

# **BEETHOVEN AND MISFORTUNE COOKIES**

(Based on the True Life Story of Kabin Thomas)

Written by Joni Ravenna

In 2006, Kabin Thomas - a 43 year-old, African American Music Appreciation Professor at The University of Arkansas whose classes all had wait lists and a 90% attendance record - was fired after a white student complained about the use of profanity and a graphic image depicting a lynching in one of his lessons. This is the story of how he lost himself and then found his way back.

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- **Character Description** KABIN THOMAS, adored by students who clamored to be a part of his class.

- **Set Requirements** Upstage there is an old radio circa 1960 atop a side table. Stage Right is a desk with a CD player and a chair. Near desk is an easel and a flip board to depict the illustrations of Beethoven, Lady Day, and one graphic image which led to Thomas' firing. Stage Left is an old couch and behind it perhaps some file cabinets. As for props, there is a slip knot - ready-for-lynching- rope.

- **Time & Place.** The play is one continuous scene that goes back and forth in time between the present sessions with the psychiatrist (2007/8) and the past lessons in the classroom (1995-2006), and the 60's when Thomas was 11 in Detroit. There are classical and jazz music cues throughout along with lighting cues which are optional but may help to delineate between time and place.

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### **SET:**

**There is a desk center stage upon which sits a CD player. To the right of the desk is an easel with a Flip Chart. A small sofa is down stage left.**

*--Lights up on Kabin Thomas, a rather rotund, 40-something, African American Music teacher. He is center stage near his desk.--*

### **KABIN (to the Audience as though his classroom):**

Hello Class. My name is Kabin Thomas, and I will be your Music Appreciation Professor for the semester. But, before I begin: For those of you who are offended by profanity, I urge you to get the fuck out of this class right now. (beat) And to the rest, I look forward to teaching whomever remains of the 250 of you; and I can promise you one thing: This class will never be tedious. Class dismissed.

*--Lights Change. Kabin sits on edge of desk and talks to the audience members, but we sense he is also relaying the story to his Psychiatrist.--*

### **KABIN**

I started every semester the same way for 10 years; never a problem. Sure, there was a complaint here and there, but for every kid who dropped out, there were forty waiting to get in.

Every year, my class had a wait list. The list would become so long, they'd add another class, and then another. I was up to four classes that year, all of them with wait lists. Easy A?

Sure, but I also had a 90% attendance record.... A University of Arkansas 90% attendance record for 10 years! Come on, these kids loved me!

Listen, I appreciate being able to talk to you Angela, I really do. But you shrinks are all the same. It's always Mommy or Daddy's fault. Well my childhood was okay. Sure, my dad died when I was just a baby and my mom...she didn't tell me the truth about how he died until I was 13. But I don't want to talk about that. I'm here because I got fired. I was a professor for eleven years. The school claimed that I had a radical teaching style and that I used profanity, which I did. But it was always to make a point. And they also said that I showed a graphic photo in connection with one of my lessons; and that's true... but my students LOVED me and still, the school fired me. So that's how I ended up out here.

***--LIGHTS CHANGE. Kabin resumes teaching class--***

**KABIN**

Today, Beethoven!

***--He crosses to flip-board and displays a picture of Beethoven--.***

This is what I can tell you about Beethoven. Ludwig Van Beethoven, born December 16, 1770, long considered Europe's greatest classical music composer, was a black man. Specifically, his mother was a Moore, that group of Muslim Northern Africans who conquered parts of Europe, making Spain their capital for some 800 years.

I bet most of you who have been listening to Beethoven never realized that all this time you were listening to soul music.

## **KABIN (Cont.)**

But yes, his mother was a Moore and his father... Well, Beethoven's dad was one of the great bastards of all time. He was an asshole. No, not an asshole; he was an ass crater. He was a drunk, and he was frustrated that his son, Ludwig, had all of this magic, but he wasn't as good as Mozart. Mozart could create music on command, and it would be exquisite; it would be delightful, and people would remember it. Beethoven had to struggle like a son of a bitch to make his music work. He had to work at it and work at it.

The beginning of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony had to be done over maybe 20 to 30 times.

*--He starts, then stops the CD player several times so that we repeatedly hear THE FIRST FEW NOTES of Beethoven's Famous Fifth Symphony--*

## **KABIN (Cont.)**

He just couldn't find the right sequence. All that work just to get those first four notes right. But his dad didn't like that. That he had to *work* at the magic. It was just there for Mozart. For Mozart, it was effortless. So, when Johann van Beethoven came home, he kicked the cat, put the wife out, and beat the shit out of his son. He beat the shit out of him if he didn't practice enough.

