

Liberty

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Cast of Characters

Berniece Wallace- An African American woman in her early forties. She is a hardworking seamstress, a mother of two, and she has been married to Eddie Wallace for 20 years.

Eddie Wallace- An African American man in his early forties. He has worked at the Westbrook Cotton Gin for over 10 years. He is the husband of Berniece Wallace and a father of two.

Louis Allen- An African American man in his mid-forties. He is a businessman and a witness to Herbert Lee's murder. He is a proud man and always wears a hat as a sign of self-respect.

Sheriff Daniel Jones- A Caucasian man in his fifties. He is the Sheriff in Liberty, Mississippi and the main suspect in Louis Allen's murder. He speaks with a slight stutter.

Setting: The day is Monday, September 25, 1961 in Liberty, Mississippi. One hour after the murder of Herbert Lee, which took place at the Westbrook Cotton Gin.

This play surrounds the unfortunate case of the murders of Herbert Lee and Louis Allen. Herbert Lee was an African American man who was born and raised in Liberty, Mississippi. Liberty during the 1950s and 1960s only had one person of color registered to vote, meanwhile 80% of the small-town's population was of African descent. Herbert Lee advocated for voter registration in Liberty. He was a member of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. His activism put a threat on his life because, during this time Liberty was heavily filled with members of the Ku Klux Klan. Most of the police departments in Liberty were members of the Ku Klux Klan as well as the Caucasians citizens. On September 25, 1961, Herbert Lee was murdered in broad daylight at the Westbrook Cotton Gin in Liberty by a state legislator, Eugene Hurst. Even though there were several witnesses to Lee's murder, Hurst was not convicted for his crime, and Herbert Lee never received any justice. All the witnesses to Lee's murder were pressured by Liberty's police department to lie and testify in compliance with Eugene Hurst. One of the witnesses was Louis Allen. Louis Allen was an African American man who had his own timber business. When walking by the Westbrook Cotton Gin, Louis Allen saw Hurst murder, Herbert Lee. Pressured and threatened by the police, Allen testified that the reason why Hurst murdered Lee was because of self-defense. Louis was deeply disturbed by his decision to lie about Lee's murder. As a result, Allen reached out to the FBI to consider testifying against Hurst. When word got out about his decision, his life was automatically put in danger. He received several death threats, and he was forced to shut down his business because the citizens no longer brought from him. Louis was repeatedly harassed and arrested by Sheriff Daniel Jones, a Caucasian man whose father was a head leader of the Ku Klux Klan. On January 31, 1964, Louis Allen planned to depart from Liberty with his family hoping to have a safe life. Unfortunately, on that night Louis Allen was murdered and his teenage son found him dead in the driveway. The main investigator on Louis Allen's case was Sheriff Daniel Jones, his tormenter. It is rumored that Sheriff Daniel Jones took part in the killing of Louis Allen. Jones told Louis Allen's teenage son, "If Louis shut his mouth, he wouldn't be laying on the ground." The murder cases of Herbert Lee and Louis Allen remain officially unsolved.

AT RISE: The audience sees a well-ordered living room with gold carpeting and tan wooden walls. On the walls hangs family pictures and a large hand clock. The living room consist of a rocking chair and a three-seater couch, which is covered with plastic wrapping. The rocking chair has a colorful, quilted blanket folded over the heading. A small table is in the corner of the living room and a Zenith radio with only two knobs, rest on top. The radio is always on playing gospel music or the local broadcasting station. Next to the Zenith radio stands a shotgun.

LIGHTS UP: BERNIECE WALLACE is swaying back and forth in the rocking chair, crocheting a blanket. SHE is humming to HERSELF with the tune playing on the radio. BERNIECE is a full-figured woman with thick, salt and pepper hair tied back into a bun. SHE wears a button-down gown, which SHE made HERSELF, and brown house shoes. EDDIE WALLACE, who is wearing dirty overalls and a straw hat, runs into the living room out with a distraught look upon HIS face and locks the front door.

BERNIECE

What's the matter with you Eddie? Running up in here like you aint got no sense? Aint you supposed to be working?

EDDIE is quiet, pacing back and forth.

