



Break

By dl Hopkins

Sitelines BLM
Cadence Theatre Company
Richmond, VA

Dramaturgical Packet Created by Liv Wilson
In Collaboration with Omiyemi (Artisia) Green
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Table of Contents

About the Playwright

Story Origins

Richmond Slave Trail

Reconciliation Statue

Timeline of Black Lives Matter Demonstrations in Richmond

Sherwood Forest Plantation

Character Summaries

Themes

Bibliography

Summary:

dl Hopkins' film follows a young man, Jackson Ward, recalling the horrors of his weekend dinner to amused coworkers and entertained onlookers. The story plays out in real time in front of the audience as Jackson narrates the couple's outing to a friend's house for dinner only to discover that the house is on a plantation. Hopkins explores these differing perspectives on the same situation, discovering the communication gap between worlds and our deep-rooted need for reconciliation of our collective truth.

Questions for Audience Facilitation:

- ❖ What is the role of the audience/camera in this piece?
- ❖ Is there something that you took away from the piece that opposed how you came into it?
- ❖ How is willful ignorance and colorblindness positioned in this story? How is it positioned in Richmond? How can we oppose those ideas in favor of a more truthful outlook.
- ❖ How can we better learn to communicate and hear each other, even when we do not come from the same background? Is there a way to unlearn engrained, societal injustices?

About the Playwright, dl Hopkins

dl Hopkins is an award-winning actor, poet, and the former Artistic Director of the African American Repertory Theatre of Virginia. Hopkins is a founder of the Southern Revolutionist Literary Guild (SRLG), a collective of poets and spoken word artists. While serving on the Board of Directors of James River Writers, Hopkins



created the Just Poetry Slam, Richmond's first and longest-running poetry slam. Hopkins is a founding member of the Jazz Actors Theatre, which was established by his mentor, Ernie McClintock, the founder of Harlem's Afro-American Studio for Acting and Speech and the 127th Street Repertory Ensemble. Hopkins is a former Artist-in-Residence at the University of Richmond, where he performed and taught McClintock's Jazz Acting Technique. Hopkins' film credits include the 2016 Academy Award-nominated feature film *Loving*, and roles on television include Tim Reid's and Showtime's *Linc's*, HBO's *The Wire*, the Fox series *Legends & Lies* as Bass Reeves, and *The Real Lone Ranger*. Hopkins was awarded the Theresa Pollak Prize for Excellence in Acting in 2017. In 2000, then Mayor of Richmond, Tim Kaine, presented Hopkins the Key to the City.¹

Story Origins

The short film is inspired by one of Hopkins' own experiences with his wife about fifteen years ago. He recounts the evening:

My wife and I were invited to a small dinner party at the Sherwood Forest Plantation, the Historic home of President John Tyler. It was truly an insane evening. For example: aside from the help, my wife and I were the only black people (there

¹ Shannon, Skye. "Sitelines BLM Screenplay Writers Announced!" Cadence Theatre Company. May 13, 2021.

were only two other couples). And before dinner, the butler, yes there were black butlers and maids replete with tuxedo and aprons, pulled me aside to let me know that no black person has ever eaten at that table or used that flatware or china. Ever. Like I said, an insane evening. That Monday during our lunch break, which took place at the Capitol, I couldn't wait to relay the story to my co-workers (all white). Despite all of my best efforts to express the horrors we endured that evening, my co-workers only viewed it as uproarious comedy. They thought it was hilarious. I became fascinated with this phenomenon and slowly began to see examples in many different places. This highlighted and became the foundation for a paradoxical theory of mine called the Oppositional Deity Dilemma (or ODD for short).²

Hopkins gives a brief description of this paradoxical theory, Oppositional Deity Dilemma, and how it sparked his writing of *Break*, a piece with opposing worlds and a man attempting to communicate between each of them.

The heroes and angels of my world are the villains and demons of my fellow citizens here in Richmond, Virginia. And, of course, vice-versa. Because of our twisted perspectives on history, our strange relationship, and generations of conditioning, we have created the perfect environment to be rife with misunderstanding each other. A seemingly impenetrable barrier of misunderstanding because they are in opposition of each other while reflecting and validating our own biases. We can't understand or hear each other. We are at the same time best friends and worst enemies, yet we need each other. And somehow it all kind of works. Therefore I can have a horrific evening and describe it to my co-workers and they see it as humorous, simply because they viewed it through a white-centered lens where this dinner invitation is an honor. Their source material for a plantation is in direct opposition to mine. I don't have a solution for this paradox. I just think it's

² Wilson, Olivia. Dramaturgy Interview with dl Hopkins. Personal, December 7, 2021.

