

FINAL

**WHY IS EARTHA KITT TRYING TO KILL ME?: A LOVE STORY**

LIBRETTO

Composer: Jeffrey Dennis Smith

Librettist: David Johnston

*one-act opera for solo performer  
based on the one-act play by David Johnston*

*Developed by American Lyric Theater,  
Composer Librettist Development Program*

## **SYNOPSIS**

The setting is a police interrogation room in Queens, New York. The time is the present. A young man, JB Williams, tells an unseen police detective that he is innocent. He begins to tell a strange story, about an unknown crime and the late cabaret/film star Eartha Kitt. His life is in danger. He pleads for help.

JB relates how he saw Eartha Kitt about a month ago, just before he met the love of his life, Joey Cocteau, an up and coming young artist. He tells the detective about the first time he saw Joey – on the cover of a gay magazine. It was love at first sight and JB decides he must meet him. He tells of their first meeting.

He recalls seeing Eartha Kitt for the second time, while doing his laundry. She threatens his life with a machete. He tells of everything he knows about Joey and how he learned this information.

He describes the events of today, leading up to his interrogation. He goes to the Met Museum where he has another encounter with Eartha Kitt. He flees in a cab and goes to Queens. He arrives at his boyfriend's art opening. At the opening, JB follows Joey up to the roof. Joey lashes out and JB pushes him from the roof.

Joey falls but then starts to fly. It twists and flies and turns into hundreds and hundreds of Eartha Kitts.

JB acknowledges that a body was found on the street, outside the building. But he insists that he is innocent and pleads for understanding.

**Setting. The present. New York City.** A Saturday night, around 9 PM. Interrogation room at a police station in Queens. A long table in the center of the room with a pitcher of water, and a few glasses. Slowly rotating ceiling fan. Frosted glass windows on the doors, which look out onto empty corridors. The door windows are not clean, and will never be clean. An occasional shadow hurries past. There is a feeling of shabbiness, dinginess, of temporary walls that have been in place for twenty years.

It's midsummer in Queens, near Long Island City - dog days, late July/early August. The air is hot and heavy. The AC in this old City building is poor and the ceiling fan is the only circulation.

There is a coffee maker on top of a banged-up standard -sized file cabinet off to the side. Styrofoam cups. Very old looking can of nondairy powdered coffee creamer, sweeteners and stirrers in another cup. There are a few old office chairs, with hard swivel backs and squeaky wheels. The institutional lighting is harsh and overhead, and the room still feels shadowy. The bottom of the table is dotted with gum. The floor has been spit on a million times.

There is a handsome man. He is well dressed in a casual suit with a light summer sport coat. Nice, but not too expensive. His build is slight. In easier moments, he is engaging and open. At this particular moment, he is visibly anxious and upset. His name is **JB Williams**. He is standing, and speaks to an unseen person, a policeman or detective.

**JB**

I know it looks bad.  
Yes, it looks bad.  
I didn't do it.  
It wasn't me.  
It wasn't.  
I'm innocent.

Can I go now?  
Can I go home?  
I know why I'm here  
But I didn't do it.  
I know what happened  
But it wasn't me.

I need to get up.  
I have things to do.  
Must speak to the super;  
the bathroom light's out.  
They need me at work.  
They're pissed if I'm late  
I have to pay bills.  
Pick up my shirts.  
I ran out of juice.

I've had a long day

Long day.  
It's been stressful.  
I didn't have lunch.  
Blood sugar's dropping.  
You have no idea what I went through today.

J.B. Williams.

Thirty-six. {Twenty-six.} {Forty-six.}

No. Not married.  
Single.  
Single *now*.

I'll tell you.

I know it looks bad.  
Yes, it looks bad.  
I didn't do it.  
It wasn't me.  
It wasn't me.  
It wasn't me.  
It was –  
Eartha Kitt.

Yes, Eartha Kitt.

Yes. She was "Catwoman!"  
I know.  
That's not all she did.  
Film, Broadway, Cabaret.

Yes. She's dead.  
I know.  
And guess what!  
She's trying to kill me!  
I don't know why she's trying to kill me!  
Me! Why me?  
I love her music.

Loved her, loved her since I was a kid.  
There was Vaughan Lee  
Piaf Clooney.

No, Rosemary Clooney.

(He thinks for a moment.)

Rosemary Clooney never tried to kill me.

