

Gray

A play about a RACE through time

by

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*Seeking representation

SCENE ONE

The sound of sirens can be heard in the distance. A pool of light fade up to a crime scene upstage. There is a section upstage taped off with crime scene tape. Digital imaging should be used to create the world of the neighborhood.

The street looks like any street in America. It is busy with trash cans, street lights, and buildings. This could be in upscale midtown New York City alley, rural Lincoln, Nebraska, or the Englewood neighborhood in Chicago. It is a representation of what could be considered Anytown, USA present time.

Behind the crime scene tape lays a coroner tarp. The body of our latest victim in America's police violence against black men. The victim is unknown.

The lights fade up on center stage to focus on a basketball. Upstage are a line of stools and/ or chairs where the cast will soon reside.

An African American boy, in his early teens enters. He wears overalls and looks like he is from another time. He whistles a melody of comfort. He goes under the crime scene tape, lifts the tarp, looks, a moment, lowers it and continues downstage.

He goes to the basketball, picks it up and begins to play by himself for a few moments, just being a kid.

From another area of the stage another African American boy enters, slightly older than the first and dressed in present time clothes. He sees the crime scene and it horrified, sees the other boy and goes to him.

The two boys begin to play a little game of one on one, a universal language.

BOY 1
You pretty good.

BOY 2
Thanks. Your defense is a little off but not to bad.

Boy 1 gives him a look then goes up to a shot, that Boy 2 blocks.

BOY 1
Damn! (*Bouncing the ball*) Okay I got you.

Boy 2 laughs.

BOY 1 (CONT.)
Best player of all time?

BOY 2
This a pop quiz?

BOY 1
I see your game so I figure you got one.

Boy 2 shoots and makes it.

BOY 2
George Mikan.

BOY 1
Who?

BOY 2
Or Larry Foust. You?

BOY 1
Jordan, Bryant, Shaq.

The sirens begin to sound overcoming their game. They stop playing to reference the crime scene that is now becoming more active.

BOY 1
Hey you see this?

BOY 2
Umm hmm.

BOY 1
Someone is dead over there.

BOY 2
I know, so do you.

BOY 1
What's wrong with you?

BOY 2
You get use to it.

BOY 1
What? Seeing dead people?

Silence. Boy 2 reaches for Boy 1's shoulder, he pulls away. Boy 2 smiles.

BOY 2
You don't have to be scared.

BOY 1
I ain't scared, there's a dead dude over there and you smiling like this ain't nothing new.

BOY 2
It's not. It hasn't been "new" for hundreds of years. All of our stories are the same, a common thread, related, connected, inner woven, relevant but only when time tells us so.

Boy 1 looks him over, laughs.

BOY 1
No offense but I don't think you and me sharing any common threads.

BOY 2
That's what the journey is all about.

Boy 2 goes back to the body, Boy 1 follows but does not go beyond the tape. He looks around as if he's a look out for Boy 2.

BOY 1
(whisper)
Hey man you can't just do that. What you doing? The police are coming.

Boy 2 stands by the body for a moment. More sirens moving closer. Boy 1 looks around in the direction of the sirens.

Surveys the area for a moment and realizes he doesn't know where he is. He looks back to Boy 2 who has disappeared.

Boy 1 looks on as the crime scene comes to life. In the midst of the crime scene coming to life the rest of the cast enters the stage and takes their places on their stools. OFFICER WRIGHT emerges from the other direction and begins to collect evidence, survey the scene, and talk to witnesses.

The cast is a presence within the play. They play multiple parts that are translated through costume pieces or props that create the character they are representing in that moment. They may exit as needed but can also stay on stage watching the play unfold.

SHELIA and ROBERT an African American couple in their late sixties stand outside of the tape.

SHELIA

(to Wright)

Another white police officer gun down another one of our black men?

ROBERT

I bet that's exactly what happened.

Officer Wright flips the page in his notebook and walks to the crowd. Boy 1 continues to stand near observing the action and becoming a member of this community.

OFFICER WRIGHT

Did anyone see or hear anything that might help us with this case?

SHELIA

You ain't told us what the case is yet.

ROBERT

You sure have not officer. I want to know-

SHELIA

I want to know too!

OFFICER WRIGHT

Sir, ma'am I can't give you any information about this crime scene. But any information you can give me would really help us out. We're not the enemy, you know that right?

