

As we wait

For its momentum

To become abashed

In the embers of your dying rage

While our own

Yes, our own

Will succeed fruition

I promise you that! We promise you that!

Nenaju

I know of your hidden graves, Mr. Debreaux.

Chorus

*(Narrative chorus, dancers and flute player)*

She spoke

Without weakness of regret

Whereby

His condition

Made a fatal descent

Which greatly inspired

Her felicity

As she perceived the growing disorder

Of his scattered thoughts

Give witness to

The dismantling of his mind

Nenaju

*(Chanting to audience)*

Mr. Debreaux was speechless  
 And I reveled in the moment  
 For, this time  
 It was I who had stolen his words  
 And left his soul naked  
 Without instrument of expression

*(Flute music)*

But this spell would soon be broken  
 And the atrocities would soon spill from his mouth  
 In the full fury of his illness

Mr. Debreaux

Scurrilous slander! Pocahontas, I shall hang and gut you  
 from a tree!

Nenaju

*(Bored)* Like a deer?

*(Singing)* A doe, a deer, a female deer. Fa, a long-long way  
 to run -

*(Mock ballet, spinning around him)* How fa can you run. I'll  
 have you know, we will rise up, we will fight back.

Chorus

She gave him pause  
 While removing a jar  
 From beneath a broken floorboard  
 Waiting  
 Waiting  
 For her vengeance to unfold  
 To punish him for his transgressions

Mr. Debreaux

What's that in that jar you hold?

Nenaju

'Tis the wsiit of Nenaju.

Mr. Debreaux

I told you never to speak those filthy words ever again!

Nenaju

Please, forgive my indiscretion  
 For you are naught but a gentleman  
 Do accept this gift as a peace offering  
 A token of my appreciation  
 For all you've done for me. . . for my education

Mr. Debreaux

Just tell me, what is in that jar?

Nenaju

The Red Rage, Mr. Debreaux.

Mr. Debreaux

You've confused your words once more. But at least I've  
 taught you manners. Try again! What is in that jar?

Nenaju

A little piece of history  
 A blast from the past  
 A bit of brooding culture  
 A gift from me to you - I insist

Mr. Debreaux

You are of use to me no more  
 For many a day  
 You've knocked at deaths door  
 Trying my patience  
 You walk about  
 As though I'm someone  
 You can live without  
 Nothing I do gets through to you

Now tell me, what is in that jar?

Nenaju

'Tis the wsiit of Nenaju.

Mr. Debreaux

Enough of your treacherous words, woman! I demand you tell  
 me the nature of the thing!

Nenaju

'Tis the nature of the beast.

Mr. Debreaux

All of these years I've been good to you

And you repay me with attitude  
 I've fed you and clothed you at the boarding school  
 And all I ask is for some gratitude

Nenaju

You've a rotten log  
 In your laden bog  
 From which a very foul itch  
 Doth spring  
 A cold-blooded pathos  
 Of eloquent bathos  
 A lamentable ode to your king

Go plea to your neighbor  
 With quivering quaver  
 And with trembling hands abide  
 Wondering to know  
 If they ever have known  
 The intrinsic intrigue of your lies

*(The little girl in the red jingle dress plays center stage  
 dropping her owl feather fan, and for the first time  
 reveals her face to the audience, it's the face of a ghoul)*

Mr. Debreaux

You're of use to me no more. *(Dark music plays as he wraps  
 his fingers around her neck)* I must bid thee farewell!

Nenaju

I'll see you in hell!*(Removing the lid from the jar, she  
 puts it under his nose, he begins to cough)*

'Tis the foot of Nenaju  
 The heart of my sisters and brothers  
 And tonight  
 You'll lie in communion beside them  
 Conjoined by the soul in the graves you dug  
 In the room beneath the cellar

Chorus

She watched with impunity  
 As the noxious gases  
 Of those he'd corrupted  
 Rose from the jar  
 And stole his breath  
 Rose from their death  
 And stole his words

Rendering him speechless

Nenaju

*(Feeling her ribs as gunshots ring out, there is blood on her hands, she tears off her Victorian dress with large bustle to reveal a red jingle dress and moccasins beneath)*

Look. Your corset didn't stop all the bullets,  
professor. *(Brushing the hair back from her face, blood is everywhere)*

I wrote you a haiku:

Cold November rain  
Always warmer than the snow  
See how we fall

*(They fall together and lie entwined, motionless on the floor - in lover's embrace)*

Chorus

*(Chatter before the song)*

Just think  
He was a teacher  
And still  
He lost all his  
Marbles . . .

*(Singing)*

So howbeit now  
Standing in the midday sun  
Do they find themselves longing for the light?  
Longing for it like no other  
Like the warmth they once felt upon their skin  
Like a tender kiss  
Of a lover  
Not like this  
Never like this  
Revealing their reflection so clear  
In the room beneath the cellar

THE END

*R. Cheeksunkun is a Mohican writer whose previous play was a finalist in Wisconsin's first New Native Theater Playwriting Festival.*