

THE EAGLE AND THE OLD WOMAN

A one-act fable by
Midge Guerrero

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www.youthplays.com
info@youthplays.com
424-703-5315

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

GREAT EAGLE, this stately and magical creature has a commanding presence.

PICA, a very proper white-necked picathartes bird.

SHARPI, a sarcastic and all-seeing apalis bird.

OLD WOMAN, who has a kind and generous heart but is easily swayed.

ELEPHANT, knowledgeable and not afraid to trumpet their thoughts.

ELEPHANT 2, outspoken and smart.

CRESTED TERN, a bird who remembers everything.

SANDWICH TERN, an opinionated bird.

VILLAGER 1, would do anything for Old Woman.

VILLAGER 2, hard worker who reveres Old Woman.

VILLAGER 3, willing to take chances.

VILLAGER 4, loves Old Woman.

VILLAGER 5, grateful member of the community.

VILLAGER 6, not afraid to tell the truth.

ABABUO, the selfish and rude granddaughter of Old Woman.

EAGLET 1, energetic wee eagle.

EAGLET 2, fearful baby eagle.

TWO MUSICIANS, may double as actors, or this can be recorded.

Casting Note: If all the roles are played by different actors, the play may be performed by 3 females, with 16 roles that can be played by performers of any gender. Feel free to augment the cast and add more animals or villagers. Or, 3 female actors and 4 actors of any gender can play all the roles. Villagers, Elephants

and Tern birds may be combined into fewer characters.

SETTING

A faraway land on a great African plain. Yesterday, today or tomorrow.

NOTES

An energetic troupe—in story theatre fashion—becomes the numerous characters in the tale. Bracketed words and phrases are translations of the Twi language and are not part of the dialogue. There is a tribal feeling. Drums, traditional African instruments and artifacts may be seen onstage and used to augment the story line. The cast may sit with the instruments—doubling as musicians and transforming into the characters. Puppets of all types—shadow, Bunraku, full body, etc.—and/or projections can simulate the animals on the plains. The expanse of the plain and the village can be found in our imaginations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Eagle and the Old Woman premiered at the Villagers Theatre (Franklin Township, NJ) in August 2003 as part of the Villagers Summer Theatre Arts Program.

The Villagers Theatre production of *The Eagle and the Old Woman* was produced by Donna Kimberlin with the following team:

Director, Janet Cantore Watson; Choreographer, Holly Jahn

The cast included the 35 children ages 6 to 12 that enrolled in the program.

SCENE 1

(Sounds of talking drums drift like a hot summer breeze across the horizon.)

(SHARPI and PICA are perched on a tree. Sharpi's narrator voice is very proper and rich. Their own voice, spoken to the audience as an aside, is comical and light. Animals are grazing on the great plain. GREAT EAGLE soars high in the morning sky.)

SHARPI: *(Narrator voice:)* In the great plains of southern Ghana, where the Ashanti lived, it is said that there once was the most generous of eagles.

(Enter feeble, limping OLD WOMAN.)

PICA: One hot and blistering day, Great Eagle spied an ancient woman painfully limping down a long and dusty trail. Great Eagle hovered over the woman and felt her agony.

SHARPI: *(Own voice:)* Look at those legs!! Disgusting!

PICA: *(Shooting Sharpi a look and whispering:)* Sharpi –

SHARPI: *(Narrator voice:)* She noticed that the old woman's legs were –

(Own voice:) Disgusting, disgusting, bleeeuuucch!

(Narrator voice:) – completely covered with big, oozing sores.

PICA: The pain of each step was etched on her face.

(Great Eagle appears next to Old Woman.)

SHARPI: Her pain pierced the heart of Great Eagle.

GREAT EAGLE: How do you walk the earth with a leg so injured?

OLD WOMAN: *(A smile in her voice:)* My heart is so full of love that I feel like I'm floating.

SHARPI: *(Own voice:)* Good trick!

GREAT EAGLE: You really feel no pain?

OLD WOMAN: I only feel love. Love for my daughter's daughter, Ababuo [child that keeps coming back]. Love for my mogya [soul]—

PICA: —her flesh and blood.

GREAT EAGLE: Love is a great healer.

