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Negro Leather Shoes

A Neo-Folktale Inspired by Little-Known Historical Events

By Olga El

Inspired by little-known historical events, Negro Leather Shoes is a neo-folktale exploring the inter-generational wealth, power, and privilege of an American family — ill-gotten gifts that must be passed down. Gwen (a white lesbian who is secretly in love with her Black roommate) is already uncomfortable with her status and overall place in the world. When Gwen's mother tries to pass down a cherished heirloom believed to be the source of the family's good fortune — magical shoes made of human skin — Gwen is shocked, disgusted, and intrigued. Gwen must choose to continue her family legacy, break the chains of the past, or...

NOTE: Movement sequences, transitions, and fx make this play at least 75m. PLEASE READ ALL STAGE DIRECTIONS (they are integral to the plot) and implement them to the best of your ability.

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Cast of Characters

GWEN:	A wealthy student (Euro-American)
NJINGA:	A working class student (African-American)
ELIZABETH:	Gwen's mother (Euro-American)
TRINITY:	Another student, Njinga's friend (Native American)
ENSEMBLE:	Various Roles

GWEN and ELIZABETH have Southern accents!

ACT I

Spot C on a shoemaker in the 1700s or 1800s sewing a woman's shoe. (NOTE this can be an earlier time period than that of the voices we hear.) We hear the following voiceover. As the voiceover continues there is slowly, gradually more light on the stage. The ever-increasing light reveals a shop full of shoes.

V/O (LATE 1800S UPPER-MIDDLE CLASS, EURO-AMERICAN ACCENT)
I remember that two or three years ago I incidentally referred to a prominent physician of this city wearing shoes made from the skin of negroes. He still adhered to that custom, insisting that the tanned hide of an African makes the most enduring and the most pliable leather known to man.

Only last week I met him upon the street with a brand new pair of shoes. I looked at his foot wear, as I always do - his pedal coverings have an irresistible fascination for me - and said, with a smile: "Is the downtrodden African still beneath your feet?" In the most matter of fact way, and without the shadow of a smile, he answered:

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V/O (LATE 1800S UPPER-MIDDLE CLASS, ENGLISH, FRENCH, OR ETC EUROPEAN ACCENT)
"I suppose you mean to inquire if I still wear shoes made of the skin of a negro. I certainly do, and I don't propose changing in that respect until I find a leather that is softer and will last longer and present a better appearance. I have no sentiment about this matter. Were I a Southerner - in the American sense of the word - I might be accused of being actuated by a race prejudice. But I am a foreigner by birth, although now an American citizen by naturalization. I fought in the rebellion that the blacks might be freed. I would use a white man's skin for the same purpose if it were sufficiently thick, and if anyone has a desire to wear my epidermis upon his feet after I have drawn my last breath he has my ante mortem permission."

V/O (LATE 1800S UPPER-MIDDLE CLASS, EURO-AMERICAN ACCENT)
The doctor's shoes always exhibit a peculiarly rich lustrousness in their blackness. He assures me that they never hurt his feet. He obtains the skins from the bodies of negroes which have been dissected in one of our big medical colleges. The best leather is obtained from the thighs. The soles are formed by placing several layers of leather together. The skin is prepared by a tanner at Womseldorf, 16

(MORE)

V/O (LATE 1800S UPPER-MIDDLE CLASS, EURO-AMERICAN ACCENT) (CONT'D)
miles from Reading. The shoes are fashioned by a French shoemaker of this city, who knows nothing of the true character of the leather, but who often wonders at its exquisite smoothness, and says that it excels the finest French calf-skin.

Do not for a moment think that this doctor presents an exceptional case of one who puts the human skin to a practical use. Medical students frequently display a great variety of articles in which in the skin or bones of some dissected mortal has been gruesomely utilized, and in bursts of generosity they sometimes present these to their friends, who prize them highly.

One of the dudest dudes in town carries a match-safe covered with a portion of the skin of a beautiful young woman who was found drowned in the Delaware river. It still retains its natural colour. Another young man with whom I am acquainted carries a cigar case made of negro skin, a ghastly skull and crossbones appearing on one side in relief. One of the best known surgeons in this country, who resides in this city, has a beautiful instrument case, entirely covered with leather made from an African's skin.

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A young society lady of this city wears a beautiful pair of dark slippers, the remarkable lustrousness of whose leather invariably excites the admiration of her friends when they see them. The rosettes on the slippers were deftly fashioned from the negro's kinky hair.

NJINGA'S VOICE
Leather from Human Skin. Philadelphia News. Printed in The Mercury, Saturday March 17, 1888

BLACKOUT. Shoe shop scene and actor are struck as TRINITY immediately responds in the darkness.

TRINITY
Ew, what the fuck? Can you forward that article to me?

NJINGA
Sure.

Lights up on NJINGA and TRINITY sitting on the edge of the stage DC. NJINGA holds a laptop.

TRINITY
I can't believe that shit is for real. *American Horror Story*.