But Eartha Kitt,  
oh she was different,  
wicked, witchy.  
She growled, purred,  
crooned, shrieked!  
"Where Is My Man?"  
"I Want to Be Evil"  
"I Love Men!"  
"I'd Rather Be Burned as a Witch"

She loved to be bad!  
She didn't need men.  
They needed her.  
When she was done she threw them away

I know it looks bad.  
I know.  
But I didn't do it.  
It wasn't me.  
It wasn't.  
It was Eartha Kitt.

You have to believe.  
You have to listen.  
You have to save me from Eartha Kitt!

(He is overwhelmed for a moment. He looks over to the side and suddenly brightens.)

Oh! You have coffee!

(He goes to the battered coffee maker, picks up a Styrofoam cup from the stack nearby and pours out a cup.)

Half and half?

(Apparently the answer is no. He picks up the powdered creamer, examines it and puts it down again. He takes a sugar packet, tears off the top and empties it into his coffee. He takes a second sugar packet, tears off the top, and empties it into his coffee. He takes a third sugar packet, tears off the top, and empties it into his coffee. He returns to the table.)

Here's the story.

(He sips.)

I saw Eartha Kitt a month ago –

I know she's dead!  
Just listen.

(He sips.)

I saw Eartha Kitt a month ago.  
This was just before I met Joey Cocteau.  
Joey Cocteau.  
The reason I'm here.  
Right?

Times Square, Belasco Theater.  
I see Eartha Kitt,  
I know she died,  
I think it's odd, to see Eartha Kitt  
Belasco Theater, Times Square.

(His hands flutter. Slowly his balance shifts as his weight moves onto the balls of his feet.)

The gorgeous black dress, leopard hat, veil, sunglasses, blood red lips.  
She totters on enormous high heels.  
She carries a tasteful jeweled clutch.

(The gestures slow and cease as if the spell is broken.)

She goes inside.  
Maybe it's not her.  
Maybe I'm wrong.  
I think it's odd,  
To see Eartha Kitt  
Belasco Theater, Times Square.

(JB takes a sip of coffee. He sits in the chair at the front of the table.)

My God, it's hot.

(He looks up.)

Do any of these windows open?

(Apparently, the answer is no. He shifts uncomfortably.)

Stick to the subject. Stick to the subject. Stick to the subject.  
Joey Cocteau.

First saw Joey a month ago.  
A month ago, when this happened.  
Laundromat, up on Amsterdam.  
Cover of a gay magazine someone had left in the laundromat.  
Profile of the hot new artist.  
His name  
Joey Cocteau

(He smiles. The smile is open and warm and full of hope.)

I see his picture. I love him forever.  
I love him. I love him.  
I love him. I love him.  
Eyes like almonds, torso, smooth.  
Smooth as glass right over his heart.

(He places his hand tenderly on his heart.)

The picture.  
Joey. Naked.  
Bubble bath.  
Holding a football helmet.  
He's soapy slick wet and ready!

He loves to pose for gay magazines.  
Views it as part of his art.  
A sculptor, an artist, but built like a pornstar!

Right on the edge.

(He pats his chest once with one hand.)

Right on the edge.

(He pats his chest again with one hand.)

Right on the edge of making it big.

(He pats his chest with both hands.)

So - I have to meet him!  
Gay bar, midtown.  
Hot new place.  
Cowboy western.  
They serve beer in cans and French fries with gravy.  
They're showing one piece of his.  
A sculpture by Joey Cocteau.

I arrive.

There's a crowd in the center there's Joey

So handsome he gleams. It hurts to look.

My mouth dries up. My hands shake.

Someone so beautiful. I could not believe.

I know I would die if this man would love me.

I know I would die if this man if this man would love me

He sees me. He sees me.

He sees me and smiles.

And that's how we began.

(He sighs, and sits back down. He notices the ceiling fan.)

That doesn't really work, does it?

The ceiling fan.

(JB stands.)

OK, back to Eartha Kitt!

(He begins to walk around the table, slowly at first.)

The second time I saw Eartha Kitt,

Laundromat, Amsterdam.

Where I first saw his picture.

The same Laundromat.

Why didn't I know? Why didn't I see it?

Why didn't I know?

(As he walks, his gait changes. His walk becomes faster. A predator in enormous high heels. His hands begin to make sweeping claw-like gestures through the air.)

The gorgeous black dress, leopard hat, veil, sunglasses, blood red lips.

Eartha Kitt at the Laundromat!

Eartha Kitt at the Laundromat!

DEAD Eartha Kitt in the Laundromat.

Eartha Kitt doesn't have a washing machine?

Eartha Kitt does her own laundry?

