

ONE LAST PEARL

A Ten-Minute Solo Performance

Written and conceived by: Crystal Lucas-Perry

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*Written for the National Black Theatre
Schomburg Center Centennial Commission
"Hidden Figures Recentered" – May 11, 2026*

Inspired by the archive of Pearl Bailey
*Letters, poems, and personal writings from the
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture*

*"Just because she could carry it all
doesn't mean it wasn't heavy."*

CHARACTERS

THE WOMAN — A researcher — or someone who believed she was one when she arrived. She has been granted access to a space that holds the residue of a life: objects, language, and fragments that have survived being kept. She is not neutral. She is not invisible. As she moves through the space, she begins to understand that observation is not passive — and that access carries responsibility. She wears long white gloves. They do not announce themselves. By the end, she is no longer simply witnessing. She is implicated.

THE ARCHIVIST — Gender-neutral. Efficient, composed, and precise. They move with the quiet authority of someone who understands the value of containment. They are not cold, but they are not here to engage. Their role is not to interpret — but to return. They wear plain white archival gloves, short. Their presence signals the shift from discovery to consequence. They do not fully enter the space. They remain at its edge.

PEARL BAILEY — Never seen. Never embodied. Present in everything. In the objects that remain, in the language that survives, in the space between what was lived and what was recorded. She exists in contradiction: public and private, performed and withheld, accessible and unreachable.

SETTING

One space. Hers. Warm amber light. Three stations exist within it — not as exhibits, but as layers. Each one holds a different relationship to who Pearl Bailey was. They are not presented. They are encountered.

THE MIRROR — The Public Self

A standing mirror, slightly aged. It reflects clearly but carries the subtle marks of use — the evidence of someone having lived with it rather than maintained it. A hat rests on or near it, placed without ceremony, the way something is set down at the end of a long day. A newspaper clipping

is affixed to the mirror's edge. The corners have begun to curl. It has been here long enough to belong. This is the space where the world spoke about her – and where she understood how she was seen.

THE DRESS FORM – The Intimate Self

A dress form stands slightly off-center, holding a garment – not theatrical, not pristine, but lived-in. Something that suggests presence rather than presentation. Beside it, a narrow surface. On it, flowers beginning to soften with time. Tucked among the stems, a small card. It is not prominently displayed. It is not meant to be read by anyone who was not meant to find it. This space holds the trace of being loved.

THE VANITY – The Private Self

A low vanity and a cushioned stool. Minimal. Functional. Not styled for an audience. One drawer is slightly open – not enough to invite attention, but enough to be noticed by someone paying close attention. Inside are letters. Folded. Kept. Not arranged for viewing. This space resists performance. It was not meant to be shared.

A NOTE ON THE GLOVES

THE WOMAN wears long white opera gloves beneath long sleeves. At first glance they could belong to the archive – plain, white, appropriate. They do not announce themselves. They read as neutral. They are not.

Their length – and therefore their meaning – is not visible until Scene Seven, when THE WOMAN pulls her sleeve back slightly and sees them for what they are. This moment of recognition must arrive without announcement. No sound cue. No light shift. No signal that something important is happening. The audience arrives at it the same moment she does.

When she understands, she does not give them to THE ARCHIVIST. She places them in Pearl's space. Where they belong.

PROJECTION AND SOUND

Projection appears only during the opening sequence. Fast. Layered. Overwhelming. Photographs that do not settle. Headlines that accumulate. Pearl Bailey's actual voice – laughter, cadence, fragments of interviews – rising underneath. Other voices layer over:

"Beloved –"

"Effortless –"

"Warm –"

"Natural –"

"Pearl Bailey is happy –"

"Pearl Bailey is happy –"

"Pearl Bailey is –"

Her laugh cuts through everything. Full. Uncontained. Real. It echoes. And fades.

HARD CUT. Projection to black. Sound to silence. Simultaneously. After this moment, the backdrop remains dark for the remainder of the piece. Nothing is projected again. The darkness is not emptiness. The world has run out of things to say about Pearl Bailey. What remains is this.

* * *

SCENE ONE — THE ROOM

Lights rise slowly on HER SPACE — warm amber light. THE WOMAN is already present. She does not enter. She is discovered.

She stands still. Listening. The space is not neutral. It carries something.

She turns.

The mirror pulls her.

* * *

SCENE TWO — THE MIRROR

She approaches the mirror. Sees herself. Then — the clipping at its edge.

She reads it.

THE WOMAN

"When I'm talking to real people, that's acting.

When I'm talking with imaginary people, by myself — that's Pearl."

(A SILENCE.)

She stays with it just long enough for it to register. She does not interpret it. She does not explain it.

