

TAGS

by Walter Dean Myers

Players

"BIG EDDIE" JONES, 17 "SMOKE"
WILLIE JIMENEZ, 16 "2-SOON/121"
D'MARIO THOMPSON, 16 "DATRUF"
FRANK WATKINS, 17 "J-BOY"

We are in the present time. The play opens on a dingy urban hallway in some dingy urban city. There is a door at stage right. To the left of the hallway, next to stairs that go up at a steep angle, we see BIG EDDIE, a young African American male, writing his tag on the wall. From somewhere a radio is playing, and we hear an ANNOUNCER talking about the wonders of the "oldies."

The light flickers occasionally, giving the set an eerie feeling. The radio gets randomly louder, then softer. BIG EDDIE works hard at his tag, which is the letters spelling out "smoke" sitting

on a bed of flames. Throughout the play, the teenagers work on their tags.

The door at stage right opens and WILLIE appears. He looks around and is momentarily startled by BIG EDDIE.

WILLIE

Yo, what's happening?

BIG EDDIE

Same old, same old. Ain't nobody much in this building.

WILLIE

Do it count?

BIG EDDIE

Yeah, we still tagging, man. We still tagging. You got more paint?

WILLIE

Enough. *(He starts putting his tag on the wall. His tag reads 2-SOON/121.)*

BIG EDDIE

Where did you say you lived? East side, right? Over near Marcus Garvey Park?

WILLIE

Yeah. This your first wall tonight?

BIG EDDIE

First wall. Hey, man, you scared?

WILLIE

No, I ain't scared. You know some dudes just give up, but I ain't stopping, man. I got to hold on. How about you?

BIG EDDIE

When that old dude told me you could still be in the world as long as people kept you in their minds, I knew what I had to do. They see these tags and they remember. I felt stronger when they had the candles and a picture of me in the park. But the sanitation department took all that stuff away.

WILLIE

That's where you went down?

BIG EDDIE

Yeah. I thought I had a get over, man. Some Puerto Ricans said they wanted to cop some heavy weed. Five pounds of Jamaican. I told this dude to meet me in the park and he said okay. When he showed with the money, I tried to take him off, and he flashed a badge on me.

WILLIE

A cop.

BIG EDDIE

Yeah. I had my piece out and was about to hit the dude, when his partner shot me.

WILLIE

Damn!

BIG EDDIE

I knew I was gone. I could feel my heart, like, fluttering. Then there was people all around. I could make some of them out. Then it was over.

WILLIE

It's a funny feeling when you know you . . . you know.

BIG EDDIE

Man, I wasn't accepting it—you know, like I was looking the other way until they started putting flowers and some of my personal stuff around. They put out shit for you, too?

WILLIE

Yeah. Somebody made a sign—REST IN PEACE. That's a trip, right?

BIG EDDIE

How you like my tag?

WILLIE

(goes over and inspects BIG EDDIE's tag) It's okay, but you should get some color in it. You got a fire, but it don't have any colors. If it's just black and white, people think about cleaning it off faster.

BIG EDDIE

Yeah, yeah. What you mean, "that's a trip"?

WILLIE

(returning to his own section of the wall) What?

BIG EDDIE

You said they put out REST IN PEACE and then you said it was a trip. Why you say that?

WILLIE

We resting? We ain't resting. Them old dudes said that as long as people remember us, we can still deal. We got our tags on the wall and people can see we were real, and they're thinking about us. But we ain't resting because we got to stay ahead of people cleaning the walls.

BIG EDDIE

I'm running from wall to wall to get my tag up. I'm getting tired. That's what happens to the old dudes. They get tired. They give up.

WILLIE

I ain't giving up. I'll tag for fucking ever.

The door opens again and D'MARIO enters. He steps inside, then stops and looks at the others without speaking. For a moment they are frozen in place.

BIG EDDIE

He's dead. He can see us, so he's dead. Yo, this hallway ain't big enough for everybody! Go someplace else.

D'MARIO

No place is big enough for everybody.

BIG EDDIE

So why don't you find another wall?

D'MARIO

You hear they cleaned up Malcolm X Boulevard from 120th Street all the way up to 135th?

WILLIE

Some guy is doing a documentary on Harlem. That same dude who did a thing on baseball. After they finish the shooting, they'll stop cleaning.

BIG EDDIE

They got a chemical now—you just spray it on and wait for a minute and then wipe it right off.

WILLIE

If he got an interesting tag, maybe they'll leave it up. People like art. What's your tag?

D'MARIO

DATRUF.

WILLIE

Yeah, yeah, I seen your tag. It's nice, man.

The door opens again and FRANK "J-BOY" enters. The recognition scene is repeated and they all see that they are deceased.

WILLIE

This place is getting to be like some kind of ghetto. How many tags going to go on one wall?

J-BOY

I ain't leaving. You got no power over me, sucker.

D'MARIO

Fool's dead and still talking smack! And tagging with a spray can. That's old. You can't tag with no spray can.

J-BOY

I can. I'm the best.

WILLIE

Yeah, everybody's the best, but we all went down.

D'MARIO

How you go down?

WILLIE

On a humble! I went into this bodega to get some cigarettes, and the owner—this old fucking dude—is eyeing me like I'm fixing to steal something. So just out of spite, I put my gun in his face. He panicked and started saying something in Spanish and English about "just take the money." But he grabs hold of my nine and he's afraid to let it go.

D'MARIO

'Fraid you going to do him!

