

A LAYING OF HANDS
(a drama)

by

Michele Verhoosky

© 1992
All Rights Reserved
Revised May, 2007

Michele Verhoosky
Lockwood Folly
2984 Lake Point Drive S.W.
Supply, NC 28462
Phone: 910-846-3535
e-mail: MicheleL1@earthlink.net

Michele Verhoosky

“A Laying of Hands” Synopsis

“*A Laying of Hands*” is a coming-of-age drama about a young deaf black woman’s “gift” and its effect on her family and community in a racially segregated Georgia town during the Depression.

When the story opens, Rita Mae (*Cicely Tyson*) age late 70s, is taken once again to her grandmother’s farmland, site of The General Store, which is to be razed to make way for a WalMart and new housing development. There, under memory’s spell, she tells real-estate agent Darleen Beason (*Ellen Barkin*) the incredible story of Hepsheba Jenkins (*Halle Berry*), The Miracle Woman of Watkinsville County, who once cured Rita Mae of her deafness with just a touch of her hands.

Shipped down on the train from Chicago by their beautiful pass-for-white mother, Madeline, young Rita Mae, age 9, and her little brother, Tyler, age 7, are met by their stern but handsome grandmother, Louella (*Oprah Winfrey*). As she leads them away from the station, Rita Mae is struck by the brief glimpses into the lives of the wealthy whites they pass: Vivian Harrleson (*Ashley Judd*), her husband, Dr. Lloyd Harrleson (*Ben Affleck*), her son, Rex (*Taylor Handley*) and Rex’s girlfriend, Sandy Campbell (*Lindsay Lohan*). Life in her new home inside Colored Section’s General Store is disorienting. There the children meet Sheba, their crippled deaf aunt, along with Yvonne Hendricks (*Jennifer Hudson*), Ben Coleman (*Denzel Washington*), his wife, Glory, (*Beyonce Knowles*), and their son, Willie. From them they learn they will be going to a revival meeting that Saturday in the hopes that Rev. Moses (*Eddie Murphy*) can cure Sheba, fulfilling Louella’s fondest wish.

Before the revival, Glory is faced with the unpleasant task of informing Vivian that Sandy is pregnant by her son, Rex. The repercussions of that accusation are felt on the night of the revival when a furious Sheba storms out of the revival tent after being subjected to yet another failed “miracle.” It is Sheba, powerless to sound the alarm, who sees the approaching Klan. Led by Dr. Harrleson, the Klan strings Ben up to die in retaliation against Glory, clubbing Rita Mae to within an inch of death with Sheba’s own cane. Held responsible in the aftermath by Louella, Sheba curses God and her fate, only to be miraculously “blessed” with the power to heal. Sheba uses this newfound power to heal Ben and, at Louella’s behest, Rita Mae. Although Rita Mae’s broken body recovers, she remains deaf from her injuries.

Sheba and Rita Mae forge a shared bond, much to Louella’s consternation. Word of Sheba’s incredible powers gets out until she is the black community’s newly appointed Miracle Woman. Louella consistently needles Sheba to cure first Rita Mae, and then herself. Yet it is not until after Sheba cures Rex and Sandy’s infant daughter, during a polio epidemic, that she works her true miracle. And more than half a century later Rita Mae, embracing the past, finds the courage to use the gift so lovingly passed.

This play is of the genre of: “*Phenomenon*,” “*A Time To Kill*,” “*Eve’s Bayou*,” “*The Man In The Moon*,” and “*Children of A Lesser God*.”

A LAYING OF HANDS

Character Analysis & Cast Breakdown

(In order of appearance)

ADULT RITA MAE – Age: Late 70s. Black. A woman of great warmth, incredible life experiences, and dignity. Modeled after Maya Angelou. Very insightful, able to empathize as the result of having much responsibility foisted on her from a very early age. Separated from both parents at an early age. Responsible for caring for her little brother, Tyler. Well educated, the result of an inner thirst for knowledge and self-discipline coupled with the support and expectations of her grandmother and Aunt Sheba. Very aware of others' sense of pain and isolation as she has those components in her own makeup. Life goal is to try to make a difference, to ease other's pain so that her spirit might be calmed. Has no children of her own. Closest she ever came to feeling truly accepted and understood was with Aunt Sheba.