She moves.

* * *

SCENE THREE — THE DRESS FORM

*She crosses to the dress form. The garment.
A body that is not there.*

*She adjusts the fabric slightly. A reflex.
The gesture of someone used to tending to
things.*

Then — the flowers. Beginning to soften.

The card tucked among the stems.

*She does not remove it. She leans in.
Touches it.*

THE WOMAN

"Yours."

"Always."

(A SILENCE.)

She lets it be. She moves on.

* * *

SCENE FOUR — THE DRAWER

She notices it. The drawer. Slightly open.

She doesn't touch anything.

(Beat.)

Then she does.

*Inside: letters. Folded. Old. She takes one.
Not carefully enough. She unfolds it.*

THE WOMAN

"So wonderful hearing from you."

*"Thank you for your delightful card and note
while I was in the hospital."*

(Beat.)

THE WOMAN

*"Thank God I'm feeling 1000% better now –
and can only say I hope I have seen the last
of hospitals
for a long, long time."*

She pauses. Reads the next part more slowly.

THE WOMAN

"If not forever."

(A SILENCE.)

She sets it down. Takes another.

THE WOMAN

*"You're an angel to let me in on the
beautiful news. Thanks so much. We're just
too famous for the Village Vanguard
anymore."*

She stops. Re-reads that line.

THE WOMAN

*"We're just too famous for the Village
Vanguard anymore."*

(Beat.)

THE WOMAN

And then she writes –

THE WOMAN

"(smiles) "

A beat. THE WOMAN smiles too, without meaning to.

THE WOMAN

" I'm trying to work out my 2nd book – it's harder than the first!"

She sets it down and takes another.

THE WOMAN

"You're a genius – 12 books – I stopped at 5 perhaps because I haven't stopped being a school girl long enough. By the way, do you have my five books? Please let me know. I want you to have them and if you don't, I will send them to you."

She sets it down. Reaches for another – older stationery. A small, illustrated caricature of a woman at the top. She looks at it closely.

THE WOMAN

September 28, 1952.

She opens the letter.

Something slips loose.

A clipping.

She picks it up. Not carefully. Reads.

THE WOMAN

*"severe facial bruises
torn ear
slight concussion"*

(A SILENCE.)

She does not react yet.

She looks at it again.

Then – returns to the letter.

THE WOMAN

*"These were people who – if they took time
to look in a mirror – would hate
themselves."*

(Beat.)

THE WOMAN

"They are to be pitied."

(A SILENCE.)

She folds the letter slightly.

Then –

THE WOMAN

*"Leaving on Queen Mary. October 22nd. For
Europe."*

(A SILENCE.)

She takes another letter.

THE WOMAN

" So happy to hear from you - just returned from London and catching up takes a little time. Yes, my book will be published in the spring. It isn't strictly an autobiography - but I won't tell you too much about it now! I want you to read it and see all the little goodies it contains. It's been a ball writing it - hard work I must admit, but thoroughly a joy and pleasure."

(Beat.)

She sets it down. Takes another.

THE WOMAN

"The world is so full -and we must participate. There is lots to be done in that big UN building."

She pauses. Sets it down quietly. Moves on.

She looks at the letters already open around her. Not reading new ones - looking back. Something is repeating.

THE WOMAN

"It's always wonderful hearing from you."

(Beat.)

"Please do keep in touch."

(Beat.)

"Be sweet, keep in touch."

(Beat.)

"I do hope you will continue to keep in touch with me."

(Beat.)

"Keep in touch."

She sets them down. Among the papers, a different kind of letter.

* * *

SCENE FIVE — THE QUESTIONS

THE WOMAN

"Are you lonely, dear God?

Doesn't anyone talk to you anymore?

*I've heard them speak of the man folks say
was your son.*

*Is he still your son? Did he really die?
Do you miss him?*

*Has anyone sat to sup or pray
or just visit you lately?*

Is your house a large one or a small one?

Do you have dogs, too?

*The sun, moon, ocean, people — do you really
have dominion over all these?*

*France, America, Germany, India, Greece, the
Middle East — you mean, this territory which
men claim is yours? Do you own them
outright, or are there debts?*

How come you're so lonely?

I still love you, and every time

I run into someone who asks about you – you know what I do?

I tell of my love for you.

You don't mind, do you?

Some just nod. I don't think they've really forgotten you. It's just they stay busy doing what you've already done – you know how it is.

Is that the right way, God?

I'll write again real soon.

Please keep in touch."

(A SILENCE.)

** * **

SCENE SIX – THE ARCHIVIST

A sound. Neutral. Institutional. A shift in the air.

