

Wise.Woman

by

Rebecca Fisseha

Wise.Woman premiered in Toronto at the Theatre Centre on February 20, 2009, with the following team.

Saba/Queen Mak'da
Solomon
Tamrin
King Solomon
Tamara
Ashmodai

Cara Ricketts
Peter Bailey
Walter Borden
Ash Knight
Tanya Pillay
Meghan Swaby

Chorus

Sedina Fiati
Andrea Henry
Cassy May Walker
Amanda Nicholls
Navneet Rai
Aracely Reyes
Marika Schwandt
Deidre Walton
Rehaset Yohanes

Rebecca Fisseha
ahdri zhina mandiela
Julia Tribe
Kimberly Purtell
Reva Quam

Aaron Kelly
Joan M. Kivanda
Nicole Brooks
Navneet Rai
Rehaset Yohanes

Josephine Ho
Shawn Henry
Mark Lavelle
Samantha Thompson

Playwright
Director
Set & Costume Design
Lighting Design
Wardrobe Head,
Co-Costume Design
Associate Lighting Design
Assistant Director
Music Directing Apprentice
Wardrobe Apprentice
Sound Design Apprentice

Stage Manager
Production Manager
Lighting Technician
Equity Apprentice Stage Manager

All cast members and the stage manager are members of the Canadian Actors Equity Association (CAEA).

Characters

Saba: An Ethiopian-Canadian in her twenties, Solomon's childhood sweetheart.

Solomon: An Ethiopian in his twenties, Saba's childhood sweetheart.

Queen Mak'da: Ruler of the queendom of Axum in East Africa.

Tamara: Royal advisor to Queen Mak'da.
In the modern setting: Solomon's sometime girlfriend.

King Solomon: Ruler of the ancient kingdom of Judah in the Near East.

Ashmodai: Royal advisor to King Solomon.
In the modern setting: a layabout in Solomon's employ, friend to Tamara.

Tamrin: Queen Mak'da's merchant.
In the modern setting: Store Owner and Customer.

Throughout, Tamrin is a shadow figure who serves as a connecting thread between the worlds, as a window into private thoughts and as a conjurer of sensations.

Settings

Modern: Addis Ababa (a bar/restaurant, house, airport) and Axum (ancient ruins and hotel). Both are in Ethiopia.

Ancient: Palaces at Axum in Ethiopia and Judah in the Near East.

Notes

The two settings are not completely independent but rather flow in and out of one another.

Although a chorus is not explicitly called for in the text, the premiere production featured a nine-member chorus that greatly enhanced the theatrical experience by invoking mood and place through song and movement.

Prologue

In ancient time, a caravan destined for Judah crosses the desert. In modern time, an airplane destined for Addis Ababa crosses the sky.

In Judah, King Solomon and his royal advisor Ashmodai await the arrival of Queen Mak'da's caravan.

- Ashmodai: What is this coming up from the desert rising like a column of smoke?
- Tamrin: Sheba's caravan.
- King Solomon: Who is this coming up from the desert breathing of myrrh and frankincense and every exotic perfume?
- Tamrin: She who is called by many names.
- Queen of Sheba: I am.
- Tamrin: Mak'da.
- Tamara: She who is the darling of her mother.
- Queen of Sheba: I am.
- Tamrin: Azeb, the favourite of the one who bore her.
- Queen of Sheba: I am.
- Tamrin: Bilquis.
- Tamara: She who is proclaimed blessed.
- Queen of Sheba: I am.
- All: The Queen of Sheba,
- Tamrin: the dawn rising, present from the time El prepared the heavens and earth.
- Queen of Sheba: I am.
- Tamrin: Saba. She who follows her own footprints, crosses distances believing there to be a sweetness and joy deeper than her own.

Ash/Tam/KS: Children of Zion, see...

Sheba transitions into Saba.

Tamrin: she who is called by many names,
on the day of her heart's joy.

Act 1 Scene 1

Modern: A frazzled Saba enters a souvenir shop at Addis Ababa airport with her luggage. The Store Owner springs to action.

Saba: Excuse me –

Store Owner: Selam! Welcome to Ethiopia, welcome to my store.

Saba: Do you have a phone I can use?

Store Owner: Delay?

Saba: Yeah, a little.

Store Owner: Is not your first time?

Saba: Please sir, it's a local call.

Store Owner: In how long Miss...?

Saba: Saba. Twelve years.

Store Owner: Saba? How you like this shawl! Perfect for a Saba.

Saba: I'll be very quick.