Eddie? Eddie, I know you hear me talking to you. Why aint you at work?

EDDIE

[Quietly] It was a long day. The man let us go early.

BERNIECE

[Skeptical] A long day you say?

EDDIE nods HIS head. HE avoids eye contact with BERNIECE.

What done happen?

EDDIE

When?

BERNIECE

While you was at work. What happen?

EDDIE

Why you think something happen?

BERNIECE

Cause Eddie Wallace I been married to ya for twenty sum years. I know when something is wrong with you. So go on ahead and tell me. Did Bunny get smart with you again?... He did, huh? Sherly been telling me that they been having some problems. You tell Bunny he need to be focusing on where he gone sleep when Sherly kicks him out instead of bothering you-

EDDIE

Berniece, I done had a long day at work today. I just need some peace and quiet that's it and that's all. *[HE sits down on the couch].*

BERNIECE

I'm just trying to help you, Eddie. You the one who came in here like you was running from somebody.

EDDIE

Well if you want to help Berniece, can you please get me something to drank?

BERNIECE

[Sarcastically] I guess since you asked so nicely.

SHE gets up from the couch and walks to the back.

BERNIECE O.S.

Boy I tell ya, I know exactly where our chaps got they smart mouths from.

SHE returns onstage with a glass of water in HER hands. SHE hands it to EDDIE and analyzes HIM.

EDDIE

Thank you, Berny.

BERNIECE

You're welcome. I don't mean to pressure you. I just want to know if you're okay that's all, but if you say everything's fine. I believe you.

EDDIE doesn't say anything. HE just takes a slip of the water and stares at the ground. BERNIECE returns to the rocking chair, crocheting.

A beat.

EDDIE

[Quietly] They got him, Berniece.

BERNIECE

[Worried] Who they got?

EDDIE

Herbert Lee.

BERNIECE

[BERNIECE drops HER needles and yarn on the floor] Oh no, Jesus, not Herbert Lee. Herbert Lee? The one riding around trying to get people to go vote?

EDDIE nods HIS head.

Lord have mercy. What happen? How did they get him?

EDDIE

He got shot at the cotton gin.

BERNIECE

Which cotton gin, Eddie?

EDDIE

Which one do you think, Berny? The only cotton gin in Liberty. The one I've been working at for ten years now. Westbrook.

BERNIECE

[Alarm] Eddie... did you see it?

EDDIE

I didn't have no choice.

*BERNIECE goes to where
EDDIE is sitting, and SHE
comforts HIM.*

Hurst shot that man in broad daylight, out in the open, for anyone to see. He didn't care who saw him.

BERNIECE

Hurst... Eugene Hurst? Aint he one of them politics? Better yet didn't Hurst and Herbert grow up together?

EDDIE

Mhm.

BERNIECE

That don't make no god damn sense to me. We are supposed to love each other, but every time I turn around someone getting killed.

EDDIE

Well it makes perfect sense to me. Hurst and Herbert might have grown up in the same neighborhood, but they grew up to be different people. Hurst grew up to be just another cracker who think he got some power cause he white. And Herbert... he saw things differently than the rest of us black folks in Liberty. That man knew that it's something wrong with this town. Not one black folk can vote in a town filled with black folks. Now how messed up is that.? You think we ought to get some liberty, in a town called Liberty.

BERNIECE

You right about that now.

EDDIE

Now he just dead and gone aint never coming back. And you got Hurst walking around here a free man. That just don't sit right with me, it just don't.

BERNIECE

Well, what can you do about it, Eddie? That's just how the south is. It aint never gonna change. No matter how many protests they organize or boycotts they sit in. SNNC nor NAACP can't stop our people from getting killed in the streets.

EDDIE

[A beat] I can say something.

BERNIECE looks at EDDIE with a stern look on HER face, and SHE distances HERSELF from EDDIE.

BERNIECE

Say what?