THE ARCHIVIST enters – not into the space, but at its edge. They carry a box or folder or a cart of some kind maybe. Short plain white archival gloves. They stand and wait. They do not move through the space. They are simply – present.

THE WOMAN understands why they are here.

She gathers the letters herself. One by one. Returns them. Into THE ARCHIVIST's hands or into the box. She does this herself. Unhurried. She is not being robbed. She is returning what she was trusted with.

The last letter – the one she has been holding longest – she holds a moment longer.

(A PAUSE.)

She lets it go.

THE ARCHIVIST receives the letters with care. Nods once. Exits.

Silence.

* * *

SCENE SEVEN — THE GLOVES

She stands alone. Pearl's space still around her — the hat, the mirror, the dress form, the vanity. The archive took the letters. But the room still feels like her.

THE WOMAN looks at her hands.

She pulls her sleeve back slightly. Just enough.

The gloves are long. Opera length. Not archival gloves at all.

(A PAUSE.)

She looks at them.

She tries to find where to put them.

The mirror. She moves toward it.

No.

(Beat.)

The dress form.

*Almost –
No.*

(Beat.)

She crosses to the vanity.

The drawer still slightly open.

(Beat.)

*She hesitates.
Then places the gloves there.
Not inside.
Not hidden.
Just at the edge –
where she found the letters.*

The moment they leave her hands –

★ ★ ★

SCENE EIGHT – THE LAST PEARL

*A single piece of paper falls from above.
Slowly. Drifting. It lands near her.*

She freezes.

She looks up.

She picks it up. Bare hands.

She opens it.

She reads it. To herself. Only to herself.

(A SILENCE.)

She looks up again.

THE WOMAN

...okay.

She presses it to her chest.

(A LONG SILENCE.)

The lights fade.

Darkness.

END OF PLAY

* * *

PRODUCTION NOTES

ON THE SPACE: One warm space. Three stations within it – the mirror, the dress form, the vanity. These are not exhibits. They are layers. Each one holds a different part of Pearl Bailey: who she was seen as, who she was loved as, and who she actually was. THE WOMAN moves

through them in that order. Outer to inner. Public to private. The archive does not have its own zone – THE ARCHIVIST enters Pearl's space from outside it, remains at its edge, and leaves. The hat, the dress form, the mirror remain after the letters are gone. The archive took what it could hold. What it could not hold stays in the room.

ON THE GLOVES: Long white opera gloves worn beneath long sleeves. At first glance they read as plain archival gloves – their length is hidden. The distinction between THE WOMAN's opera gloves and THE ARCHIVIST's short plain gloves is only revealed in Scene Seven when THE WOMAN pulls her sleeve back. This recognition must arrive without announcement – no sound cue, no light shift, no signal. The audience arrives at it the same moment she does. When she understands what she has been wearing, she does not give them to THE ARCHIVIST. She tries different places. None feel right. Finally, she sets them in Pearl's space – not arranged, not ceremonial. Just returned. Then she steps away. The moment they leave her hands, the letter falls.

ON THE ARCHIVIST: The Archivist comes only for the letters. They do not collect props, costume pieces, or objects from the space. They remain at the edge – present but not inside. They are not villains and they are not indifferent. They are the reality of what archives do: they hold what can be held and leave the rest. Their plain short gloves beside THE WOMAN's long opera gloves are the piece's central visual argument, revealed quietly and without explanation.

ON THE FALLEN LETTER: Its contents are never revealed. This is not a trick – it is the point. For the first time, something of Pearl's passes without being consumed, archived, explained, or labeled. It goes directly from her to whoever is willing to sit with what she left behind. What it says belongs only to the person who finds it.

ON PROJECTION: Projection appears only during the opening sequence – fast, layered, overwhelming – and cuts to black before any single image fully settles. After that cut, the backdrop remains dark for the entire piece. No words. No images. No handwriting. The darkness is not emptiness. It is the piece's argument: the world has run out of things to say about Pearl Bailey. What remains is this.

ON PEARL'S WORDS: Every word attributed to Pearl Bailey in this piece is drawn directly from her letters, her published poems (Hurry Up, America, and Spit, 1976), and her interviews. The letter dated January 16, 1976 – written on United States Mission to the United Nations letterhead – contains the line: "The world is so full – and we must participate." The quote at the mirror is from a 1950 New York World-Telegram interview. Nothing in this piece has been invented. Everything has been found.

ON PACING: This piece runs ten minutes. The silences are not dead air – they are Pearl arriving. Hold them. The piece lives in the space between words, not in the words themselves.

ON THE DESCRIPTION: Pearl Bailey spent fifty years making rooms full of people feel seen. This piece asks what it cost her – and what she still had left to give.

* * *

"Keep in touch..."