He beat the shit out of him if he practiced too much. He beat the shit out of him if he hit the wrong note. He beat the shit out of him if he hit the right note. He beat the shit out of him just because he was there. I bet some of you know people like that. Maybe you have friends; maybe

it's one of you. I bet someone out there has gotten the shit beat out of them just for being there; just because the Genetic Lottery didn't spit you out a winning ticket. Well, here's the thing: Your DNA Does Not Account. (*He crosses to the easel and writes the letters DNA below the picture of Beethoven.*)

Forget about it. Throw it away if it sucks. Got gypped by a lousy set of parents? Put it behind you. Genetic Malcontent? Boo- Hoo, tell it to someone who cares! I say, if you were born with flat feet, become the best goddamn swimmer out there. Take the sour notes and tweak them like the Beet Meister did.

*--He crosses to desk to put in a new disk. We hear Beethoven's Adagio Movement of Pathetique--*

**KABIN (Cont.):**

Hear that? That's the adagio movement from Beethoven's "Pathétique Sonata." Hear it?

*--At end of the first few bars Kabin begins striking the seat of the chair forcefully, as if he were Beethoven's dad beating Ludwig--*

**KABIN (Cont.)**

You stupid son of a bitch. You worthless piece of shit. Do it again. Do it again. You stupid fuck. You dumb ass.

**KABIN (Cont.) (To Class)**

Did you see that? Beethoven took that anger and made some of the most beautiful music that you or I will ever hear. He made something glorious out of his misfortune, and we can do the same. We just have to take the sour notes and tweak them.

And if it doesn't come easy, work at it, then work at it some more, until you find exactly the right sound in exactly the right sequence, and the result will be pure beauty, no matter what kind of ugliness spawned it. (beat) Class dismissed.

*--Light Change. He is seated on the couch, now clearly directing his thoughts to his psychiatrist, Angela--*

**KABIN**

I guess I was lucky in some ways not to have a dad around. My lessons on Beethoven always reminded me of that. But, it was hard on my mom and my sisters and brothers when he died. Hell, what did I know? I was only one. - Look, I don't want to talk about that! I want to talk about the strangest thing that has ever happened to me.

This morning, my rear-view mirror fell off, and I couldn't get it to stay back on. I tried crazy glue, putty, everything, but nothing worked! What's so strange about that? Well the exact same thing happened to me once before, on the worst fucking day of my life, and I cursed that broken mirror and everything else that happened that day. Yet, now that it's happened again, I look at it as a sign: Fuck looking back. As long as you can see ahead of you. That's my bumper sticker. Fuck the past!

*--Lights Change, Kabin crosses to center stage--*

## **KABIN (to Class)**

Today, we pick up with Beethoven and the misfortune that would visit him in later years: his deafness. Was this just another evil that he could thank his son of a bitch father for? Or was it Typhus? What could have caused Beethoven to lose his hearing back then? It could have very well been lead- poisoning.

They used lead in everything back then, including medicine. One of the symptoms of lead- posing, besides bizarre and erratic behavior - including rages - is deafness. In fact, a sample of his hair years later proved that he had alarmingly high levels of lead in his system. Yet, even lead poisoning seldom led to the profound form of hearing loss that Beethoven exhibited.

You can bet he liked to play his music loud. He also had a habit of sticking his head into a huge vat of ice water just to stay awake... which, by the way, can be arranged for some of you sitting up there in the back.

All we know for certain is that by 1808, Beethoven started to hear this ringing in his ears- the beginnings of Tinnitus. By 1812, he could hear nothing. During this time, he was starting to become suicidal. So he moved to a little town called Heiligenstadt, just outside of Vienna. This is where he wrote what we know as the "Heiligenstadt Testament," a testament to life.

## **KABIN (Cont.)**

"Oh, what a bastard the devil is, but I will take this malady and I will persevere. I won't satisfy you, devil, who brings me such sadness by taking my own life. I will survive."

*--Kabin fiddles with the CD player. We hear Beethoven's 9th Symphony--*

And it was a damn good thing he did! Because some of his greatest and most introspective works came from when he was deaf. His glorious 9th Symphony, he couldn't hear a note. Probably one of the greatest pieces ever created by humankind! Yet, the only place Beethoven could hear it was in his head.

*--Music continues to play for a few bars as Kabin lets the music float through him. It is a balm, a drug, a salve, his salvation. He then begins speaking above the music to the class --*

And at the end of the premier of this masterwork, he had to be turned around to see that the audience was applauding wildly. Did they like it? Was it any good? He had no idea until then. *(music slowly fades out)*

And when he saw that, he began to weep. (beat) Class dismissed.

*--Lights Change and Kabin is once again talking to the audience, as though his psychiatrist--*

**KABIN**

I loved teaching... But when they took that away, just like Beethoven, I headed for the hills...Hollywood Hills.