OLD WOMAN: My daughter died during the drought, and the child is all that I have left. I walk happily to find the unbruised bananas she craves.

SHARPI: (*Narrator voice:*) As the woman slowly walked— (*Own voice:*) This ancient one drags her leg for unbruised bananas?

PICA: Great Eagle circled her and thought many thoughts.

GREAT EAGLE: I could help the woman.

SHARPI: (*Narrator voice:*) But should she?

GREAT EAGLE: Humans have a short memory.

SHARPI: She could gift the woman a wonderful life.

GREAT EAGLE: With love that strong—

PICA: —this human would appreciate her gifts—

GREAT EAGLE: —and embrace my family with her love.

PICA: Perhaps.

SHARPI: Never.

PICA: Never?

SHARPI: Never, never, never!

GREAT EAGLE: Look at her hobbling in pain to serve the child she loves.

PICA: This old woman bursts with love.

GREAT EAGLE: She would of course honor the one who helps her.

PICA: Careful—

SHARPI: —she's so full of love for her granddaughter, there might not be room for you.

(Great Eagle soars up to the sky, decides not to leave and floats down to Old Woman.)

GREAT EAGLE: Old woman, you hobble to find food for Ababuo. With love that strong, I think... *(Pause.)* I know—I will help you—but I must ask you this—would you repay my generosity with a kindness or a cruelty?

(ELEPHANT, ELEPHANT 2, CRESTED TERN and SANDWICH TERN enter. Wings fluttering become whispered warnings.)

PICA: Be wary—

CRESTED TERN: —humans burn the forest.

SHARPI: Think—

ELEPHANT: —humans hunt, take our tusks—

ELEPHANT 2: —then leave our carcasses for the jackals.

SHARPI: *(Own voice:)* Euuuchhh—carcasses for the jackals—who says stuff like this? *(Narrator voice:)* Remember—

SANDWICH TERN: —humans poison streams and ponds.

OLD WOMAN: Great Eagle, I could never forget you.

ELEPHANT: Elephants never forget.

OLD WOMAN: *(To Great Eagle:)* You would be in my heart forever.

ELEPHANT 2: Humans are heartless in their cruelty.

OLD WOMAN: I would be beholden to your children and your children's children.

(All the animals and birds are circling Great Eagle. They dash in and out.)

PICA: See —

CRESTED TERN: — the lion cubs robbed of their mothers and left to die.

SHARPI: Hear —

ELEPHANT 2: — the wail of the elephant when her mate is shot for tusks.

PICA: Feel —

SANDWICH TERN: — the flutter of wings fleeing the burning forests.

GREAT EAGLE: Enough — she is a kind woman.

OLD WOMAN: Kindnesses can only beget kindness.

GREAT EAGLE: I will help you.

CRESTED TERN: Your choice.

GREAT EAGLE: Yes, the choice of the Great Eagle.

(Exit Crested Tern and Sandwich Tern.)

OLD WOMAN: I will be your servant.

PICA: Great Eagle believed the woman!

ELEPHANT & ELEPHANT 2: *(A trumpet roar/wail of elephants:)*
Noooo.

(Exit Elephant and Elephant 2.)

SHARPI: *(Narrator voice:)* This — will — not — end well!

GREAT EAGLE: Put your hands over your eyes, and in the center of your mind's universe, see and feel the power of

healing rush to you from the earth, the river and the sky. Surround your body with the love of those who love you. When you have done all that, open your eyes – your leg will be healed.

SHARPI: *(Narrator voice:)* The old woman covered her eyes. Her face revealed all the love she had for the world.

(As Great Eagle sweeps around her, music and drums intensify. Great Eagle's wings open to their full span and then enfold the woman. Great Eagle steps back as the woman's walk transforms to the walk of a spry young person. Old Woman opens her eyes, looks at her legs, starts to cry and dances with joy.)

OLD WOMAN: My leg – my leg is healed. The sores have all disappeared!

PICA: She walks as a young woman.

(The woman falls prostrate before Great Eagle.)

OLD WOMAN: I will never forget today. Thank you, Great Eagle.

GREAT EAGLE: Cover your eyes once again and see the faces of all the people that you love and who truly love you. Think carefully and forget no one.