SHELIA

I bet that news reporter over there would love to know what we saw, what we think, and how we feel.

The lights shift to a newswoman standing center stage. She does not hear or reference the crowd that has now faded out.

We have been transformed to another crime scene, it is Ferguson, MO 2013 and the body that lays on the ground is that of Michael Brown. Digital imaging from this event assist in creating the transformation. News outlets reporting from the scene can be heard as images of Ferguson appear. The images should evolve throughout the scene.

LAYLA JEFFERY an African American woman in her late twenties fixes her suit and prepares to go live on the air. She is stern but pleasant.

The street is alive with protestors, police radios sounding. It should feel like she is in the midst of the height of the protest. Boy 1 get mixed up in the crowd but works his way through to hear her speak.

LAYLA

This is Layla Jeffrey coming to you live from Ferguson, Missouri. I am standing just feet from where the body of a yet unidentified African American male took his last breath. He was recently shot and killed in the middle of this street, in his own neighborhood. Sources say he had his hands raised in the air. Still a threat? Or a victim of a brutal murder? Will justice be blind on this day? The ultimate question in the minds of everyone in this area including his family, friends, neighbors, media, and slowly reaching the world, is why?

The camera has been cut. She relaxes herself and takes a moment to look over the area. She watches people passing by with protest signs chanting.

CROWD

Stop killing us! Stop killing us!

The lights fade the crowd fades as Layla addresses the audience.

LAYLA

(to audience)

I know that it's not a coincidence that anytime anything happens in the African-American community I'm the person that they choose to send. I think that in the media there is a level of comfort in knowing that the face that is in front of the camera should represent the faces of all of the people standing behind it. The producers came to me and said that they needed me to go out of town to cover this breaking story. They wanted me to be the face of the network. That immediately told me that who ever it was that I'm covering had to be a face like mine, a black face like mine. Everybody's playing the same game, everybody's making strategic choices, everybody's playing chess. Except in this game the whole country is playing and the world is watching, trying to stay ahead of a game that no one really knows how to play. It's always a matter of who is three moves ahead. Strategy. Because whoever's three moves ahead is the person in charge, they are the person that is making the smartest decisions, the checkmate is coming. Black crime, black face reporting on the crime, makes sense; their Queen just took my pon.

When I was in college the breaking story was the Rodney King beating. I'm sure all of you remember in 1991 an African-American man, Rodney King, was involved in a high-speed chase in Los Angeles, California. When the chase ended Rodney was surrounded by five police officers.

Projections of the Rodney King beating are shown. Layla watches as if reliving this memory, Boy 1 watches as well.

LAYLA

Unbeknownst to the police officers there was a tourist in the vicinity videotaping the entire incident as he was snatched from his car and literally beaten within an inch of his life. No gun. No knife.

No super hero strength, just a black man that had clearly pissed off this group of white officers so bad that they had to beat him with their fists, batons and feet. When the Rodney King beating happened and those police officers were charged I remember thinking to myself they have the video there is no way that they will be found innocent. The jury came back (*Pause*) and acquitted all of them on all counts and as tragic as the verdict was what happened afterwards was a true testament and change to American history. People took to the streets.

The protestors return in the shadows

The emotion was raw. People were tired of being oppressed. As much as the African-American community was angry during the 1960's this was a different type of anger and a different type of unrest. It was the kind of anger that said, "What do we have to do? How many years do we have to work to prove ourselves worthy of just living?" Things happen and years down the line in a US History class the teacher roars, "It was a shameful day in American History." Why do so many of those days define the history of black people?

We are brought up to believe that policeman, teachers, and ministers are all people that are supposed to support us and keep us safe. We have now evolved into a place where ministers are being caught having inappropriate relationships with children and teachers are having relationships with their students and unfortunately policemen are killing our young black men at outrageous rates. I do acknowledge it's not all, but enough to make the next shooting of an unarmed black man news for the back page instead of the headline. Forgotten. Buried. Without provocation. Without reason, or are we still living in that fear? As I stood in my dorm room and watched this massacre unfold on television as I watched thousands of African-American men and women terrorize, loot, set fires to their own neighborhood and their own property I yelled at the television, "What are you doing? This is your neighborhood."