**KABIN ( to the unseen producers of A Reality TV Weight Loss Show)**

Well, I didn't use to be this big. I gained a lot of weight out here! Nobody walks in LA.

*--A' Cappella, he sings the first bar of "Walking in L.A." by Missing Persons (1988)--*

“Walkin’ in LA... Walking in L. A.! Nobody walks in LA.”

*-- We can see that it doesn't go over as intended. He quickly regroups--*

**KABIN (Cont.)**

I can also play the tuba. I've subbed with some of the finest orchestras in the world.

(Beat) And, I've been a bouncer, and I cleaned stalls for a while in a porno book store on Hollywood and Vine. But, what I really am is a music professor, for ten.. .no, eleven years, at the University of Arkansas. Woooo pig sueeee, woooo pig sueeee wooo pig sueeee, Go Razorbacks! (As though he is interrupted) Oh, of course I'll sign a waiver.... No, I have no problem discussing why I'm so fat with the show's psychiatrist. That's the name of the show, right? "Why Are You So Fat", or "How'd you get so Fat?" Something like that. But, it's not a competition, right? I don't win anything if I lose the most weight? ...No? Okay. That's okay.

And since I'm signing a waiver, does...does that also mean no pay? Oh, ok... (with each sobering reality, he snaps himself back from the brink of discouragement to regain his enthusiasm) But it will appear on National Television, right?! ...The Discovery Channel? Ok, I'm in! LA ROCKS!!!

*-- Perhaps the lights change as yet again, Kabin is in a different place and time. He dons sunglasses, and suddenly, Mr. Cool, he strides into the spotlight--*

**KABIN (Cont.)**

Welcome to HOLLYWOOD, where everyone wants you to have a nice day. And why not? There's beautiful sunshine and fresh air. (He coughs, removes glasses.)

*-- Kabin suddenly seems to hear the voices. We hear the Sound of a distant metronome ticking away. --*

**KABIN** *(to himself, agitated)*

You have no talent, Kabin. You're a fucking moron, Kabin. You're not an artist young man, you are a pretender! How can one learn from a pretender?!? You reap what you sew, Kabin. You sew a sow! You are a sow!! You fucking sow!!!

*--Lights change again. Miles Davis' instrumental "So What" plays low as Kabin speaks to the audience--*

**KABIN**

I was talking to the show's shrink and telling her how I would listen to jazz artists like Miles Davis, Eddie Harris and how I took up the tuba myself to drown out those voices. *(music fades)*.

And then I found beer. Which works even better. But no more, I promised her. No more beer. After all, how can I stay sober if I drink? And if I'm drunk, I lose the gig. The Tuba is actually better anyway. It's like a fog horn; it blankets everything, so nothing gets through. Did you know that only 1 % of the population plays an instrument? And I chose a big instrument.

My father played one of the most delicate instruments there is. But it's easy to break a Violin. You can't break a TUBA though! My dad wanted to be a professional violinist, but my mom said that he wasn't good enough. I've subbed with some of the finest orchestras in the world, by the way. I know he was a teacher. He taught math in grade school. I'm a professor. He served in the Marines. I served in the Coast Guard. Marines take lives. Coast Guards save them. I didn't know him, but I always managed to one up him. The question is, what happens now? I'm 43, the same age he was when he died. Soon, I'll be 44. Who wins then?

**KABIN (Cont.)**

So, I am telling her about this newspaper calling me a cancer on the university! A fucking cancer! A Blight I could have lived with. But a Cancer? My mother had just died of ovarian cancer the year before.

I wonder did they know that over 400 students signed petitions to have me reinstated. Did they know that? Huh? Whatever. Music was my life. It was as important to me as breathing; and now I was drowning. Without my class, who was I? What was I? Some fucking sideshow on another flash-in-the-pan, pseudo-psychological reality series? Of course, when I said that, the shrink got offended. But the shrink I didn't give a shit about. It was the producers who I wanted to convince. The producers!! So, I got an idea to ask them if I could come to their office and have a meeting with them, or if they were on the set, if maybe they could come and meet with me. So, they agreed. And there I am *thanking them*... **--He crosses down stage center, then begins talking to the Producers up in the light booth--**

**KABIN (to Producers)**

“First of all, I just want to thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to meet with me; and also I want to let you to know how much I really enjoy participating in ‘Why Are You So Fat?’ or, ‘How Come You're So Fat?’ (*searching*) I mean, uh, ‘What’s Making You Look So Fat This Week?’” ... “It’s ‘What Makes capital U capital S Fat!’” They said. “Oh,” I said. “What makes *US* fat?” Ok, that’s cool, capital U capital S as in the U.S. Oh yeah, that’s good. I got it now. But what I would really like to talk to you about is an idea that I had that would more fully utilize my talent, you see... Oh you have no more room?