EDDIE

I can tell them pigs what I saw. *[HE stands up]* Why not? It's time for change to happen here. It's been this way for too damn long-

BERNIECE

Why not? Negro, have you lost your mind? Have you forgotten where you're from? Where you stay? You can't talk to the cops. The cops is the KKK and you know that. As soon as you open your mouth and say something, them crackers gone come here with damn hoods on and take your ass and hang you. That's why not, Eddie because you will lose your life just like Herbert lost his. *[SHE stands up and looks at EDDIE in HIS face]* Now I know what happen to that man aint right, and my heart goes out to Elvira and them nine chaps they got. I pray for them. But that don't mean you, Eddie Wallace, go out and do something that's gone get you killed-

EDDIE

You're telling me just to go on with my life and not say anything? Well I can't, Berniece! That aint right to that man! It would be like I killed the man my damn self if I don't say nothing. Don't you think Herbert deserve more than that? What if it was me, Berny?

BERNIECE

Well it aint you, Eddie! And I'm glad it aint! And I know that's a terrible thing for me to say. God forgive me but it's the darn truth. Eddie, I pray to God every night to keep my family safe, and to protect you from them evil people. Because I know they don't see what I see in you. Why can't you see it's not about Herbert Lee?

EDDIE

Then who is it about then? Tell me, how many people we know is gonna die before we realize that this aint right? Too many white folks walking around acting like masters, and too many black folks afraid like slaves.

BERNIECE

I understand that, I do, Eddie. But thinking like that is dangerous in this town, and you know it! Why won't you understand? Let the wrong person hear you, you ass gone end up dead in a ditch.

EDDIE

If it's God plan for me to go then it's my time. I can't control that Berniece.

BERNIECE

You watch your mouth, Eddie Wallace. You're willing to risk your life for a dead man? Did you forget that you have a family?

SHE takes a family picture of the wall and shoves it in EDDIE'S face.

This is why you can't speak what's on your mind. This is why you can't go to tell the cops what you saw. Because of your family. You have a family that needs you. Eddie, I need you.

EDDIE

I know, Berny, I know. But what type of man would I be if I don't say anything?

BERNIECE

[A beat] A smart man.

EDDIE

Well, I never was too bright.

EDDIE lets out a laugh, but BERNIECE does not.

BERNIECE

Eddie, please don't make a joke out of this-

There is a knock on the door. BERNIECE and EDDIE are confused.

EDDIE

Who that be?

SHERIFF JONES O.S.

It's deputy Jones, I uh came to ask Eddie some questions about the little incident today at Westbrook.

BERNIECE AND EDDIE are silent. THEY look at each other with worry. EDDIE signals BERNIECE to go to the back, SHE does.

There is no use in trying act like you're not here. I heard ya. Just open the door so we can make this quick. I have other cases to attend to.

EDDIE hesitantly opens the door. SHERIFF JONES pushes the rest of the door open, almost hitting EDDIE. SHERIFF JONES, who is dressed in a police uniform, looks around the living room disgusted.

SHERIFF JONES

Interesting place y'all got here. [*HE notices the radio*] Is that a Zenith radio? I didn't know y'all people listening to the radio. Every time I make a trip to this side of the tracks, I always find myself surprised on what you coloreds got going on-

EDDIE

[*Irritated*] You said you had some questions for me, deputy?

SHERIFF JONES

Uh why yes that's right. Let's make this quick cause I do have other trips I have to make, and I have a wife and kid waiting for me at home. I don't want to stay over on this side of the tracks for too long. I know how dangerous it can get at night. You know what I'm talking about?

EDDIE

Nawl, not really. You see deputy, I feel safe over here on my side of the tracks. It's just when I get around... people... like... you is when I start to question my safety. You know what I'm talking about?

SHERIFF JONES

Hmm, well I guess we both have our own way of looking at thangs. You see that's a thang I found funny about being human. We is all made different therefore we can see thangs different. What I may see can be completely different than what you may see. That doesn't make it the truth, that's just how things is. Do you see what I'm saying, Eddie?

EDDIE is expressionless.

I thought you would. So, I say, why go through the hassle of hearing everybody's stories when we can all come together and agree on the right thang?

EDDIE

And what is the right thing, deputy?

SHERIFF JONES

Funny you ask Eddie because I have an answer. That little incident at Westbrook today shouldn't destroy a good man's life-

EDDIE

A good man?