DARLEEN BEASON – Age: 40s. White. A chatty, brassy real-estate agent whose insecurities and inner scars caused by a "poor white trash" upbringing are masked behind makeup, clothes, and big hair. Single, she fights a gnawing sense of desperation with determined optimism, undergoing an epiphany by the end of Rita Mae's story.

YOUNG RITA MAE – Age: 9. Black. Very perceptive, well-mannered, almost overly polite as the result of anxiety over what is to become of her and Tyler now that her mother, Madeline, has sent them away. Drawn to Aunt Sheba in part because she sees that Aunt Sheba is also an outsider within her own family.

TYLER – Age: 7. Black. Not as ambitious or intelligent as Rita Mae, but more easily loved. Has a tendency to coast on his innate cuteness and natural charm. Others, especially the women in his life, are quick to help him, and he takes advantage of this. Louella, his grandmother, is the only one who consistently calls him on this fault. Feels extreme culture shock in Bishop. Homesick for Madeline and the easy life. Loves Rita Mae like a second mother.

LOUELLA JENKINS (GRANDMA) – Age: 40s. Black. A woman of fierce pride, determination and strength. Inner warmth often masked by her sense of crushing responsibility. Twice married, twice deserted. Oldest daughter, Madeline, left home early for the glamour of Chicago. Feels abandoned and resentful that not only is she responsible for picking up the pieces and carrying on, but that others expect that of her since she is so strong. Well respected in the community, but feels as if no one really loves her. Secretly longs to find someone strong enough to shoulder her burdens. Her fierce belief in religion stems partly from an almost romantic notion that God is not only the good Father, but the ultimate Lover, there to soothe and never demand. Her relationship with Sheba is twisted up in love, guilt, anxiety and resentment.

VIVIAN HARRLESON – Age: early 40s. White. A steel magnolia leading a life of luxury and quiet desperation. Married out of a sense of duty and love, only to discover that she hardly recognizes her husband, Dr. Lloyd Harrleson, as the young man she married. Staying in marriage out of a sense of commitment and fear of social scandal, she harbors sickening suspicions that her husband is engaged in clandestine activities, and is extremely anxious that her son, Rex, escapes the insidious pull of the South's dark side.

REX HARRLESON/KLANSMAN – Age: 18. White. Handsome, sensitive, intelligent son of town's doctor. Trapped between a racist father and a social climbing mother, he is gnawed by his own budding sense of social responsibility. His marrying Sandy and seeking Sheba's help is a real act of courage and the first step down the road of change he decides to pursue.

SANDY CAMPBELL – Age: 18. White. Pretty, young, awkward and insecure due to her youth and precarious social standing. Bullied by her father and unsupported by a spineless mother, Sandy is riddled with self-doubt. She is drawn to Rex, not only for his good looks, but for the inner potential she senses he carries inside. Frightened at finding herself pregnant, she is consumed with worry. What will happen to her? Will Rex stand by her? Has she ruined their lives?

GLORY COLEMAN – Age: 30. Black. Striking. Proud. Strong work ethic. Tries to control circumstances and others so that she can calm her inner fears. Loves Ben and Willie passionately, but is afraid if she shows just how much, as she might inadvertently lose them. Innately mistrustful and jealous of Sheba, not just for her power to heal but for her power over Ben. Why is Ben so drawn to a deaf cripple?

