

# My Son

A Theatrical Experience

By

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## **Abstract**

Confrontations between law enforcement and the black community have too often turned deadly leaving immense strain on the relationship between the two. Since the days the early immigrants migrated to America and the first African slaves were imported to America an oppressive power dynamic has existed between the groups. Much research has been paid to the ways in which this dynamic exist but little has been done to uncover the psychological effects this century's year old tension creates maintains and passes down. In this essay we will discuss some of the history between the African American community and law enforcement, the ways in which community violence effects parenting and how the community deals with loss of a loved one. These emotional reflections of the African American community in the wake of an officer involved shooting will be turned into a theatrical event

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American citizens should be against mass media's use of character assassination during incidents of police brutality because it creates fear and hostile attitudes between law enforcement agents and the black communities they serve while maintaining the oppressive status quo. Over the years the relationship between law enforcement and the African American community has been plagued with strain distrust and violence. History between these two groups has proved their relationship to be tense creating unsafe and far too often fatal interactions between the parties. The resulting feelings of hostility in the wake of tragedy are often exacerbated by the media coverage surrounding them serving to further the divide between the communities. Often overlooked and forgotten during these times of loss are the hopeless feelings that reverberate throughout the community. Shockwaves can be felt by mothers of sons who share feelings of desperation and frustration with respect to being able to protect their children. As a result this senior project, a play entitled My Son, is focused on expressing those feelings as they are directly relational to the authors experience with communal loss and childrearing after the tragic shooting death of Michael Brown Jr. This essay will discuss the current state of affairs in the African American community, its relationship with law enforcement, and the creative process used in writing this piece of documentary theater; including the inspiration for the piece, the relevance of the documented material used and the social position the author has taken.

The relationship between African Americans, police and media has been contentious for over a century and incidents like the before mentioned provide evidence as to why. To this day in some communities law enforcement is seen as a occupying force where black citizens are policed by white officers who do not live within the confines of the community borders and hold little regard for the residents who do. Historically African American migrants were met with hostility from existing populations when former slaves began to settle north. This tense

relationship has gone through decades of what Bruce Pierce describes as a cycle of police brutality behaviors. These behaviors are most commonly displayed in news media to the extent that this particular cycle had a life altering affect for many within the community causing weeks of unrest in Ferguson, Ms. According to Pierce the cycle consist of periods of relative quiescence, catalytic police incident, community/ political outcry, and police sensitivity training before returning to relative quiescence, this time with less trust and more animosity than before. These behaviors are usually carried out through the media with news cycles going through a usual course of relative quiet, to 24 hour coverage of a controversial shooting, followed by civil unrest of residents met with promises of change by authorities that barely if ever come to fruition.

Research studies have pointed to the detrimental effects community violence can have on the mental health of African American parents when either witnessing an event or being victimized themselves. While other unrelated research also made the case that African Americans are prone to several of the same grief behaviors when faced with loss of a loved one. Combining the results from both of these studies may point to a clear yet bleak picture of how the community deals with grief and loss even when tragedy strikes outside of our immediate family and friends. In cases such as the Michael Brown shooting and others that receive national attention and news coverage, community violence is brought into the homes of thousands of African American families who are not regularly exposed to it which can trigger a multitude of negative mental health side effects. One study conducted by Tanya Sharpe and Javier Boyas looked at those effects and how families attempt to deal with the loss of a loved one due to homicide. Their analysis showed that African Americans mainly relied on interconnected methods of coping with this specific type of grief. These methods are founded in spiritual

traditions passed down through generations but still practiced in regions of Africa, Latin America and Asia that include spiritual coping and mean making, maintaining a connection to the dead, collective coping and caring for others, and concealment. Each of the methods serves its own purpose but ultimately puts the needs of the collective group before the needs of oneself. Through the interview process Sharpe and Boyas were able to note the similarities between the experiences regardless of their differences in relation to the deceased.