NJINGA
Yup and, in 12th to 18th century Europe, it became fashionable to grind Ancient Egyptian mummy bits into medicinal elixirs.

TRINITY
Them folks ate your ancestors?!

NJINGA
It's not really that much of a leap if you think about it. Nat Turner's flesh was boiled down and added to medicines too.

TRINITY
Do they want Wendigos? Because, where I come from, that's how you get Wendigos.

NJINGA
The Wendigo is actually a great metaphor for the insatiable greed of societies built on - and still benefiting from - genocide, slavery, imperialism, aaaand the destruction of the environment. Thanks, T. I'm gonna add that to my essay.

NJINGA types as TRINITY looks over NJINGA's shoulder and lights come up on the fuller stage, revealing a distinguished, antiquated living room. We hear a crackling fire as the orange glow from an unseen "fireplace" stage left can be seen. NJINGA and TRINITY leave as GWEN and ELIZABETH enter the living room. ELIZABETH holds a gift box.

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GWEN
Mama, what was so important that I had to come all the way out here in the middle of finals?

ELIZABETH
It's her birthday and your 20th year.

GWEN
Mama, what are you on? You been acting real weird lately, you know that?

ELIZABETH
I have something for you to try on.

GWEN
If it's another fur bolero you can keep it. I'm vegan now.

ELIZABETH
Just hush and open the box, Gwen.

GWEN takes the gift box from her mother and opens it. She pulls out a pair of leather women's shoes, similar to the shoe the shoemaker held in the opening scene.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)
Those shoes have been in the family for generations.

GWEN
Seriously? They look brand new!

ELIZABETH
That's that real good leather. Try them on.

GWEN
Damn, definitely not vegan but I guess I can make an exception for such an exquisite hand-me-down.

GWEN tries on a shoe.

GWEN (CONT'D)
Must be damn good leather. I feel like they just molded to my feet perfectly.

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GWEN stands up and twirls around. She brings the back of her hand to her forehead.

GWEN (CONT'D)
(**Imitating a Southern Belle**)
Do I look like a distinguished high-society lady, mama? I ain't never felt so distinguished.

Why are you looking at me like that?

ELIZABETH
Do you accept?

GWEN
Do I accept? What kinda question is that? Why wouldn't I accept?

ELIZABETH
Gwenivere Morgan Whitney, do you accept the shoes?

GWEN
I accept you for who you are no matter how loopy you get in old age, mama.

ELIZABETH
Damn it, Gwen. Be serious for once. These ain't no ordinary shoes. How do you think this family got it's fortune?

GWEN
Oh, I dunno but I'm pretty sure all the slave labor and swindlin' had something to do with it.

ELIZABETH
It's the shoes, girl.

GWEN
Ok, now you're really worrying me.

ELIZABETH
There's a soul bound up in those shoes.

GWEN
That's dark even for you, mama.

ELIZABETH
And that soul is fated to line this family's pockets as it did in life.

GWEN
(**Laughing**)
You mean like a genie? We got a genie-ghost up in here? We gotta get your head checked.

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ELIZABETH
Don't you patronize me, girl. I'm not too old to slap the freckles off you.

GWEN
You're serious.

ELIZABETH
She turned 20 years old today 'bout 200 years ago.

GWEN
Who, mama?

ELIZABETH
Amelia. A freewoman and a witch. They say she enchanted her slavemaster to gain her freedom, his house, and his whole plantation when he died.

Only way he agreed to that shit.

GWEN
Sounds like a fair enough trade for a life in bondage.

ELIZABETH
Shut up, girl. You don't know shit from Shirley. That woman was a jezebel hussy with 5 pickaninny bastards to prove it.

GWEN
Oooh, so that's the real reason ol' massa handed over his plantation. Why do you care though, mama? What's with the story time?

ELIZABETH
That was your great, great... I forgot how many greats. Your ancestor.

GWEN
Oh, hell yeah! I knew I was part Black. N word gonna roll off my tongue like butter.

ELIZABETH
No, fool. The slavemaster and his wife.

GWEN
You sure? I tan real nice.

ELIZABETH
Gwenivere, please. What I'm trying to tell you is... His wife... your great, great... your ancestor, Helene. Well, she wasn't too happy about the affair.

GWEN
Affair? Even I know you can't consent under slavery, mama. Damn, I wonder how many of my ancestors are rape babies.

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ELIZABETH
Helene had that plantation house burned to the ground with them pickaninny babies in it. But not before getting the townsfolk to hang Amelia for witchcraft. She was hung, skinned, and her remains were thrown to the alligators. Helene moved back up here to her parents house. This house.

GWEN
And there it is. Why I moved as far away from this shithole town as possible.

ELIZABETH
Helene kept the skin, Gwen.

GWEN
Mama, what are you saying?

ELIZABETH
And had the skin turned into those shoes.

GWEN
What the fuck, ma?!

ELIZABETH
And I must pass them on to you now.

GWEN
The fuck you will.

GWEN struggles to get the shoes off.