Store Owner: Antique unique one-of-a-kind. See, here, the painted story of Queen Mak'da, or as your people say "The Queen of Sheba".

Saba: You know what, never mind, thanks anyway.

Store Owner: Wait! Ok. Here.

He hands her a phone and continues to talk.

For us she is Saba. She who ruled over vast lands, a thing unheard of for a woman in her time. When King Solomon –

Saba: (*into phone*) Hello Solomon? It's me, where'd you go?...of course I came...I swear I'm calling from here... at the souvenir shop by the...ok...can't wait to see you...assuming you remember what I look like, eh! (*She hangs up.*)

Store Owner: As Queen Mak'da to King Solomon so Saba to Solomon.

Saba: Story of my life.

Store Owner: (*offering shawl*) You like?

Saba: How much?

Store Owner: Oh, but to put a price...Queen Mak'da's pilgrimage was no mere visit, and King Solomon was no mere man. His palace, oh, his palace in Judah boasted of vineyards, gardens, pools and singers with exotic musical instruments! There never was nor ever will be such heaven for a seller...

Act 1 Scene 2

Ancient: In Axum, Tamrin recounts his experience at King Solomon's court, beginning with how he presented himself to Ashmodai, the royal advisor. Tamrin's recounting prompts a re-enactment of the events that is occasionally interrupted by the responses of Queen Mak'da and Tamara.

Ashmodai: Seller?

Tamrin: Head merchant.

Ashmodai: From ass...

Tamrin: Abyssinia. Head merchant of Abyssinia, capital city Axum. I bring gold, ebony, sapphires. For your carpenters and masons in the building of temples.

Ashmodai: All of which we have in abundance. Your matter is finished.

Tamara: Tamrin, that was hardly the purpose of your journey, nor the route it was intended to take!

Queen Mak'da: I thank the goddess for your safe return.

Tamrin: Queen, I assure you. It was not a stop made on a whim.

Ashmodai: What further audience do you seek?

Tamrin: My intention is to see for myself that the King Solomon in whose praise all words of awe have been exhausted by every tongue in lands far and wide is real, a king made of blood and bone.

Queen Mak'da: He is not known to us.

Tamara: Did he prove of blood and bone?

Ashmodai: Stands he not before you?

Tamrin: King? Oh! I offer homage! I prostrate myself! I am but air in your presence! Forgive.

Ashmodai: You will live.

Tamrin: Might there not be a queen of this wondrous place before whom I might -

Ashmodai: In whose interest do you enquire?

Tamrin: I present myself in the name of Queen Mak'da.

Ashmodai: Queen?

Tamrin: But pity it is that she remains unwed.

Tamara: Pity?!

Ashmodai: Pity.

Tamrin: Oh but king, think not that this homage is without currency. Queen Mak'da of Axum is of unrivalled power and riches. She is the radiance of the sun. She is the vast lands of her dominion. She is the depth of the sea and the breadth of the air. She is-

King Solomon *enters*.

King Solomon: Who is he that exhausts all words of praise and awe in the name of an unknown she?

Ashmodai: King!

Tamara: What land is this where every man is king?

Ashmodai: A man of no substance, king, to be removed immediately.

Tamrin: The Majesty of King Solomon appeared before me, queen, and words I had no more.

King Solomon: Speak.

Tamrin: Oh King, I lament! How unforgivable that the djinn spirits who are themselves under your command even they have shielded the gentle lady from your sight and kept her out of your grasp my lord! I weep!

Ashmodai: Weep! Weaver of words and illusion!

Tamrin: Oh King, to tell you all of her, I would have to return to Judah countless times, carrying my wares along with my tales.

Ashmodai: Solomon, be advised, as with the value of his wares, so it is with the truth of this sorcerer's tales.

King Solomon: What is the story of her?

Tamara: She is the heart of woman, the head and hands of man.

Tamrin: It begins with a goat-

Tamara: False.

Tamrin: A jackal-

Ashmodai: Trickery.

Tamrin: Awre. The serpent.

Ashmodai: King, be advised.

Tamrin: It demanded to be fed a virgin every year!

Ashmodai: A virgin?

Tamara: Ever certain to rouse a serpent.

Tamrin: One such terrified virgin awaited the dragon's arrival, tied to a tree, when it happened that her virgin luck caused seven angels to pass under her leafy prison, when it happened that some of her virginal tears dropped upon and soaked their celestial robes. Looking up, they beheld the virgin.

Ashmodai: Terrified!

Tamrin: Terrified.

Ashmodai: My king, certainly these were the angels of God.

Tamrin: Yes! The angels of Astar, the angels of Shams.