fascinating that two people can have a complete conversation and leave with two completely different and opposing perspectives.³

Hopkins also talks about his visions for the cinematography of the piece, noting “I want the audience to see both sides of this story. I am purposefully wrapping a horror in a thin comedic veneer.”⁴ To create the dichotomy between the two situations, the co-workers portion should be shot like a sitcom and the drive to the plantation as a horror film. Hopkins suggests, “This should emphasize the duality, the mental contortions Jackson is experiencing as they slowly meld into one. If fingers-crossed, it's done right, I want people to walk away contemplating some miscommunications and opportunities in their own lives and how to rectify them moving forward.”⁵

Richmond Slave Trail

Richmond Slave Trail tells the history of the trade of enslaved Africans from Africa to Virginia until 1775, and away from Virginia to other locations in the Americas until 1865 in a walking trail around Richmond. The trail begins at Manchester Docks, a major port in the downriver Slave Trade. Richmond was the largest source of enslaved Africans on the east coast of America for thirty years in the mid 19th century, exporting people through these ports. The trail routes through the old slave markets of Richmond and past Lumpkin's Slave Jail. Other notable stops include the Negro Burial Ground and the First African Baptist Church, a center of African-American life pre-Civil War.⁶ The Richmond Slavery Reconciliation Statue is part of the Richmond Slave Trail in effort to raise awareness and provide accurate information about Richmond's role in the slave trade.⁷

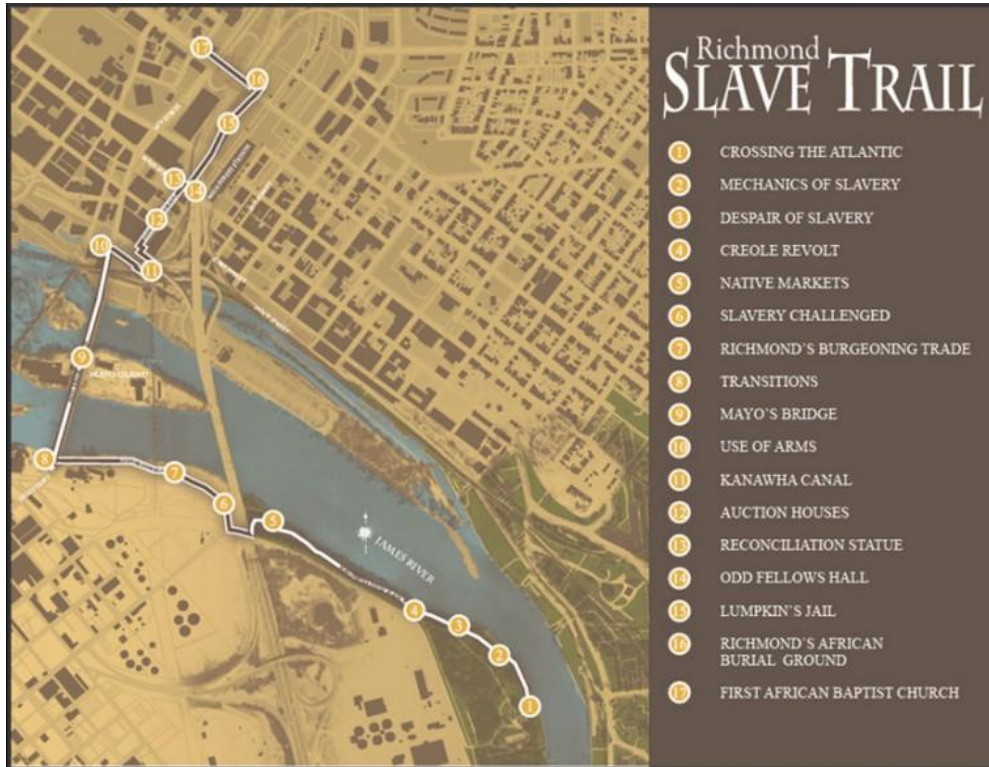
³ Ibid.

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⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Richmond Slave Trail.” Virginia Tourism Corporation. Accessed December 8, 2021.

⁷ “Slavery Reconciliation Statue.” Virginia Tourism Corporation. Accessed December 8, 2021.



Reconciliation Statue

The Richmond Slavery Reconciliation Statue was unveiled in March of 2007, completing the triad of statues in Liverpool, England and the Republic of Benin. Together these cities created the Slavery Triangle with Liverpool being the center for finance and administration, Benin was in charge of collections and distributions, and Richmond served as the point of sale.⁸ Each identical statue in three cities symbolizes a commitment to “new relationships based on honesty and forgiveness.”⁹

The reconciliation project emerged from officials in Liverpool, England, and Benin in West Africa issuing



⁸ Wilson, Olivia. Dramaturgy Interview with dl Hopkins. Personal, December 7, 2021.