WILLIE

Yeah, and all I want to do is get some cigarettes, let the fool know I *could* have robbed him, and walk out the damned door! But now I'm struggling with this old man and he's holding on to my gun and crying and begging and carrying on. I ain't letting the gun go and he ain't letting the gun go. Then two sisters come in and see what's going on and duck right back out. I think they might be calling the cops or something, so I let go of the gun with one hand to punch the old man, and it goes off and hits me in the neck.

D'MARIO

You killed yourself!

WILLIE

No! The old man had his finger on the trigger! The shot broke something in my neck and I didn't feel nothing. I knew I was on the ground and . . .

(WILLIE is breathing heavily as he remembers the moment.)

I thought I was just hurt bad. When the ambulance guys got there and looked me over, right away they started making nice-nice to the dude who shot me, trying to make *him* feel better. Then they put me in a bag and started . . . *(WILLIE can't continue.)*

WILLIE

(to D'MARIO) How you go?

D'MARIO

Why we got to go through all this? Ain't no use to it.

WILLIE

What else you got to do? You giving a lecture down at the college? You talking at the UN? Maybe you going to be on television!

D'MARIO

I was with my cousin Pedro and his little sister on his stoop. We were just chilling. We were talking about this and that, you know, light stuff. Then a car pulls up. Two guys get out

of the car, and one of them asks where Hamilton Heights is. Pedro stands up and is going to give the guy directions, when I see he's flashing signs. One guy pulls down his cap and he's covering his face, so I knew some shit was about to go down! Then *blam! Blam! Blam!* Pedro ducks into the building, pulling his sister, and I'm right behind him. A bullet hits the wall next to my head, but I'm halfway up the first flight of stairs, so I think I'm cool. We get up the stairs, and I know they ain't about to follow us into the building, so I'm breathing light. I think I got a stitch in my side from running so hard, but when I look down, I see I'm bleeding. All kinds of crazy thoughts are going through my mind. You know what I'm thinking? I've been shot, but I'm still walking, dig? I'm like Fifty Cent and Tupac and all those guys who been through the battles. I wasn't even going to say nothing to Pedro until later. Some people are out in the hall 'cause they heard us running up the stairs, and a little boy points at me and tells his mama I've been shot. Then I look down again and my whole side is covered with blood. I sit on the stairs and they call 911 and the cops come and an ambulance. After that, all I remember is lying on a table and some doctor telling me to count backward from ten to one. I come to and I'm all by myself and there are guys like y'all standing around sucking on hurt and looking miserable.

WILLIE

They shot you for nothing?

D'MARIO

I tried to figure it out. About a week before, me and Pedro was in this hall right here.

BIG EDDIE

Where we are now?

D'MARIO

This white boy said he had some Mexican blow to sell. I thought he might have been a cop, but he sounded like he was from the South or something, so we thought he might have been legit. We was looking at the blow when another dude came rushing through the door. I thought he was a cop and I can't do no more bids, so I lit the mother up. It turned out that the white boy was legit, and the guy I shot lived in this building. So I figured the drive-by was some revenge.

J-BOY

In this building?

D'MARIO

Yeah. Yeah. So I read the whole set wrong, and then I got killed behind it!

J-BOY

(staggering against the wall) Oh, man! Oh, man. This is so fucked up!

BIG EDDIE

Hey, man, shit happens, bro! This is what our lives were always like. We out looking to make a name for ourselves and staying in the sunlight. We doing the same thing now.

J-BOY

No, man, it ain't like that.

BIG EDDIE

He's right. Being alive ain't tagging. Being alive is walking the damned streets, and making love, and listening to some music. This is just hanging on to what you know is already gone. This ain't nothing like no life.

WILLIE

Yeah, but this nigger getting all sick over it and shit don't help, either. We just got caught up in it, that's all.

J-BOY

(reaches for D'MARIO but goes through him) You killed me, motherfucker! You killed me! You killed me!

D'MARIO

What you talking about? What you talking about?

J-BOY

I came through the door that night! I had to pee and was rushing to get upstairs, when I seen a white boy with his back

to me. He moved aside and all I saw was the flash from the damned gun! It was you! You killed me!

D'MARIO

Whoa, man, your boys got me!

J-BOY

I didn't have no boys. I don't know who got your ass! Maybe some baby Gs making their bones—I don't know! I know you killed my ass. You killed me!

WILLIE

This hallway is spooked, man. I'm going to go tag someplace else.

BIG EDDIE

Yeah, I gotta get some air. Gotta get some air.

D'MARIO

Man, I didn't know what was going on. It was an accident!

J-BOY

(tries to grab D'MARIO again but again reaches through him) I hate you! You shit-bitch motherfucker!

(He reaches for D'MARIO again, but then stops as he realizes it's hopeless. He repeats himself, but in a much subdued voice.)

You shit-bitch motherfucker!

BIG EDDIE

I'm outta here! *(He starts slowly away.)*

WILLIE

(also leaving) Word.

D'MARIO

You can't do nothing to me now. I can't do nothing to you. It's too late. The shit is over. We can't turn it back.

BIG EDDIE, WILLIE, and D'MARIO leave.

J-BOY sits and buries his head in his hands. We hear the sound of sobbing through the theater's loudspeakers. J-BOY's shoulders begin to shake as the sobbing fills the entire theater. It continues as J-BOY gets up and goes to the wall. Carefully he begins removing the tags of BIG EDDIE, WILLIE, and D'MARIO. He touches his own tag with his fingertips and then slowly wipes it away.