King Solomon: There is one God.

Ashmodai: He who has found favour with you, King.

Queen Mak'da: Who speaks with such contempt regarding that of which he knows nothing?

King Solomon: The God of Judah is a god of jealous, mysterious fury, without form or face.

Queen Mak'da: As surely as the sun rises in the East and sets in the West, so the towers of Astar and Shams stand proud in Axum.

Tamara: What is the name by which their god is known?

Ashmodai: He Who Is.

Tamrin: Is...?

Ashmodai: He Who Is.

Tamrin: Who?

Ashmodai: He Is.

Queen Mak'da: One with no name.

King Solomon: I am.

Tamrin: You?

Ashmodai: He has said:

King Solomon: I AM.

Act 1 Scene 3

Modern: At the souvenir shop, Saba tries on the shawl.

Store Owner: It is made for you, made for you.

Saba: You think?

Solomon *enters*.

Solomon: Saba!

Saba: Hi!

Solomon: You really are here!

Saba: I am!

Solomon: Let me look at you.

Store Owner: So? For you, one hundred birr only.

Solomon: What's this? You wanted this?

Saba: Isn't it pretty?

Solomon: Fifteen.

Store Owner: It's one of a kind!

Solomon: Do not be dramatic man. I know your trick.

Store Owner: Brother, I'm only trying to earn my bread. You know how it is.

Solomon: Let us go.

Store Owner: Ok, fifteen.

The exchange takes place. Solomon presents the shawl to Saba.

Solomon: Here.

Saba: What a beauty it is.

Solomon: Fit for a queen.
Saba: I guess you're the king around here.
Solomon: It is good to see you, so many years.
Saba: You too.
Solomon: Shall we?

Saba and Solomon exit.

Act 1 Scene 4

Ancient: Tamrin presents King Solomon's letter to Queen Mak'da and Tamara. As before, this too prompts a re-enactment of the events that is occasionally interrupted by the women's responses.

Tamrin: This, from Solomon the king:
King Solomon: Come, in the name of the most merciful one God, surrender yourself unto me.
Tamrin: Queen, you must not resist him.
Queen Mak'da: I am intrigued by this king.
Tamara: Would you further encourage Tamrin's folly by allowing access to such a belligerent?
Tamrin: This king is divinely commissioned by I Am the Lord Himself!
Queen Mak'da: Tamara, it is the king who has presented us with an invitation.
Tamara: Of sorts!
King Solomon: Listen, queen, understand.
Ruler of remotest lands, take warning.
Sovereignty is given to you by the Lord-
Tamara: The Lord?
Ashmodai: Hear!
Tamara: Queen Mak'da, clear-eyed beauty radiant as the sun, will not go wandering into the desert in search of a vain trickster king!

King Solomon: Power, by the Most High.
He will Himself –

Tamara: Himself?

King Solomon: - probe your acts and scrutinize your intentions.
A stern trial awaits those who wield power
from He who has made small and great.

Queen Mak'da: Listen not for words, Tamara, but for passion.

Tamara: King Solomon likely must drink from a crystal goblet, the better
to keep an eye on his demon slaves!

Queen Mak'da: I want to discover the true nature of him, of his god.

Tamara: He has said I AM the Lord Himself.

Tamrin: Might they be one or three?

Ashmodai: King Solomon will not be interrupted by a messenger-boy for
she-beasts!

Tamara: This king is nothing without his spirits and shades of the night,
his djinns, his talking beasts and fantastical palaces.

Queen Mak'da: He is one with the confidence to disdain the capacity of my
wisdom.

King Solomon: Monarch, my words are meant for you
so that you may learn wisdom
and not fall into error at the moment of your trial.

Queen Mak'da: And not ceasing there, to anticipate my submission.

Tamara: Judah is an illusion.

Queen Mak'da: I am resolved to go to Judah, in order to have a trial of his
character, to be satisfied by my own experience.

Tamara: Should you lose yourself in it?

Queen Mak'da: You will lose yourself with me. Let us seek him, Tamara, and
we shall find him; let us love him, and he will not withdraw
himself from us; let us pursue him, and we shall overtake him;

let us ask, and we shall receive. Let us tame this beast at our door and be at peace.

Act 1 Scene 5

Modern: Saba and Solomon reach Solomon's house with her luggage. Ashmodai stands by his shack just inside the gate.

Solomon: Meet Saba. Saba, Ashmodai- gatekeeper.

Ashmodai: Good day *yene geta*. *Yene emebet*.

Saba: "Gatekeeper"? "My lord"? "My lady"? What's next, maids and butlers?