Though all of our communities may not be dangerous we do all share sentiments of distrust when law enforcement is involved. Experiencing incidents of police brutality at home and then witnessing those incidents happening across the country via television further to galvanize the community against the common enemy. Viewing violent images has always been of concern for researches but there are still a lot of unanswered questions as far as community violence and the negative impact it can have on parenting. Authors of the study Impact of Community Violence on Parenting Behaviors and Children's Outcomes found that there is a significant relationship between exposure to community violence and posttraumatic stress disorder. This research focused specifically on the emotional distress of mothers which was one advantage of the study. For the purposes of this play, that focuses on a mothers grief, it was an extremely useful source of relevant information; highlighting the relationship witnessing these traumatic events and the emotional impact on child rearing and development has while adding validity to the play's claim of the negative impact felt miles from the origin of the incident. . Repeated exposure to this violence also has detrimental effects on the mental health and well being of African American parents in turn affecting their ability to display positive parenting behaviors to their children. Though the study did not come to any conclusions about the impact those parenting behaviors have on children's outcomes it was a predictor for some adverse

behaviors warranting further research. This piece of art was meant to highlight some of those effects often disregarded within the community.

Documentary theater can loosely be defined as a genre of play that attempts to retell historical events, mundane or epic, from the viewpoint of the playwright. Many different approaches can be taken to accomplish this feat that spans a multitude of topics including historical people places and events. The purpose of this genre is to initiate dialogue about the subject matter that is relevant to the current social condition. For this reason I found documentary theatre the most appropriate medium of storytelling for this piece. In this play the historical event of the Michael Brown Jr. shooting death by Officer Darren Wilson is told through the lens of an unrelated party who is sharing that experience as the community mourns. A personal turning point in my life, it was important to use primary source documents to convey that experience and expose the ill-researched and rarely discussed emotional distress witnessing events live and through the media can have; the emotional pain mothers are asked to endure while raising their sons.

To create this theatrical work the documented material chosen to use includes poems authored shortly after Michael Brown Jr. was murdered, news clippings of his and other similar shooting deaths as well as interviews, recorded video and still photos to complete the picture of community grief. I choose to incorporate multiple incidents as part of the production as a way to convey the true hopelessness of the situation, the frequency of these incidents and the commonality of experience in the aftermath. This could be my child, is one of many themes explored by the composition of the work. Background music will also add to the dramatization of the performance. The materials selected were done so to elicit an emotional response from the audience as the events were traumatizing as they unfolded in real life. Trying to recreate that

experience on stage by incorporating different media was a difficult task. The section process, physically scanning hundreds of photo and video archives for the appropriate shot, was the most time consuming but choosing to format my script similar to the style of Adrienne Kennedy's *An Evening with Dead Essex*, made structuring the selected media more simple. This particular play by Kennedy employs the use of projected images and sound to create time and space for the audience. As visual beings it also serves to heighten the dramatization and emotional awareness of the piece, aspects I felt important to incorporate into my own work. I also choose to only use my primary source documents written in the wake of the murder and recount the ways in which the images and video surrounding the tragedy made me feel. These poems were a way to cope with those feelings of frustration, sadness, anger, and confusion, and convey a natural raw emotional state I want the audience to feel and further actress to experience. The use of long pauses, stillness, minimal set design and powerful imagery attempt to bring the audience into my world. By breaking the forth wall and speaking directly with them the play is more like a personal story being shared between close friends rather than a theatrical event.

The ultimate goal was to encompass these feelings in the onstage direction and overall structure of the piece. I intend to portray the unfortunate state of affairs within single mother households while fully acknowledging my bias because it is founded in reality, backed by the aforementioned evidence and proof. This play is dedicated to the memory of Michael Brown Jr, his parents, family, friends and the African American community that mourned his and other tragic losses. This work is meant to represent our collective struggle to parent and foster hope in our children. While his case received national news attention it is far too often that mainstream media controls the narrative. This play seeks to challenge commonly held perceptions of guilt by offering a glimpse into the ways that media is received by those it does not represent.



## Full Script **My Son**

**Dedication-** This project is dedicated to my children and every mother who fears her child leaving to never return home.

**Characters-** Momma- African American or Hispanic mother, Thirties or older she is dressed in pajama pants, a t shirt and slippers. A scarf is tied around her head. She carries a coffee mug. Director is encouraged to replace 'Jaida' with her child's name

**Set-** Dimly light stage with light centered in the middle fixed on a single round dining room type table. A chair is also present. Hanging on the back of the chair is a bathrobe. On the table is a notebook, pen, and eye glasses.

