

Running Out of Lies

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Abstract

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Running Out of Lies is a solo show that explores the façade a man puts on vs who he really is. This façade is a representation of the defense mechanism men use in order to protect their vulnerabilities. The question becomes when do men feel like the space is safe enough to be vulnerable?

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Graduate Thesis– Running out of Lies

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Johnnie Taylor sang songs that represented men's thought processes. He was the affirmation that men needed. He gave men a space that said, “Although what you are doing may not exactly be right, I understand why you did/are doing it.” Mr. Taylor was the therapy that men didn't know they needed. It's safe to say that he saved lives. The smiles that my family would give when Johnnie Taylor's music came on made me happy. At a young age, I didn't know exactly what he was talking about, but I knew that it touched my family. It created a type of contentment in them that someone understood what they were going through. I could tell they were at peace. It's safe to say my grandfather didn't like much music. But, when I would drive him places, specifically toward the later days of his life, I would put on Johnnie Taylor because I knew it would save me from having to listen to him talk about that “damn rap music” I listen to. When Johnnie Taylor would come on, he would dance and sing. You could see him light up in his darkest moment. That is precisely the impact Johnnie Taylor had on my family and my community. Therefore, this script is dedicated to my family. This script is dedicated to the good times and the bad times. To the smiles and the tears. To the deep family reunion conversations accompanied by a gold 24 oz of Stag Beer. This script is dedicated to the dances that would bounce the car while it accelerated down the street. This script is dedicated to the betterment of men's mental health. This script is dedicated to creating safe spaces for men where they don't

experience pressure to alter their personalities for others. Lastly, this script is dedicated to Mr. Johnnie Taylor. Thank you, Mr. Taylor. May your Legacy and music live forever.

While taking Solo Shows with Valerie Curtis-Newton, our professor, she told us to make a box and add ideas to it daily. This method would enable us not to get fixated on one idea. After our final class, I kept adding to that box for months. Four months to be exact. After some time had gone by, I finally opened the box and went through all the ideas I had written down. Thus, *Running Out of Lies* was born. I wanted to tell a story that connected with me. A story that truly represented the under-represented—Black men. I wanted to tell a story that dismantled the Black male stereotypes by exposing people to things Black men don't or can't talk about. The story poses the question, 'Why is it that Black men can't be vulnerable?' and 'Why is it that Black men have to be viewed as something so specific?'. I wanted to create something that told the story of the men in my family that would only cry when my 7-year-old self was around because they knew I wouldn't understand enough to label them as anything. I want to tell the story of alcohol that is used to suppress emotions. I want to tell a story that exposes how much Black men feel the need to constantly escape from being labeled as weak or less than others. To begin writing my solo show, I started researching Johnnie Taylor and immediately I was struck. Johnnie Taylor had a rich background. He was a pimp, a pastor, and a singer. I was struck by his essence. I was struck by his legacy and what it meant for me and my experiences. I knew this was something I had to get right. Because of the specificity in which Johnnie Taylor carries himself, I had to make sure that I found ways to approach not only embodying the character but also telling his story. Each process: the writing process, rehearsal process, and performance process allowed me to deepen the story in different ways.

Style

During my time at Morehouse College, we were given the assignment to read Suzan Lori Parks', *In the Blood*. Since then, I've been interested in how Suzan Lori Parks' writing style physicalizes acting fundamentals on the pages. I knew I wanted to do that with this script. To achieve this, my approach was to gradually decimate what Johnnie Taylor believes to be his identity through stage directions.

Mr. Johnnie Taylor enters the room dressed to the nines, nice afro, fur coat, rings on the pinky and third finger, and gator boots. And his personality is just as lavish as the clothes that occupy his body. He inspects the space to approve if it's to his liking. He sees the whiskey and is satisfied.

Mr. Taylor takes a sip of his whiskey.

Johnnie sits in Silence. Did he just lie to her? If not, how much was the truth? Was it all the truth? He rushes to his Whiskey Bottle which appears to be empty. He doesn't have any more cigarettes left. Johnnie begins to pace around. He comes to a stop.

As you can see, the stage directions intentionally get smaller and smaller to reflect that Johnnie Taylor's facade is slowly disintegrating; I used these elements to demonstrate that this individual is resorting back to his raw self. I also have become very interested in how Archetypal the work of August Wilson is; every character August Wilson writes is rooted in a type of aura that is very specific to Black culture. For example, Ma Rainey from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* or Boy Willie from *The Piano Lesson*. I wanted to use that approach as I told a story about this cool, sophisticated, and emotional being.