Solomon: Very soon.

Ashmodai: How beautiful she is.

Solomon: Her eyes are doves,

Ashmodai: as behind a veil.

Solomon: Her hair is dark as purple,

Ashmodai: a king is held captive in her tresses.

Solomon: Her lips are a scarlet thread,

Ashmodai: and her words, surely, enchanting.

Solomon: Her neck is the Tower of David, built on layers,

Ashmodai: hung round with a thousand bucklers,

Solomon: and each the shield of a hero.

Ashmodai: Her breasts-

Solomon: (*indicating the luggage*) Take that in.

Ashmodai *exits with the bags*.

Saba: What are they, my two...?

Solomon: Two...fawns.

Saba: Fawns?

Solomon: Twins of a gazelle.

Saba: Right.

Solomon: That feed among the lilies.

Saba: When did you start talking like that?

Solomon: I always have.

Saba: I'm feeling pleurably violated.

Solomon: Does not quite come across the same in email you know.

Saba: No, no it doesn't. But I think you've been practicing.

Solomon: Just getting ready for the main event.

Saba: I'm not one to complain. I don't know about your friend here though.

Solomon: Ah you will get used to the royal treatment soon and start demanding it.

Ashmodai *enters*.

Besides, he is usually drunk and mostly harmless. Are you not, Ashmodai?

Saba and Solomon *exit during Ashmodai's speech*.

Ashmodai: Your servant am I, of your serving maid son,
a man feeble, with time little to live.
Of justice and laws, with small understanding.
Were among the sons of men anyone perfect,
he would still count for nothing
if he lacked wisdom, that from you comes.

Act 1 Scene 6

Modern: Saba and Solomon enter the house.

Saba: Wow! This is not the same place I remember.

Solomon: This little hut?

Saba: Come on!

Solomon: Just a few touch-ups. It took years but little by little I managed to get it ready in time.

Saba: In time?

Solomon: For us, our new life.

Saba: Beautiful.

Solomon: It is yours. Do you need to call home?

Saba: Let them wait.

Solomon: Yes, let them. I have got twelve years on them.

Saba: I've had twenty-four with them.

Solomon: I missed you.

Saba: I missed you more.

Solomon: "I missed you more."

Saba: Shut up. Funny, everything looks smaller.

Solomon: That is one effect I have on people.

Saba: It's your oversized head, you're still full of yourself.

Solomon: I am full of you.

Saba: Thank you.

Solomon: You are welcome.

Saba: For waiting.

Solomon: I will wait a thousand years for you.

Saba: That's it?

Solomon: A thousand and one.

Saba: Two thousand.

Solomon: It is like a breath.

Saba: Three thousand.

Solomon: I am still here.

Saba: And I.

Solomon: Looking fine...

Saba: Stop it! I just flew fourteen hours and you want to get it on?

Solomon: You have been a long time coming.

Saba: Oh please, as if you've been holding out for me.

Solomon: Have you not?

Saba: Not by choice.

Solomon: Ah hah! So you have looked.

Saba: Meanwhile, when did all the women here get gorgeous?

Solomon: I never noticed.

Saba: So tell me.

Solomon: Tell you what?

Saba: How many girlfriends?

Solomon: What is it with this?

Saba: I want to know.

Solomon: No you do not.

Saba: I mean you've got the real thing left right and center here, you're going to have to explain it to me.

Solomon: Must be something in the water.

Saba: Keep in mind I'm still on the market.

Solomon: Does that mean you will not be unpacking?

Saba: Until you put a ring on this finger, smarty-pants.

Solomon: Before I send some of my people over to your people?

Saba: Oh get with the program, that's old school. It's the new millennium!

Solomon: I am ready whenever you are.

Saba: You better start confessing or I'm putting my eyes to work again.

Solomon: There might have been a few. But, forget them, what every single one of them wants is somebody to fly out of here with. Now you!

Saba: Me?

Solomon: One in a million. You have got the stuff, that little blue book, in the palm of your hand, and you are giving it all up to settle here.

Saba: Not just for anyone. Look at you, perfectly happy to be where you are. You make me proud.

Solomon: You love me.

Saba: I love Ethiopia.

Solomon: Same difference.

Saba: Well excuse me.

Solomon: What was that?

Saba: I said, lucky me.

Solomon: The main point is, you flew back.

King Solomon: My dove is my only one, perfect and mine.

Saba: I didn't just fly back to mate, like those pigeons you used to breed back in the day.

Solomon: You remember?

Saba: How could I forget, especially that time my cousin Nini's fat cat ate your favourite one?