HEPSHEBA JENKINS (AUNT SHEBA) – Age: early 20s. Black. A whirlwind of talent, ambition, spirit and drive cruelly stunted at an early age due to complications of polio meningitis. All those qualities live on, but because she is dependent on Louella, all those hopes and dreams wither daily. No one sees Sheba. All they see is the crippled, black deaf woman. And later, all they want is her gift. No one sees the real Sheba with the exception of Rita Mae and Ben. Sheba is drawn to Ben’s wit and charm. But her friendship with Ben is thwarted by Glory. Sheba is locked in a battle with Louella, who wants to restore Sheba while subconsciously needing to keep Sheba dependent. When Rita Mae appears, Sheba ultimately sees herself. Her relationship with Rita Mae during her period of deafness is in part Sheba’s attempt to rewrite her own history as well as an outlet for all the love Sheba holds inside but fears she may never have the opportunity to express to a family of her own. She is angry at God, at Louella, at her limited circumstances. And yet, she is frightened. Where would she be without them? In giving up Rita Mae by curing her deafness she performs both the ultimate sacrifice and the ultimate act of faith.

OFF-STAGE INTERPRETER – Age: female, early 20s. Black. We do not see the Interpreter until the curtain call, but she is a vital character, giving voice to Sheba’s words and inner thoughts, speaking over a microphone.

YVONNE HENDRICKS – Age: 30. Black. Sassy. Uses her tongue and her body to get what she wants. Getting desperate as she gets older. Will she ever be able to escape Bishop and her life as a domestic? Secretly envious of Madeline and the life of ease she imagines Madeline living in Chicago. Attracted to Ben, but deliberately puts him down as she secretly fears he represents her need to settle for less than what she wants. Her saving grace is her sense of humor. She can see the absurdity in her surroundings.

BENJAMIN COLEMAN – Age 30s. Black. A man who transcends many of the negatives of his time and place, uplifting those around him. Initially, Ben appears almost childlike with his boyish good humor. But he possesses a core of inner strength and a fierce need to protect not only those he loves, but those he perceives as weak and downtrodden. He is drawn to Sheba because he senses she too is “more than meets the eye.” Though respectful of tradition, church does not feed Ben’s soul to the same degree as does Sheba’s mysticism. Sheba, and her gift of healing, fascinate Ben. It is as if, through her, he can glimpse the window of opportunity into another world, one far removed from his current existence where a black man’s opportunities are severely limited.

WILLIE COLEMAN – Age: 13. Black. Glory and Ben’s son. A younger of Ben. Would prefer coasting on charm if only Glory would let him get away with it. Forced to grow up quickly when he witnesses Ben’s lynching. What would he do without his anchor? Without Ben, who will show him how to maneuver the rocky path of black manhood?

DR. LLOYED HARRLESON/KLANSMAN – Age: mid 40’s. White. Town doctor. Educated, yet bigoted and biased, a product of his times, class, and upbringing. His over-inflated sense of importance, pride and ego mask deep inner fears and insecurities. He compensates for these inner “weaknesses” by seeking to dominate and control, especially his reluctant son, Rex, whom he is trying to mold in his footsteps.

CROWD/CHORUS - Age: child – adult. Black.

REV. MOSES – Age: 40’s. Black. Riveting. Charismatic. Well meaning, but puffed up with a sense of self-importance. Has great gifts, but puts himself over God. Sheba is his greatest challenge. His inability to cure her deafness in comparison to the pain of his wounded pride. Sheba takes all that he holds sacred and turns it on its head. Never before has he met such a skeptic. Never before has he been unable to win a sinner over with the sheer force of his personality. Never before has he been forced to examine his faith only to be badly shaken to realize just how flimsy the foundation that has supported him truly is.

KLANSMEN – Age: teens – adult. White. Dressed in the traditional hooded white robes, their individual identities are hidden, but their bigoted hatred is clearly revealed.

BROTHER SIMON –Age 50. Black. Shares many of Rev. Moses’ character traits without the redeeming qualities. Out for his own good. Will exploit any power and prey upon any weakness to elevate himself. Cynical. Thinks Sheba’s ability to heal is some magic trick he hasn’t yet figured out. But the lure of monetary gain dispels any qualms. Thinks life is like a deck of cards stacked against you. The way to stay in the game is by any means possible.

BABY LANIE – 1 month old daughter of Rex and Sandy. White. (*Note: She is actually a swaddled doll in a wicker bassinet*).