### **Scene:**

*Momma appears stage left. She walks slowly, stops, stretches and continues to walk towards the chair.*

**Momma-** its cold in here *(she continues to the chair, puts down the cup, picks up the robe and puts it on and sits. A moment passes before she addresses the audience directly)*

Its early morning... I didn't sleep well last night *looking at the coffee cup, gestures with it probably had something to do with this pauses we're in my kitchen pause before turning upstage, still seated the stove... and the sink is there underneath the window motions to where each would be still facing up stage the fridge with my sons drawings on it...looks back to audience my son pause, looks off stage left my sons room is there..just off the kitchen.. light hearted almost joking its easier to get him up for school if I can just... yell shrugs picks up coffee mug but nothing is ever easy when it comes to them...*

\*on screen photo Michael Brown Sr. with cardboard sign\*

*Momma takes a sip from the mug, stands walks over toward the projected image she looks at it with her back to the audience for a long moment before she begins to speak again, first line delivered facing the photo*

...You see this picture was on my mind and *turns to face audience pauses before continuing well that was 5 years ago since the first time I saw this face, the first time I saw this hurt, I first time I truly lived someone else's pain. Walks back towards the table You see this father had just lost his son pauses imagine that feeling...its unnatural to bury your child...but he wasn't just lost...no...no his child was taken from him another state sanctioned murder and I just couldn't understand something about his face looks back to photo something about the pain this those struck something deep in my soul and I had to know.... I had to know who he was and what happen to his son, a fathers pride and joy...and that was the moment I unexpectedly found her... his mother speaking the words I had heard coming from my own mothers mouth sits in the chair*

\*on screen Lesley McSpadden interview clip plays\*

**Momma-** *in a low voice* Hours....his BODY lay in the street for HOURS.....his body? *Pauses shaking her head no .... Her son motions to self* My son..

\*que Music Lori Perri Up Against the wind\*

**Momma-** *with building emotion*

I made a promise to you  
That I'm not going to be able to keep  
You see, there are people who would want to take you away from me  
People who won't see your light  
People who don't know your love  
People who will just see your face  
And send you, express, to the lord above  
You see your hair  
That's a crime  
As are the clothes on your back  
And everything you do  
From hang with friends to walk down the street  
Will be used to justify the most criminal of acts  
And I won't be there to stop them  
I won't be there to save you  
So living your memory will be the only thing that gets me through  
*(louder more angry and irritated)* Because I don't get to be mad  
I can't want to seek revenge  
They will want me to watch silently as they say that you had a hand in your own end  
They won't expect me to cry  
They will ask me to forgive  
They will tear apart my life  
After tearing out my reason to live  
Like those before me  
And like those to come  
A am just another mother  
With only false security  
To offer my son

\* Spoken word should end seconds before singing begins, Momma sits looking off towards stage left... On screen as music continues to play as background for the picture montage of families before and after tragedy\*

**Momma-** *yells* Jaida! It's time to get up \*black out on screen\*

**Momma-** *back to the audience* he pretends he doesn't hear me...you know they leave these things out the handbook when you become a parent....I didn't use to yell this much....now I yell for everything it feels like *mocking voice* sit down, get off, don't touch, put that back....get up...

Oh have boys they said... it'll be fun they said...*serious tone* well when exactly does the fun start? *Shakes head looks down* no there's no fun in this...no fun at all *looks back to audience becomes increasingly agitated* I can't afford fun *pauses* I can't afford to let my boys *air quotes* "be boys" no, they can't have innocence because they aren't innocent...they aren't victims.. no they are bodies that lay in the street for hours...bodies that float in the river for days...day after day and year after year with no change a coming *slams down into chair, sits with arms folded visibly agitated.*

\*on screen footage of Funeral no audio\*

**Momma** *still seated arms folded-*

Will it be today

Will it be tomorrow *sounds of hysterical crying can be faintly heard off stage*

Nights filled with pain

Days ripe with horror *crying gradually increases in volume for dramatic effect every couple of lines*