(Old Woman covers her eyes. The perfect village – VILLAGER 1, VILLAGER 2, VILLAGER 3, VILLAGER 4, VILLAGER 5, VILLAGER 6 and a giant tree holding the beginnings of an eagle's nest – materializes. Old Woman uncovers her eyes and looks around.)

OLD WOMAN: Great Eagle, all my life I have dreamed of a village like this. Fruit fills the trees, clear running stream – it is perfect. However, to live my life surrounded by those I love and who love me is truly the greatest of gifts.

VILLAGER 1: Mother of all mothers, thank you for bringing my child into the world –

VILLAGER 2: —and now sharing your beautiful new home with us.

VILLAGER 3: We love you deeply. Thank you.

OLD WOMAN: Do not thank me, thank Great Eagle—our protector and friend.

(She walks around the village looking for something.)

Great Eagle, I do not see my precious Ababuo.

SHARPI: *(Own voice:)* Yeah, where is the rotten "unbruised bananas" kid?

GREAT EAGLE: Does she love you as you love her?

OLD WOMAN: I am sure she loves me very much.

GREAT EAGLE: Then she will appear.

OLD WOMAN: Thank you! Thank you so much! What can I possibly do for you?

GREAT EAGLE: It is time for me to raise my family and watch over yours.

OLD WOMAN: I will love and care for your children as if they were my own.

(Festive music. A Villager brings Old Woman some food and drink.)

SHARPI: *(Narrator voice:)* The villagers dance with joy at their good fortune and pay homage to this very special great eagle.

(A spirited dance is done by the Villagers and birds. The director may add other animals to the dance.)

PICA: Great Eagle is pleased to have found a safe place to raise her eaglets. Humans and animals will live together in harmony.

(Great Eagle is seen up in the tree building a huge nest. As the dance progresses, we see two eggs appear in the nest and Great Eagle happily perch on them.)

(Blackout.)

SCENE 2

(Thunder and rain.)

PICA: A fierce storm covered the plains.

SHARPI: *(Narrator voice:)* As the lightning rages across the horizon, a bedraggled girl appears. *(Own voice:)* Bedraggled? Why can't I just say – totally messed up?

(ABABUO appears. Her voice is so whiny that it hits the audience like nail scratches on a chalkboard.)

ABABUO: *(Screaming:)* Grandmother – which of these shacks is yours? Grandmother! Where are you?

(Old Woman appears and embraces Ababuo, who pushes her away.)

Puleeze – get off me.

OLD WOMAN: Ababuo, I am so glad that you are finally here. Akwaaba [welcome] – welcome. Now the day is perfect.

ABABUO: Perfect! Perfect for what? I am starving. You were just going to go to the next village to bring me back unbruised bananas. I couldn't wait another minute.

OLD WOMAN: I knew your love was strong and you would eventually appear.

ABABUO: *(Fast rant:)* Appear? What mumbo jumbo is that – I had to follow you. And look – my shoes got dusty on the awful road. I am soaking wet – I need new clothes. Why don't you work so we can have bearers carry me about? You are such a

slow old woman. You always take too long. What is this dump? I don't remember a village here.

SHARPI: (*Angrily in own voice:*) Just give me an unbruised banana...

OLD WOMAN: This is our wonderful new village—an incredible gift. The magical Great Eagle created this for us. We will never be hungry, always be surrounded by love, and look, look, my leg is healed.

(Ababuo ignores the woman and looks at the Villagers eating and working. None of them look so happy to see her. One Villager tentatively waves to the girl. Ababuo turns her head and angrily confronts her grandmother.)

ABABUO: When is dinner? I am starved. While I have been walking miles following your lazy body, you have been relaxing in your new village. You selfish old witch. When do I get to eat?

(Old Woman waves her arm, and a Villager appears with food. Ababuo barely acknowledges the person who has dashed from home in the rain to deliver the food. Great Eagle is protecting her eggs from the storm.)

PICA: The family picture is complete.

SHARPI: (*Narrator voice:*) Hmm—the old woman thought of all the people she loved. Now we find out just who had never really loved her.

(Drums convey danger and anger.)

PICA: With the invasion of Ababuo, the tone of the village changes.