⁹ “Richmond Slavery Reconciliation Statue.” Richmond Region Tourism. Accessed December 8, 2021.

apologies for slavery. Liverpool prospered from ships carrying enslaved Africans. Benin benefitted as the place where enslaved persons were sold in exchange for goods. Richmond was one of America's busiest slave centers, responsible for selling more than 300,000 before the Civil War. The Richmond Slavery Reconciliation Statue, located near Richmond's former slave market in Shockoe Bottom, was years in the making. The 15-foot tall bronze sculpture was created by Stephen Broadbent and unveiled in 2007. The statue was later vandalized in September of 2017.

Sherwood Forest Plantation

Sherwood Forest Plantation, located in Charles City, Virginia, was the home of President John Tyler for twenty years in the mid 19th century. The plantation “reflects the lifestyle of this.... Presidential family” with pristine lawns, terraced gardens, and the longest known frame house in America.¹⁰ Tyler purchased the home and its accompanying 1,600 acres in 1842 and moved there with his second wife, Julia Gardiner Tyler, after his presidency ended in 1845. Julia famously defended slavery in “A Letter to the Duchess of Sutherland and Ladies of England in Reply to Their “Christian Address” on the Subject of Slavery in the Southern States”, claiming enslaved people in the States lived better than the working class in England. The Tyler’s owned a number of enslaved persons who also



¹⁰ Sherwood Forest Plantation - Home of President John Tyler. Accessed December 8, 2021.

resided on the plantation, however few accounts exist about their lives.¹¹ As a supporter of “state’s rights”, Tyler re-enter the political sphere in 1861 and became a member of the Confederate Congress of the Confederate States of America. Sherwood Forest Plantation made it through the Civil War, with some damage occurring in 1864 attributed to Union soldiers. Around this time, the story of the ghost known as the Gray Lady also came about. It has been said that she can be heard rocking in the Gray Room for more than two hundred years.

The Tyler family still maintains the plantation today and descendants are frequently seen on the grounds. Sherwood Forest is considered one of the “most complete plantation yards left in America”, dating back to 1680.¹²

Timeline of Black Lives Matter Demonstrations¹³:

As Terri and Jackson drive to the dinner, the radio is heard with the following message referring to the demonstrations held in the summer of 2020.

...protests and vandalization of Historic Confederate Statues and Monuments continue as City and State officials are baffled by these sudden events as they search for a root cause and seek to dispatch State and Local Police to quell the violence and criminality...¹⁴

May 2020

May 25th - George Floyd is murdered by police in Minneapolis. This killing sparks protests that start in Richmond about three days later and continue into August, the pandemic illuminating existing injustices and allowing for much needed racial reckoning.

May 29th / 30th - Protestors marched from Monroe Park down Franklin Street and through the Monroe Ward neighborhood. Richmond Police Department, VCU Police, and Virginia Division of Capitol Police. Two police cruisers were set on fire and destroyed.

¹¹ “Sherwood Forest Plantation.” Clio. Accessed December 8, 2021.

¹² Sherwood Forest Plantation - Home of President John Tyler. Accessed December 8, 2021.

¹³ “George Floyd Protests in Richmond, Virginia.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 May 2021.

¹⁴ Hopkins, dl. *Break. Sitelines BLM*. Richmond, VA, 2021. cadencetheatre.org.

May 30th / 31st - Hundreds of protestors marched down Monument Avenue, passing five statues honoring Confederate generals. Several of the monuments were defaced with spray painted slogans including: "Black Lives Matter", "ACAB", and "Fuck Capitalism". The Memorial to the Women of the Confederacy was damaged and set on fire. The sign for the Virginia Museum of History and Culture soon read: "Virginia Museum of Bullshit and Cultists".

June 2020

May 31st / June 1st - A city-wide curfew was put in place. Up to two hundred protestors were arrested.

June 1st - Hundreds of protestors gathered around the Central Office District. Forty minutes before the curfew was to start, Richmond police tear gassed 500-600 protestors who were gathered peacefully, kneeling near the Stuart and Lee monuments. This premeditated response was justified by the Richmond Police as an attempt to protect the monuments from protestors.

June 2nd - Mayor Stoney of Richmond addressed and apologized for the actions of the RPD the previous day. Amidst calls to fire the police officers and resign, Stoney joined the BLM protestors.

June 3rd - The Lee monument plaza becomes an open, cultural hub. Mayor Stoney announces his plan to remove the Confederate statues on Monument Avenue.

June 4th - Governor Ralph Northam states he will remove the Lee Monument.