And - Laundromat's filled with people!



But no one looks up!  
No one sees her!  
I know, right? What the fuck?  
Why –

then she turns

In her hands,  
a machete.

(He suddenly stops.)

*A machete?*  
Eartha Kitt has a machete!  
At the Laundromat!

She sees me. She sees me.  
She sees me and laughs.  
Laughs, laughs. Laughs.  
She laughs, she blows a kiss

(He blows a kiss.)

and she's gone.

(He sits.)

I'm scared.

Even if she's dead  
I. Am. Scared.

(He sees the pitcher of water on the table.)

May I?

(He pours himself a glass of water. He takes a sip. He sits. He sips again. He leaps up from his chair, smiling, his manner light and easy.)

I know where he lives. I know where he shops.  
I know who his friends are and where they all work.  
I know he takes soymilk and never eats dairy.  
I know he likes to watch Dancing with the Stars.  
I know he likes smoothies and I know his cell phone.  
I know on Fridays he works on his pecs.  
I know he thinks that Matt Damon is sexy.  
I know he's thinking about going vegan.

I know he recycles the paper and plastic.  
Google is great. Google is easy.  
Google is how I know all about Joey!

I know he's on Facebook and wants a tattoo.  
I know he thinks Kylie has lost her direction.  
I know he takes selfies while running the treadmill.  
I know he'd like to go to Burning Man next year.  
I know his personal trainer is Carlos.  
I know he's into alternative healing.  
I know his shoe size.

(He visually indicates a small shoe size.)

Nine and a half.  
I know he's allergic to lobster and peanuts.  
I know he's concerned about carbon emissions.  
Google is great. Google is easy.  
Google is how I know all about Joey!

He'll never know.  
He can't understand.  
He has no idea how much I love him.

I know he loves Meryl but hates Sandra Bullock.  
I know he likes malbec and always sleeps naked.  
I know where his parents are living in Maine.  
I know his underwear size is a thirty.  
I know he keeps the shades open all morning.  
I know his email and all of his passwords.  
I know his Social Security number.  
I know last night he got in at four-thirty.  
I know his front door will give if you push it.  
Google is great. Google is easy.  
Google is how I know all about Joey!

Right on the edge.

(He pats his chest once with one hand.)

Right on the edge.

(He pats his chest again with one hand.)

Right on the edge

(He pats his chest with both hands.)

of making it big.

I see his picture. I love him forever.  
I love him. I love him.  
I love him. I love him.

(He sits.)

Let's talk about today.  
Let's start with this morning.  
This morning I wake up, and I'm thinking:

Tonight I see him at his art show.  
It opens later tonight. Queens.  
A room full of his sculptures,  
somewhere in – Queens.

I'm proud of Joey,  
proud of all he's done,  
proud he's mine,  
proud of my love.  
But I'm scared.

Can't relax!  
See him later tonight!  
How do I look?  
How is this jacket?  
Gym? Facial? New shirt?  
God I hate this haircut!  
Do I look fat?  
I know! I'm a mess.  
So I go to the Met.  
I love The Temple of Dendur  
Temple of Dendur  
Peaceful. Still.  
And I love mummies.

(He looks deliberately at the policeman.)

Now *this* is where things get weird.

(He reaches for his coffee and takes a sip. And another sip.)

Met Museum, Temple of Dendur.  
Egyptian temple. Coolness. Still.

Love it here. Quiet. Stone.  
This temple, this sculpture, this sarcophagus reminds me of Joey.  
I think of his smile, his eyes torso, smooth.  
Smooth as glass right over his heart.  
Breathe. Quiet. Peaceful. Calm.

Stay sharp! Be awake. Be alert!  
Eartha Kitt does not stop.  
Jesus that *machete*.  
What if she has a mace? A whip?  
Or God forbid a Ninja death star.  
Eartha Kitt can do anything.  
She worked with Orson Welles.

I won't think of her I won't think of her I won't think of  
But she's here

(He now slowly stands.)

A dark laugh up above.  
Laughter on top Temple of Dendur  
She stands, on top.

(His weight gradually shifts to the balls of his feet as he paces the room.)

The gorgeous black dress, leopard hat, veil, sunglasses, blood red lips.  
Eartha Kitt totters on enormous high heels.  
On top, Temple of Dendur.  
In her arms in her arms in her arms  
a machine gun.  
An AK-Forty Seven.

(He turns to the cop.)

Is an AK-Forty Seven a machine gun?  
I don't know these things.

(He goes back to his story. His arms cradle an invisible rifle.)