Images post riots flood the digital screen. Pictures of the neighborhood, the people, the rubble, the reality of what was done to this area, the devastation. Boy 1 watches, mesmerized by the images.

People lost everything that they had built and fifty-three people lost their lives. What the hell were they thinking? I wished I were done with school so I could've been there to stand on the street trying to get people to stop and think about what they were doing.

She stands on her post and reports life. The background has evolved from the first report, the crowd has grown. The background noise is louder, street busier.

This is Layla Jeffrey coming to you live from the intersection of Florence and Normandie in Los Angeles, CA where there is civil unrest in the wake of the Rodney King verdict. People are furious with the justice system and cannot understand how a not guilty verdict could have happened. I urge people to stop and think.

Images of the OJ Simpson trial from the perspective of the media.

LAYLA

This is Layla Jeffrey coming to you live from the Los Angeles courthouse where there are over five thousand people waiting to hear the verdict of the OJ Simpson murder trial. As you can see behind me there are police officers as far as the eye can see on the ground, atop horses and in cars hoping to calm the storm if the verdict is guilty. Fearing another riot like that of Rodney King just four years earlier. I urge people to stop and think.

Images of the George Zimmerman on trial from the perspective of the media.

LAYLA

This is Layla Jeffrey coming to you live from Sanford, Florida where George Zimmerman was just found not guilty of the February 2012 murder of unarmed African American teen Trayvon Martin. Again I urge you-

She catches herself. Stops for a moment then continues, fearless into the camera.

LAYLA

There is more to reporting than reporting. Just as there is more to teaching than teaching. I stand in the midst of war zones with a microphone in hand and report what is real.

Images of the crowds of people with signs of protest for Michael Brown's shooting.

LAYLA

The blood still stained on the street, the childless mother and father.

Layla speaks to the camera man.

LAYLA

Make sure you zoom in on the anger on their faces.

CROWD

"Hands up don't shoot. Hands up don't shoot. Hands up don't shoot!"

The image of the protesters are present but become silent to Layla.

LAYLA

(to camera)

I will not report what is popular but what is honest. The shop owner that is afraid to run his business because he now lives in fear that one day another child will be shot and he will again lose his livelihood. I will report the mother who watched her son take his last breath. I want to interview the father who is leading the peaceful protest through the streets hand in hand with his young sons who don't understand.

Layla looks to the crowd and approaches an African American man who has entered holding a sign.

LAYLA

Sir, can you tell me why you're here and who you have with you?

MAN 1

I came out with my two sons. They asked me what happened and I had to tell them. I had to explain to them what is going on in our community, so we're here. Some people may not agree with me but this isn't the time to shelter our young black men. If someone doesn't tell them what is true, they will continue to live this life ignorant to the very real possibility that they are being hunted.

LAYLA

And you brought them because?

MAN 1

I sat them down a few years back and told them what to do when the police approach them, told them to put their hands up and do as their told. *(Pause)* Michael did that and they shot him anyway. They made a liar out of me to my boys, I had to do more this time. Because they need to learn that this is what they have to do when you have experienced unfair treatment. We can't do nothing anymore.

If you're watching this sitting at home on your butts angry, then do something. Have a voice. But don't complain about it from the comfort of your living room. Hands up!

CROWD (OFF STAGE)

Don't shoot!

The Man exits as the image of the crowd of protestors fades.

LAYLA

(to audience)

I want to join them. I want to march. I need to capture the sweat and tears. Trying to stay three moves ahead. Yes, I will be the black face in the crowd of black faces in Ferguson, MO. Reporting on what I see and what is happening while trying to hold my composure because what I want to do is put the microphone down and turn the camera off and participate. I want all of the people in all of these places to know that I am not just another black person that has been sent to blend in. We don't want to blend in, we stand out. We are different and we are struggling for understanding and in some instances we are tired. My grandmother thought we had truly overcome when we received our right to vote, integrated schools, we were on our way to the top of the mountain. People tell us to be patient, then follow it with, "It's not that bad." Black men get killed and there is no lasting affect on society. These deaths are beginning to mix in with the term, "Just another..." Just another black man has been shot. Just another one of them has died at the hands of a police officer. Just another, just another, not making the news anymore. No one is reporting on it anymore. It is as insignificant as the story in the bottom right hand corner of page seven of the newspaper that no one reads. But like any good crime there is the other side, justice takes time. Death takes only seconds, justice could take years, but change can take a lifetime. The fear is always the same, if we wait for justice and the outcome is another Rodney King or Trayvon Martin the momentum that this movement could have had would have died with them, again. Here we stand hand in hand at the top of the mountain and we begin to slowly all fall down.