June 6th - Protestors topple the statue of William Carter Wickham (Confederate General) in Monroe Park.

June 9th - The Christopher Columbus statue is set on fire, toppled, and thrown into Fountain Lake in Byrd Park.

June 10th - Protestors tear down the Jefferson Davis statue on Monument Avenue.

June 13th - "5,000 Man March" on Monument Avenue.

June 15th - Protestors gathered outside the Richmond Police Headquarters. Police shot rubber bullets and tear gas at the nonviolent group of citizens.

June 19th - The Lee Monument is now proclaimed "Marcus-David Peters Circle".

Evening of the 22nd - A protest outside the RPD against police brutality is met with rubber bullets, tear gas, and pepper spray.

July 2020

July 1st-7th - The Stonewall Jackson and J.E.B. Stuart Statue is removed by the city.

July 25th - A Solidarity with Portland protest occurs in south Richmond in which a dump truck is set on fire. It is declared an unlawful assembly as white supremacists were acting as agents provocateurs under the banner of BLM, "an attempt to undermine an otherwise overwhelmingly peaceful movement".¹⁵

August 2020

August 7th - RPD disperses and disassembles the camping area around Lee's monument in response to complaints from residents nearby.

August 13th - BLM joins with student activists to demand the defunding or abolition of the VCU Police Department.

August 16th - "Marcus-David Peters Circle" sign is removed. RPD denies responsibility.

Character Summaries

Jackson Ward - a stylish and witty Black man. He sits on the back of a park bench surrounded by onlookers as he tells his tale. He is the only person of color in the group.

Terri - attractive, young Black woman, Jackson's wife, giver of directions

The crowd - listeners, onlookers, co-workers, all white group, laughter and revelry

Role of the audience/the camera - Jackson breaks the fourth wall to address us as viewers

¹⁵ Editor, Managing. "Police disperse protesters with chemical agents, explosives after dump truck fire". *The Commonwealth Times*. Retrieved July 27, 2020.

Themes

Reckoning and Reconciliation

Much of this story touches on the tension between past and present and how we come to terms with our collective history. On the Reconciliation statue, Hopkins feels as though it serves as “one of the many stark reminders of Richmond’s duality (a colorblind double-mindedness).”¹⁶ Where other monuments in Richmond such as the Lee Memorial elevate the “Lost Cause” lie, the Reconciliation Statue symbolizes a much more real truth people choose not to see. This “colorblindness” sneaks into the story as the protagonists to a dinner party at a historic plantation Hopkins asserts, “Those who profess not to see color are weaponizing willful ignorance. Denying our collective past and the impact of its present ramification because of discomfort or feelings will never bring us closer to a reconciled/evolved future.”¹⁷

Code Switching

Our protagonist finds himself in crisis as he tries to explain this horrendous situation to colleagues that haven’t the slightest idea what that experience must have been like for him, and moreover think it is knee-slapping humor. Hopkins notes that most audiences aren’t fully aware of all “the mental gymnastics that go into code-switching, here I wanted to not only show the math but what went to this character’s decision to stop.” Hopkins describes the “imposter syndrome on steroids”, which occurs often without a thought, as questioning the motivations behind every interaction. Thoughts creep in, “Was I being othered?... How much of my authentic self is being compromised for this job/position? Am I dying a little every day or just dead and don’t know it?”¹⁸ Hopkins sums it up perfectly when he states, “I feel this story is about Jackson’s contending with the realization of his inability to be heard or communicate, considering what is lost in translation, and his subsequent resolution to be aware but not to explain. Ever again.”

¹⁶ Wilson, Olivia. Dramaturgy Interview with dl Hopkins. Personal, December 7, 2021.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Wilson, Olivia. Dramaturgy Interview with dl Hopkins. Personal, December 7, 2021.

The Intertwining of Past and Present

In the second half of the piece there is gradual overlapping of elements of each story as well as past narratives of our country that continue to haunt. Cinematically, the piece attempts to navigate visually the internal trepidation Jackson is experiencing at the moment. Hopkins discusses this dissonance and distance created when Jackson mentions the plantation and “ his co-workers immediately imagine parasols, hoop skirts, and the palatial expanse of the antebellum south.” By including the baying dogs in the distance, the burning cross reflection, the running through the woods, and the articles of clothes to denote degradation & subjugation it is made clear what emerges for Jackson and Terri in this situation. Hopkins observes, “Same subject. Two totally opposing views and perspectives.”¹⁹ These flashes also force the viewer to broaden their thought horizons when they think “plantation”. As Hopkins puts it, “You can keep the hoop skirts and parasols, but I’m going to need you to add forced labor, rape, and unyielding despair.”²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

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