Holy shit holy shit Holy shit.  
Holy shit.  
Dead Eartha Kitt. Dead Eartha Kitt.  
Dead Eartha Kitt has a machine gun  
She sees me. She sees me.  
She sees me and laughs. Laughs.  
She laughs, she blows a kiss

(He blows a kiss. He lifts the invisible machine gun.)

and she aims.

Duck dive bullets flying  
roll fall run for the door  
glass breaks screaming running  
where are the cops?  
OH FUCK shooting bullets flying run RUN  
Get away get AWAY from me.  
Move she's CRAZY  
WHY IS EARTHA KITT TRYING TO KILL ME?

(He covers his face a moment. He pulls a handkerchief from his pocket, and mops his brow.)

I have to get to Joey.

Get in a cab  
Give the address, somewhere in - Queens.

(He walks around the table several times, more and more agitated.)

Finally. We're in Queens.

I arrive  
There's a crowd and in the center, there's Joey  
A room filled with his artwork.  
He looks so handsome.  
And I feel so loved.  
But something is wrong. He won't talk to me.  
He won't make eye contact.  
He looks angry. Angry at me.  
Why is he angry?  
It's his big night.  
He hurries out and I follow.  
I just want to know what's bothering him.  
He goes upstairs to the roof.

(He sweeps the glasses and pitcher off the table, and they shatter on the floor. He climbs on the table and stands. A shadow hurries past the door.)

I see him standing right on the ledge.  
He's *smoking*. Never saw him do that.

I say to him, "Baby, you shouldn't smoke."  
Then he turns.

“Why are you HERE?  
Why do you KEEP BOTHERING ME?  
Why do you KEEP FOLLOWING ME?  
I TOLD YOU BEFORE  
Leave me ALONE.  
Stay away from my HOME.  
Away from my FRIENDS.  
Away from my FAMILY  
AWAY FROM ME  
LEAVE ME ALONE OR I’LL CALL THE POLICE.  
GET AWAY GET AWAY FROM ME MOVE.  
YOU’RE CRAZY!”

Right on the edge.

(He pats his chest once with one hand.)

Right on the edge.

(He pats his chest again.)

Right on the edge

(JB makes a pushing gesture with both hands.)

and I push  
I push him  
right over his heart.  
and he falls

(JB is now facing out, standing on the table, arms open wide.)

I knew as I pushed him it was not Joey.  
It wasn’t him. It wasn’t. It wasn’t.  
Falls from the roof, falls, twists, curls into a shape.  
The shape that was Joey starts flying

(JB’s body changes; his weight moves onto the balls of his feet...)

Twisting and flying up into the night

(...his hands clench and lengthen...)

Twisting and flying

(...his smile twists open. It’s a smile of demonic possession, elation, a gaping grimace.)

and turning into the gorgeous black dress, leopard hat, veil, sunglasses, blood red lips.

(He sees a vision; hellish, a nightmare.)

I look up and the sky is filled with  
her

And her. And her.

And her. And her.

And her.

Dozens. *Hundreds.*

Hundreds of her flying like crows witches bats  
black dresses veils hats black dresses veils the sky  
screams like rats and crows and cats  
cats and rats and knives and bats  
knives and bombs and guns and rats.

Laughing shrieking fills the sky.

Hundreds hundreds hundreds more hundreds hundreds hundreds more

Laughing shrieking fills the sky.

Fly into buildings explode flames explode explode explode  
screaming night sky shrieking filled with laughter laughter and screams  
flames explode explode explode! Ah!

They see me. They see me.

They see me and laugh. Laugh, laugh, laugh.

They laugh, laugh, laugh, laugh.

They laugh. They blow me a kiss and I'm gone

(JB collapses on the table. He's crouched on his knees, hands on head. He looks up. A shadow appears at the door, then a second, watching and waiting. He is quiet now, hushed – and terrified.)

You found a body on the street

fell from roof building Queens.

But not my Joey.

It wasn't him. It wasn't.

She tricked me.

He couldn't have said that. Not my Joey.

He couldn't have said:

"Get away, get away from me. Move. You're crazy."

He wouldn't say that. Not my Joey.

I see his picture. I love him forever.

I love him. I love him. I love him. I love him.

It wasn't him. It wasn't. It wasn't.

I don't know why she's trying to kill me!

I know it looks bad.

I know. I KNOW.

I didn't do it.  
It wasn't me.  
It wasn't me.  
It wasn't me.  
It was

(Blackout.)

**THE END**