(The Villagers stay as far away from Ababuo as possible. As the drums mark her evil nature, Ababuo runs around bothering everyone. Tasting people's food with her hands. Messing up their

work. Intimidating the children. Generally being obnoxious. Pica and Sharpi fly in and out cawing menacingly at her. This could also be stylized like a modern dance.)

ABABUO: (*Ad-libs may be added as she torments folks:*) Nice house you've got here. Too neat for my tastes. Ha ha ha ha! Feed your kids much—ugh, not with this glop, I hope! Gimme that stick, you little runt. If I have to take it away from you, I'll beat your head with it. Don't look at me that way—I am Ababuo.

(Meanwhile, up in the tree, the eggs begin to hatch, and EAGLET 1 and EAGLET 2 appear.)

SHARPI: (*Narrator voice:*) Even the birth of the two adorable eaglets did not bring joy to the village.

VILLAGER 3: We need to meet with the old woman.

PICA: They decide to consult with the old woman.

VILLAGER 4: (*To Old Woman:*) Wise one, you who have healed my son, I love you as my mother. Please see your Ababuo for what she is before she hurts you.

OLD WOMAN: She will never hurt me. She is my daughter's daughter!

VILLAGER 2: But she has the nkra [soul, personality, life force] of her father. The man who—

VILLAGER 3: —beat your daughter and left her.

OLD WOMAN: I have always kept an open heart and an open mind. I hear your concerns, but my heart knows you are wrong. Enough said.

ABABUO: Grandmother—I am hungry!

(Sharpi drops a banana on Ababuo's head. Lights fade on the village. Pin spot on the newborn Eaglet 1 and Eaglet 2.)

(Blackout.)

SCENE 3

ABABUO: I am starving. I want a baby eaglet for breakfast! Is anyone listening? I want eaglet, and I want it now!

PICA: She can't be serious.

SHARPI: Oh, she is serious — next she'll want baby elephants.

PICA: Great Eagle!

(Pica and Sharpi frantically fly off. Villagers huddle horrified. Eaglet 1 and Eaglet 2 are playing in their nest.)

OLD WOMAN: *(Handing her a bowl of yams:)* Precious daughter of my daughter, eat these yams. I made them the way you have always liked them.

ABABUO: *(Flinging the bowl:)* I am tired of yams. I can only satisfy my hunger with an eaglet. Eaglet boiled. Eaglet fried. Eaglet, eaglet, eaglet!

VILLAGER 5: *(Bringing a platter of fish:)* I have some wonderful smoked fish. My children love it. This is all we have, but I would gladly let you have it.

(Ababuo takes the platter and tosses it to the ground.)

VILLAGER 6: How dare you treat your grandmother and those who love her with so little respect?!

VILLAGER 1: She is the wise woman of our village, and you dare to stand there like —

ABABUO: Like — like?

VILLAGER 1: Do not use that tone with me, you little —

ABABUO: Tone — you think this is tone? What part of the word eeeeeeeaaaaaaglet don't you people understand? The only thing that will satisfy my hunger is roasted eaglet.

VILLAGER 2: What part of rude little creep don't you understand?

OLD WOMAN: Please, please stop fighting. She is just a child who is hungry.

VILLAGER 6: You are blinded by love. Her life force is that of her father, not your daughter.

(Eaglet 1 and Eaglet 2 hear the request and are shuddering in the tree.)

EAGLET 2: I'm scared. That scary girl wants to eat us.

EAGLET 1: Don't worry. Mommy always said that the kind old woman in the village would take care of us. She would love us like her own.

ABABUO: Grandmother—I am waiting.

OLD WOMAN: We will not kill the children of Great Eagle—she would not kill you.

ABABUO: She is just a bird—they are baby birds. We eat animals. What part of this don't you get? I am so hungry I could scream. I will scream until I die—you'll be sorry.

(Menacing drums. Ababuo begins to scream and toss things around the village. The skies darken. Old Woman looks at the Eaglets and then at Ababuo. Ababuo is now ripping her clothes and rolling on the ground. She looks like she is having a seizure. Old Woman gathers a group of Villagers.)

VILLAGER 3: Wise one, sometimes we do not see the truth in things that are right in front of us.