Years of planning

Undone in minutes

Unfortunate tragedies

Willing participants

*The crying should be loud enough that the actress must compete to be heard*

You stole him from me

My child my boy

Let the world see

What a mother must endure

Does it make you sick

Do you want to cry out

Are those prayers struck

Deep down in your mouth

Choke your sorry

Death by condolences

I do not accept

And I will not get over it

I will make you remember

The day as I forever hold onto it

With grief with pain

With hurt and disgust

I will stand in sorrow

And do what I must

*Crying sound end as lights go down on stage, Momma stand center stage head high arms folded in front of her.*

\*on screen news clip Mike Brown Funeral\*

**Momma** *walks toward stage left yells off stage – Jaida...are you getting up in there? Come on your gonna be late...walks back towards the table and stands by the chair... I'm almost always*

late *sits in the chair*...it's just so hard to focus sometimes... I think it may be anxiety or something like that...I don't know... I write sometimes *holds up the pen and pad* and it helps but I don't think it's enough...but what can I do *looks off stage left* I don't have time for weakness, I don't have time for anxiety and mental health problems...whatever that means...those don't even exist where I'm from...no you take care of your people and your people take care of you that's it *long pause* but I'm tired ya know...just so tired *sits in the chair drops her head in her hands for a moment before continuing*...we don't get to be sad...but I am and I'm scared because any day it could be my turn to bury my son...

\*on screen eye witness news clip\*

### **Momma-**

You see we know  
We always knew  
They will snatch you off the street  
They will come and find you  
Like a theft in the night  
You won't hear them approaching  
And I't will be to late  
By the time you start running  
Never to been seen  
Or heard from again  
Your light will be put out  
Over the color of your skin  
This is years in the making  
No fault of your own  
They believe us second class citizens  
Inferior down to the bone  
And they'll want to convince you  
Want you to believe their lies  
That your life, my life  
Isn't worth living  
That we aren't worth the time  
That we didn't come from greatness  
That we aren't divine n our claim  
That we don't deserve the accolades  
The Recognition the fame  
But we built this country  
And they know its true  
Our blood nourished the ground  
We will all return to  
We are not without fear  
We are not without shame  
But we can not  
We must not  
Allow death in vain

\*on screen black out\*

Momma- \*looks up frantic\* oh god it's already 7!? JAIDA....BREAKFAST

\*audio Marvin Gaye plays\* as audio plays momma moves about the kitchen seemingly making breakfast. She makes hurried movements between what would be the fridge and stove motioning as if opening and closing cabinets. Several times she walks over towards stage left and gestures to continue to wake Jaida. She returns to the table and pretends to place a plate in front of the chair as the music ends, on screen black out

Momma \*stands with her hands on her hips next to the chair facing the audience- JAIDA CHRISTOPHER THIS IS THE LAST TME IM CALLIN YOU *Momma recognizes what she said and stops to contemplate her words her body language softens and she sits*

I can't keep you forever  
You'll never grow that way  
I have to let you explore the world  
I have to step out of your way  
I know I've prepared you  
As best I could  
I know that you'll act  
As you always should  
With honor with love  
With integrity and fight  
I have no doubt that you will  
Stand up and do what's right  
So my fears  
I hide them  
And I keep my prayers silent  
That when you walk out this door  
You are not met with violence  
but that you make it back home  
You survive another day  
You don't become a hash-tag  
Everyone won't know your name  
Because you died due to a heartless act  
You will do great things  
And that's why your life will matter  
Because of that  
So I have to let you go  
Go Adventure and explore  
And I don't want to pray  
Before you walk out that door  
That you make it home safe  
Just one more time

That today isn't the day  
You are sent to the divine  
No I will not worry  
I will not walk in fear  
My prayers are no longer silent  
Instead I rage to anyone who will hear  
NOT MY SON  
NO SIR  
NOT TODAY  
You won't take my peace from me  
There's no space for you in my head  
My son deserves life  
He has a right to exist  
And I will fight you  
Tooth and nail  
If you believe different  
A change is gone come  
Whether you want it or not  
Because we won't stop fighting  
We can't give up

\*on screen Sam Cooke a Change Gone Come video plays, lights on stage go black and only a shadow can be seen

\*Curtain closes as song fades\*

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