Solomon: Ay do not remind me, it still makes my blood boil. So many of the other boys' pigeons followed that bird to my home, because of her I started with two and in within a month I had twenty of them!

Saba: Ok back up I think it took the whole season.

Solomon: No no. I had my own secret system. I did not have to clip their wings to train them.

Saba: Yeah right.

Solomon: No it is true, I had a shortcut to getting them used to my house so they would always fly back.

Saba: Well, master of the birds, what was your secret?

Solomon: Well now if I told you that I would lose all my powers.

Saba: Do tell me you're not still breeding pigeons.

Solomon: First of all, I never bred pigeons. I bred doves. And second of all, what if I am?

Saba: Then I'm getting on that phone to Nini and telling her to send me a ticket quick, I came all the way here to live with a twelve year old boy!

Solomon: No I am not breeding them anymore but the skills, ahhh the skills, they have come in useful in other areas.

Tamrin: Such is our love, such is our friend.

Saba: Such as?

Solomon: Well, firstly, you came back did you not?

Saba: You didn't clip me.

Solomon: God knows I tried.

Saba: Don't change the subject.

Solomon: Secondly, I know how to keep them coming keep them wanting more, never let them forget that I have what they need.

Tamrin: That is why girls love and women understand him.

Saba: Who are these unfortunate souls?

Solomon: The tourists of course.

Saba: My bad. I forgot I was talking to chief cook and bottle-washer at First Ethiopian Tours.

Solomon: I call it "First" for a reason. Now with you here, you and I, we will be a force, a winning team. We create our own neech.

Saba: Neech, eh?

Solomon: Neech.

Saba: So I would be, like, your main bird.

Solomon: Always.

Saba: Luring in the unsuspecting birdies. Flash a smile and testify in traditional gear and they'll all start flocking home.

Solomon: "Look, a real habesha beauty in the flesh!"

Saba: "But her English is so good!"

Solomon: *Motherland Package*. How does that sound?

Saba: Way too E.S.L.

Solomon: Who are you calling E.S.L?

Saba: Now now no need to get jealous, just as soon as you smoozze out zose 'ze's and rrrrememberrr to rrrround out zose 'r's and dot the 'i's on your neeches...

Solomon: Woman you hurt my feeling. Oohh aw aw aw. Ouch. Oh oh.

Saba: Please, if only I could sound like you. Anyway before we start I want a personal V.I.P tour of the sights.

Solomon: Forget the sights. I do not think I can even go to the city tonight. Sights. We must cancel dinner and go straight to bed.

Saba: Oh my god, what time is it here, I mean there, now I really have to call them or they'll just die. Give me your phone.

Solomon: Direct? Are you crazy?

Saba: First and last time, I promise. Give it.

Solomon: I cannot watch this.

Saba: Give it give it and go.

He hands over his cell-phone and exits. Saba dials.

Saba: Nins?...hi girrrl oh my gawd I am shaking I'm in a complete tizzy!...Yeah I'm here of course I'm here what was I going to do, tell them stop the plane let me get off?...I can't believe it I'm really here and he's here and he's so...god he's so...god he's beautiful. Don't tell anyone I told you this but I feel like I'm the Queen o' Sheba herself or something...I really I really I really thought like...he wouldn't recognize me I really thought...I don't know what I expected, sometimes you know how you expect something to be a certain way and it never is it never is but...this is just how I imagined it would be...I half expected him to see me and just turn around and walk the other way...everything's different and everything's the same, d'you know what I mean?...it's like it's like I never left...what do you think, really really what do you think...I'm so nervous I feel like I can just be myself around him...you know? Just be myself...I thought we would see each other and we would have nothing to say you know how weird I get around habesha guys...it just feels right it feels right it feels perfect...yeah I *know* I've been here thirty minutes would you ...why do you always have to do that...why do you always have to point out the obvious of course I've been here thirty minutes but I'm just saying I know these things you know on a gut level...and girl you know about my gut it never did need much convincing...ok ok sorry sorry ahhh anyway how are things in c'naaada, where *you* are from? How's the fam?...can't call them right now...just say I had jet lag and went straight to sleep wait don't tell them I called are you insane?...anyway um I gotta go I'll tell you how it went...

Solomon *enters, looking extra handsome for their night out.*

...hold your panties definitely to be continued. (*She hangs up.*)
Lookin' nice! How about me? Am I okay to go like this?

Solomon: Too much. Much too much clothing on you in general for my comfort.

Saba: You're bad. Give me a minute.

Solomon: Do you need help?

Saba: I think I got it.

She exits.