SHERIFF JONES

Why yes, a good man. Hurst is a Mississippi state legislative. I believe that he's going to bring sum good thangs to Liberty. What a waste it would for him to go to jail over a little misunderstanding.

EDDIE

Remind me what was the misunderstanding?

SHERIFF JONES

Well don't you know that Herbert Lee threaten to kill Hurst? That is why Hurst shot him. It was simply self-defense.

EDDIE

Is that so?

SHERIFF JONES

It is.

EDDIE

I was there and to me I saw things differently. I didn't see Herbert threaten Hurst. He looked calm to me. It looked like it was Hurst who threaten to take Herbert's life, as a matter of fact, he did.

SHERIFF JONES

[Grins] Well as I said before us humans see thangs differently.

EDDIE

[Grins] Right, I guess so.

SHERIFF JONES

That's is another thang about being human. Some of us have power and some of us don't. Some say it's not fair, but to me it's just... natural selection. And those who have power make thangs happen and those who don't have power... do the thangs. You get what I'm saying? Right I know you do. You see Eddie, you seem like a smart man and because of that I have a little respect for you. So, I'm finna suggest you something and uh I suggest you do it. Tomorrow I'm going to come back with some buddies from the station, and I want you to say that the Herbert threaten Hurst. Therefore, Herbert had no other choice but to shoot him. Herbert was a threat on Hurst' life. Do you understand or do you want me to put it in your language?

EDDIE

That won't be needed. I understand ya now, but I do have a question for ya. Hear me out, you are right, us humans are different. So how you may feel about a certain thing, I may feel completely different. And I think it's my right to do what I feel is right... don't you think?

SHERIFF JONES takes a short walk around the room and lets out a laugh. HE approaches EDDIE staring HIM directly in HIS eyes. EDDIE does the same.

A beat.

SHERIFF JONES

You just may be confused. I'm not giving you a choice. Either you agree and say that this was a matter of self-defense or you and family are going to run into some problems. I would hate for y'all to be put in danger. As I said before, you seem like a smart man, so make the smart decision. Do it for your family.

SHERIFF JONES pats EDDIE on the shoulder and grins. EDDIE is angry but remains HIS composure. SHERIFF JONES looks at the clock on the wall.

Well would you look at the time, I must be going, I have others I have to talk to.

EDDIE doesn't say anything, HE looks at HIS shotgun. SHERIFF JONES notices.

You not thinking about doing anything stupid is you, boy?

EDDIE stops looking at the shotgun and glares at SHERIFF JONES.

[Grins] Oh, I know you're not. You are a smart boy. I'll be seeing you.

SHERIFF exits the stage. Soon after BERNIECE appears from the back. SHE runs to EDDIE and gives HIM a hug.

BERNIECE

Eddie...Eddie are you okay?

A beat.

EDDIE

[Depleted] Did you hear the way he talked to me? Like he owned me?... He called me "boy." *[HE breaks away from BERNIECE and becomes angry]* I'm a grown ass man, I'm not his boy! I'll show him who is a boy. I'll kill every last one them crackers if I need to-

BERNIECE

Edward Wallace!

EDDIE

It's the darn truth. I'm tired of having to live in fear. To watch what I say to them. To look over my shoulder, I'm tired of it! I want my kids to live in a free world! A world that is fair to them! Why can't they just have that? Why can't I give them that Berny?

BERNIECE

Eddie there is somethings in life you just can't change-

There is a knock on the door. EDDIE and BERNIECE look at each other. EDDIE grabs HIS shot gun and approaches the front door. HE turns around and signals for BERNIECE to go to the back of the house. SHE does not.

EDDIE

Who that be?

LOUIS O.S.

It's Louis Allen, I'm the man who owns the timber shop. I came to talk to Eddie, is he here?

EDDIE

Whatcha want to talk for?

LOUIS

It's about what happen to Herbert... I was wondering if you saw what I saw.

EDDIE looks at BERNIECE and SHE gives a disapproving look. EDDIE unlocks the door and opens it allowing LOUIS to enter. LOUIS enters wearing a white shirt with brown pants and a hat sits on top of HIS head. HE walks in and tips the hat to BERNIECE, addresses HER. LOUIS sees the shot gun and becomes alarmed.