VILLAGER 4: You are asking that we do something that may kill you.

ABABUO: (*Gagging and foaming at the mouth:*) Feed me before I die as my mother died. I can't see the sky. It is black. My brain is exploding.

(Old Woman drops to her knees and points to the tree. The Villagers begin to chop it down. Old Woman goes into her house and closes the flap against the shrieks of the Eaglets. Ababuo, magically cured, gleefully claps her hands and dances around the tree.)

EAGLET 1: (*Shrieking with fear:*) Mother! Mother!

ABABUO: (*Leaping to her feet – singing:*) Praise be – I am cured! How, do you ask? Because I know I'm gonna eat me some eaglet. I'm gonna eat me some eaglet. I'm gonna eat me some eaglet.

EAGLET 2: Mommy! Mommy – where are you!

(Great Eagle, Sandwich Tern, Crested Tern, Pica and Sharpi appear, zooming across the horizon. The smaller birds begin pecking at the Villagers.)

GREAT EAGLE: (*Waving her wings across the space:*) Yera! [Begone, go away!] Begone! Yera!

(The Villagers who are chopping the tree fall to the ground and disappear in a cloud of smoke. The hack marks on the tree disappear. Frightened, Ababuo runs into the house. Great Eagle soon is at the top of the tree consoling the Eaglets.)

I have removed the danger.

CRESTED TERN: We warned you.

GREAT EAGLE: Those humans will never hurt you or anyone again.

SANDWICH TERN: Are you blinded by love for that woman?

GREAT EAGLE: (*Shooting the Terns a look that could kill:*) Yera!

(Sandwich Tern and Royal Tern leave in a ruffled huff.)

The woman who runs the village has pledged to protect you. She must not have seen them come to the tree.

EAGLET 2: But Mommy, she — **EAGLET 1:** The bad girl tells the old one what to do and —

GREAT EAGLE: Hush, my beloved babies, this will never happen again. *(Shouting:)* Old Woman! Old Woman — you who have pledged to protect my babies — come to me now!

PICA: Great Eagle could not believe that one she had given so much to would ever hurt her.

(Old Woman tentatively peeks out of her hut and ducks back in. Ababuo, holding Old Woman's bent arm behind her, pushes her out to face Great Eagle.)

SHARPI: *(Own voice:)* Can't Great Eagle see that the little wretch is hurting her grandmother?

GREAT EAGLE: Some humans of the village were attacking my nest. You promised that no harm would come to my babies.

(Ababuo twists Old Woman's arm harder.)

OLD WOMAN: I was asleep —

SHARPI: *(Own angry voice:)* In your dreams — you liar.

(Great Eagle shoots Sharpi a look.)

OLD WOMAN: I am so sorry. I have you to thank for my life — I would never want to hurt your children.

EAGLET 2: Mommy, she pointed to the tree, and the people —

GREAT EAGLE: Did she tell them to cut down the tree? Did you tell them?

ABABUO: She didn't tell them to do anything.

GREAT EAGLE: (*To Eaglet 2:*) Did she tell them to cut down the tree? Do not lie to me – think clearly.

ABABUO: She never said a word.

EAGLET 2: She never said a word, Mama, she –

GREAT EAGLE: Ah – there are times, little one, when we need to trust our elders. (*To Old Woman:*) You will take care of my family? I have your word?

PICA: The old woman chose her words carefully.

OLD WOMAN: I respect and honor you.

GREAT EAGLE: You see, my children – this will never happen again. The old woman will protect you.

EAGLET 1: Mother – she didn't say –

GREAT EAGLE: Hush darling, just sleep now and grow strong. This will never happen again.

(Blackout.)

SCENE 4

ABABUO: (*Up in the tree feeding the Eaglets:*) Yoo-hoo – it is chow time in the tree. Come here my cute little roasters, eat up. Yum, yum good.

SHARPI: (*Own voice to Eaglets:*) Take a bite of her greedy fingers.

ABABUO: I love you little chickies – you are soooo rollie pollie!

PICA: The girl seemed to have changed her mind about the eaglets.

ABABUO: (*Gleefully:*) Time to fry! I mean fly. That's it little guys, it is time to leave the nest.