ELIZABETH
You sure about that, Gwen? There's something you want so bad that you'd be willing to kill for it. That's why them shoes ain't coming off so easy.

GWEN
(**Struggling**)
You know, of all the fucked up pranks you could pull, I didn't know you could go this low. Now, help me get these damn shoes off.

ELIZABETH
What about that big fellowship award you been talking about? The one that ends with a book deal? Accept those shoes and it's already done. I know 'cuz I've seen 'em work. You can have anything you want.

GWEN
I don't want anything that bad. Shit we can buy most anything we want anyway.

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ELIZABETH
Without them shoes you ain't gonna have a pot to piss in, Gwen. And money can't get you everything, but them shoes CAN.

Look, Gwen I know I can be a bit much sometimes but have I ever lied to ya? And that old story, it was tragic but it was a long time ago. Don't got nothing to do with us now.

Just give 'em a few days. If you don't want 'em after that, I'll take 'em back. The magic will end with me.

GWEN
Magic, mama? Really? You sure Amelia was the witch?

ELIZABETH
Just a few days, Gwen. That's all I ask.

BLACKOUT. After a few moments, lights slowly fade up on the trendy living room scene of NJINGA's and GWEN's home. A bench and a bunch of shoes are on a shoe rack RC by the "front door." NJINGA sits on a couch C reading. GWEN walks in from RC with her cursed shoes on. She puts her coat on a full coat rack

then sits on the bench. She attempts to remove the shoes and fails. Giving up, she starts to walk deeper into the living room...

NJINGA
Aht! Aht! Shoes off in the apartment. How many times do I have to tell you?

GWEN
Ok, but can you help me get them off? They're like stuck to my feet somehow.

NJINGA
And you gotta stop being so helpless, white lady, I mean seriously.

GWEN sits on the bench and NJINGA walks over and helps remove the shoes easily.

GWEN
Oh come on. That was not happening a second ago. Damn it.

NJINGA
(**Laughing**)
I'm sure you loosened them for me. Nice shoes by the way. Vintage?

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GWEN
(**Grumbling**)
Family heirloom.

NJINGA
Wow! They're in pretty good shape for an heirloom. By the way, did you hear back from the Vellichor Fellowship yet? I made it to finals but got rejected again. I really thought I had it this year.

GWEN
Oh sorry to hear that, hon. And, damn, if you didn't get it I might as well not even check.

NJINGA
Oh stop, you never know what these judges are looking for. For all we know, I lost because they couldn't spell my name. Just check your email.

GWEN
Alright.

GWEN pulls out her phone to check her email. After a few moments, she drops her phone and sits on the couch stunned.

NJINGA
What? C'mon, don't hold me in suspense. If you tell me you won I'm gonna scream.

GWEN
I won.

NJINGA
EEEEEEEEeeeeee, oh my god, congrats Gwen! That's amazing.

GWEN
You're not mad?

NJINGA
Girl, please. It's a competition. Of course I'm not mad. Am I a little bummed for me, sure, but I love this for you. And a finalist is not a bad thing to be.

GWEN
I can't believe it.

NJINGA
Believe it. You are that girl.

GWEN's phone rings. GWEN picks it up off the floor.

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GWEN
Shit, I gotta take this, it's my mom. Be right back.

Blackout except for spotlight C on GWEN.

GWEN (CONT'D)
(**"Whispering" audibly**)
Mama? Mama, I got the fellowship. Now, I know you made some calls. I told you to stop doing that shit...

ELIZABETH
I assure you, I didn't make any calls Gwen.

GWEN
(**Excited**)
Well I'll be damned. You mean I won off of merit alone? I can't believe it!

ELIZABETH
And don't you start believing it. We both know you ain't no Mark Twain. It's the shoes.

GWEN
You're sick you know that? Ain't no such thing as magical shoes. And that tall tale you came up with was absolutely disgusting. Now, if you don't mind, I'm gonna go enjoy my victory.

ELIZABETH
Gwen, I...

GWEN hangs up the phone. It rings again but she ignores it. Blackout. Lights come back up slowly on TRINITY and NJINGA at a dinner table with some appetizers in the middle. Soft music plays.

NJINGA
Of course she'd be late to her own victory dinner.

TRINITY
Now tell me again, real slow, because in what universe did Gwen Whitney beat you at anything? She probably plagiarized your shit.

NJINGA
Stop T.

TRINITY
And why are you paying for dinner? Isn't she loaded?

NJINGA
I'm actually surprised she agreed to this. She won't let me pay for anything else. I don't even pay rent because her uncle owns the flat.

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TRINITY
Mmm hm. That's how they get you. You know she's obsessed with you, right?

NJINGA
I think it's kinda cute actually.

TRINITY
Not you encouraging that shit! I thought you said she wasn't your type. Now she's cute? What about Makeda?

NJINGA
Makeda just told me that she's transferring next semester and doesn't do long distance relationships.

TRINITY
Wow, really? I thought you two were tight.

NJINGA
I guess she fooled both of us.

TRINITY
Well, if you're going to rebound, I think you can do better than...