One of the protestors gives Layla a protest poster. She looks at it for a moment, protestors can be heard, sirens come back to life again. Boy 1 moves into the scene as he watches her. For the first time she sees him.

I can only pray that people with guns whether white or black, whether a policeman, homeowner, criminal or mother, that they could just start to value the idea of someone's life as much as they do their own. Reporting on yet another shooting of yet another one lost. Unarmed. Guilty of something or nothing? Does it really matter? Does someone's past justify being shot and killed? The unarmed black man had been in and out of jail. The unarmed black man was a good husband and father of three. The unarmed black man was helping a stranger to fix a flat tire. The unarmed black man that looked like trouble. *(Pause)* The unarmed black man had his hands up, *(Boy 1 raises his hands)* hoping that on this day no one would shoot him. Does it really matter?

Layla collects herself, puts the poster down and grabs her microphone and goes back to the camera. Frozen.

Layla transitions taking the poster with her and joining the protestors. Boy 1 stands watching her exit as Boy 2 emerges still bouncing the ball. They being to play again.

BOY 1

So that's Michael Brown under there?

BOY 2

Yes. Michael is already with us.

BOY 1

This ain't right though.

BOY 2

It never is.

BOY 1

No one should die like that. All these people out here pissed off and protesting. We should be protesting too.

BOY 2

In a way we are. We all have a purpose, something to do with our lives that will make a difference.

BOY 1

What are you talking about? A purpose? Like to pick up a sign and stand my ground?

BOY 2

Something like that.

Boy 1 grabs a sign left by the crime scene, the image of the protestors resumes. Boy 2 watches but does not join.

BOY 1

Hands up! Don't shoot! Hands up! Don't shoot!

Layla leaves the crowd, turns back to the cameraman and prepares to speak. The lights shift. She freezes as-

In the darkness from the back of the stage a woman enters. A small living room lives downstage of the crime scene. MARYANN, a white woman in her early-thirties watching the television laughing. She takes the remote and flips a few channels. She stops on a station, the stage is split living in two pools of light, one on the crime scene and one in the living room where MaryAnn watches the scene on television.

The sound of the crowd of protestors gets loud as Layla breaks through to speak. Behind her the crowd lives.

CROWD

Hands up! Don't Shoot!

LAYLA

As the crowd of protesters grows so does the presence of more men and women in blue in the wake of the slaying of a young African American teenager Michael Brown. This is Layla Jeffrey coming to you live from Ferguson, MO. I urge any and all of you on this day to stop and think.

MaryAnn continues watching Layla on the television, protestors in the background.

MARYANN

(to audience)

Life changing moments. For this generation it's, "Where were you on September 11, 2001?" I was in my college sociology class arguing about the importance of something that was of no importance when the head of the program came in and whispered something top secret to my professor.

(Pause) We were all making jokes that her car had just been peed on by some drunk kid she failed but she sat at her desk, started crying and told us the news. Today Saturday August 9, 2014 a little after noon I am standing in the living room of my home in a suburb outside of St. Louis waiting for my husband to get home for lunch. That's where I was when the breaking news came in-

MaryAnn listens closely to the report.

LAYLA

We again interrupt your regularly scheduled program to continue bringing you breaking news out of Ferguson, MO right outside of St. Louis. A young black male Michael Brown has been shot and killed by a Ferguson police officer. Reports are coming in that this young African American man confirmed to be a teenager was unarmed and his hands were raised when the officer shot him. Many are questioning the need to use lethal force on an unarmed man with his hands in the air. After speaking with a Sergeant in the department I was told that quote, "The use of lethal force is only deemed necessary when the officer feels his or her life is in imminent danger. As we investigate this officer involved shooting, interview the officer and witnesses we will do our best to come to an open and honest decision as to whether lethal force was indeed necessary." End quote. We will keep you posted as this story unfolds, as the crowds linger and as the emotion of the neighborhood grows.

Layla fades out.