LOUIS

Look I don't want any problems. I just came here to talk.

EDDIE

Well, talk then. [*EDDIE sets the gun down beside HIM*]

LOUIS

I was at Westbrook...when Herbert was shot. I saw what happen.

EDDIE

What happen?

LOUIS

Come on man. You were there, I saw you. I know, you saw what happen. Hurst shot Herbert for no reason. I just want to know if you spoke to the cops?

EDDIE

Something like that. Jones crooked tail just was just here tryin' to get me to lie. He say to tell them that Hurst shot Herbert cause of self-defense. Get a load of that shit, they wanna lie on a dead man. That aint right.

LOUIS

It aint at all. Deputy Jones came to see me earlier today, while I was at my shop. He told me the same damn thing. He say he gone kill me and my family if I don't corroborate Hurst story.

EDDIE

What you say to him?

LOUIS

I didn't say anything to that man. By the look in his eyes I could tell he was crazy enough to a do it.

EDDIE

What you do then?

LOUIS

Something I'm aint proud of.

EDDIE

You lied?

LOUIS

I told them what they wanted to hear [*A pause*] but it's tearing me up on the inside. I didn't want to lie on a dead man. I can't ask Herbert for forgiveness, he's dead. I just can't help to think I can do something to fix my mistake.

EDDIE

Whatcha thinking about doing, Louis?

LOUIS

I'm thinking about going to the FBI and telling them the truth... I was wondering if you would want to talk to them too.

BERNIECE

See, didn't I say not to let him in here. Now he is talking crazy-

LOUIS

I know I might sound crazy, but it's the only way we can help Herbert now-

BERNIECE

And what you think talking to the FBI is gonna do Louis? What makes you trust them so much? Don't you know they all connected, what liberty PD know, the FBI know, and what the FBI know Liberty PD knows. They fighting the same fight, the fight against us. Eddie see this man out.

LOUIS

Now wait one-minute ma'am, I understand that it's a risk. But hell, I'm a negro living in Liberty, Mississippi every day is a risk. That don't mean I should be afraid to do what's right.

While LOUIS and BERNIECE talks, EDDIE takes a moment and looks around the room. HE sees the family picture that BERNIECE previously shown HIM. HE looks at the family picture, admiring HIS family.

A beat.

EDDIE

Look Louis, I understand where you're coming from. What happen to Herbert Lee wasn't right and I believe that Hurst is an evil man. He will get what's coming for him, that's just the way life goes. *[A pause. EDDIE looks at BERNIECE]* But I got a family to think of man. I can't put them at risk.

LOUIS

I understand what it means to be the man of the house more than anyone. I want to see my son grow into a strong and powerful man. How he gone do that if he has to live being afraid of life? I'm doing this because of my family.

EDDIE

I wish things were different. I wish Herbert was still here. I wish I was brave as you to speak the truth. But Herbert is dead, and I'm not brave enough. I can only do what I know I can take care of my family.

EDDIE looks at BERNIECE crocheting and listening at the same time.

LOUIS

Well I see you made up your mind, and I will respect that. If you ever change your mind, come to my shop. I'll be there. I'll see y'all later.

*LOUIS tips HIS hat at
BERNEICE and heads
towards the door. EDDIE
walks HIM out. Just before
LOUIS exits out the door
EDDIE stops HIM.*

EDDIE

[HE whispers] Good luck, Louis.

*LOUIS exits the stage.
BERNEICE and EDDIE look
at each other, THEY know
what each other are thinking.
BERNEICE walks over to
EDDIE and gives HIM a hug.*

BERNEICE

I know you want to a make a change, but God has a plan. The bible says, the Lord will make you the head and not the tail; and you will ever have the highest place, if you give ear to the orders of the Lord your God which I give you today, to keep and to do them. I believe that one day all our pain and lost would be accounted for. One day our children would have the same rights as the white children across the tracks. I don't know when. I don't even know if I'll will even get to live to see it, but I know that it will happen. We just have to keep our faith and keep surviving.

EDDIE

Just keep surviving.

BERNEICE

That's right, Eddie. That's all we can do.

*BERNEICE and
EDDIE continue to
hold each other.*

Lights Down.

End of play.