SHARPI: *(Narrator voice:)* Maybe her grandmamma gave her a good, long time-out.

PICA: Those baby eagles are so cute and plump.

SHARPI: *(Narrator voice:)* Hear that? Sounds like thunder—no—no—it is the growl of hunger. Talking drums are beating the sounds of danger.

(Drums beat a heavy beat.)

ABABUO: *(Down from the tree and bellowing:)* Grandmother!

OLD WOMAN: *(Peeking out warily:)* Yes, my dear?

ABABUO: *(Stamping her foot and shaking her fist:)* I am unusually hungry today. I need a very special meal.

(Old Woman exits and returns with a pot of stew.)

OLD WOMAN: We have a beautiful fish stew! I made it with all the herbs you like.

(Ababuo takes the bowl, smells it, lifts it over her head and tosses it aside. Old Woman runs inside for another dish. The other Villagers, sensing what is to come, appear carrying dishes that they hand to Old Woman. She in turn hands them to Ababuo, who tosses them aside, getting more and more furious. The lines should happen quickly and overlap.)

VILLAGER 4: Yams with sugar cane!

OLD WOMAN: Yams with sugar cane?

ABABUO: I do not want yams—

VILLAGER 5: Fried plantains—

OLD WOMAN: Fried plantains?

ABABUO: I do not want fried plantains—

VILLAGER 6: Curried potatoes.

OLD WOMAN: Curried potatoes?

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ABABUO: I do not want curried potatoes —

(Sharpi drops a dead mouse on Ababuo's head.)

SHARPI: *(Own voice:)* Mouse mousse?

ABABUO: UGGG!!

VILLAGER 4: Cooked wheat and spices —

OLD WOMAN: Cooked wheat and spices?

ABABUO: I do not want cooked wheat and spices! I do not want corn, mush, quail or baboon. I do not want anything you worthless people have.

VILLAGER 5: Just what do you want?

(After Villager 5 asks the question, she realizes that she has been set up for the answer they all fear.)

ABABUO: Since you have asked so nicely — cook me an eaglet.

ALL VILLAGERS: *(Ad-lib negative responses:)* Not the eaglets — no.

PICA: Ababuo did not remember what happened to the last group of people who tried to get her an eaglet.

OLD WOMAN: Do you not understand that Great Eagle has blessed our lives?

VILLAGER 6: Do you not see that your Ababuo is a selfish brute who cares only about her stomach?

OLD WOMAN: She is the flesh of my flesh. She is just upset over losing her mother.

VILLAGER 5: She is just upset about not getting her way.

ABABUO: They get bigger and bigger every day — I don't want them to get too big and tough. I can almost taste the juicy meat — feel the fat dripping on my chin — yummmmmmmmm. *(Looks at Old Woman:)* Command these fools to get me an eaglet,

or I will hold my breath until I die. You let your only daughter die of starvation – will you let her only daughter die too?

SHARPI: (*Own voice:*) Yes, please – pretty please!

(*Narrator voice:*) Old Woman paled, and a tear slowly slipped down her cheek.

OLD WOMAN: I did not let her die—you were such a big baby – always wanting to suckle. There was a drought. No one in the village had any food to spare. I gave her all we had—I lived on hope and love.

ABABUO: You did not give her enough, and now you will not give me enough. I will hold my breath and join my mother.

(*She pinches her nose shut with her fingers. Villager 5 struggles with Ababuo to pull her hand off her nose, then gives up.*)

OLD WOMAN: Please do not say that. I promised Great Eagle. She has given us all the food we need. She loves us, but she is powerful. You saw how she destroyed the others—we do not want to see her anger. And I do not want to break my word.

(*The Villagers demonstrate joy at the prospect of the girl's death. Old Woman tries to pull the girl's hand away from her nose. Villager 5 joins in to help her. The girl holds fast. Old Woman looks up and sees that Great Eagle is gone. The girl starts to go limp – though she peeks a look with one eye.*)

PICA: With a heavy heart, the old woman turns to the few remaining villagers.

OLD WOMAN: Please—I beg you, spare my granddaughter's life and quickly get the eaglets. Do it before Great Eagle returns and my Ababuo dies.

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