Writing

During Nikki Yeboah's Script Analysis class, we learned about the structures of plots and how they are used to tell stories. I used elements of plot structure to tell my story. The story begins with a man who is in charge. He demands the space and wants to make sure he is respected. He makes it known that he is trying to win a Grammy. He is confident in the song they are about to record, *Cheaper to Keep Her*, and believes it will achieve this goal. Johnnie's desire serves as the Inciting Incident. The event that commences the rising action to the climax. Furthermore, we learned about the concept of a major dramatic question; the question that the audience wants to be answered through the play and what the Protagonist fights for. As the story continues, a huge obstacle is introduced when Johnnie receives a call from his daughter whom he hasn't claimed. He must confront this way of living he has been approaching. As he realizes the damage, he has done he drops the facade that he has been putting on and faces his truth. At this point in the story, I lean into the fundamentals we learned in solo shows, such as focusing on the message I wanted to tell. So, I wrote a credo. In the words of Louis Catron, "A credo is the writer's beliefs concerning topics he or she feels are highly important." After writing my credo, I realized that the character lied to protect himself. Subsequently, all these concepts started to emerge: "The Truth will set you free, and "The best acting is Acting that is rooted in the truth." –the core message of my grad school experience. Throughout the play, I insert messages of my truth in the script. For example, the character states, "People expect me to be on point, but who gone be on point for Johnnie Taylor." This is my way of questioning: do people care about me? Or What I can do for them? At the end of the play, Johnnie focuses on another song, *Running Out of Lies*, a song that speaks more to his truth. This goes back to another key concept of my graduate

experience, “Good art is rooted in truth.” meaning good art imitates real life. Furthermore, in Nikki’s class, we learned the concept of characters and how each character serves a particular purpose as the plot moves forward. Specifically, we learned that antagonists and protagonists have different purposes. For example, stories center around the protagonist who is working toward a certain goal. In contrast, the antagonist is stopping the protagonist from achieving their goal. Although this is a solo show, I was interested in the dynamics of a protagonist vs. an antagonist. Because Johnnie is the Protagonist and Antagonist, we know that he is his setback. His decisions become a detriment to his living a good life. Much like in real life, you are your own worst enemy. I wanted to know how to effectively portray that concept. So, I made efforts to illuminate this dynamic by using Johnnie’s facade. The way he behaves per how he wants people to view him. I intend to illustrate how his facade is being dismantled and hope to leave the audience with an understanding and compassion for Johnnie’s raw self, this would show the effects that the different character dynamics had on Johnnie. This would also emphasize what it looks like for a Black man to showcase his true emotions, leaving the audience to sit with their individual perceptions of this vulnerable Black man. This becomes a demonstration of how society doesn’t allow Black men the space that is needed to be unshielded. There is automatically a label that is associated with him for this action.

Voice

I think back to a time when I would observe my grandfather. I was always interested in the specific behavioral shifts he would make to compensate for different spaces. This is what I consider the “facade,” an outward appearance that is maintained to conceal an unpleasant part of

the self. The concealment of what we consider to be displeasing manifests very specific behaviors. As a part of Johnnie Taylor's facade, the voice is very specific. It took time for me to get it down. It is still a work in progress. However, the approach I took was the Linklater work, a method used to improve the voice by way of vocal exercises and awareness of the mechanics that make up our vocal cavities. While at the University of Washington, we learned how our natural voice functions. We have learned that we naturally produce tension when creating vocal sounds. Linklater's, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, has given us the tools to release the that don't allow our natural voice to project at its fullest potential. With these tools, I found ways to manipulate them to create different sounds with my voice. Thus, the voice of Johnnie Taylor was born. After listening to the way his voice sounds, I was able to spend time imitating the sound. Then Bridget, my Voice Professor, and I started to do work that would allow me to imitate the sound efficiently, without straining my voice. In, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, Linklater talks a lot about where the sounds project. For example, when I first started the work, I would use my throat to help produce the sounds I wanted to make. Yet, the sound wanted to go to the roof of my mouth. Because of the tension, I was creating with my throat, the sound would not be as potent as it would be targeted to the roof of my mouth. This was especially true for singing. I encountered many challenges; the biggest being my attempts to replicate Mr. Taylor's yelling in the script, due to my natural speaking voice wanting to creep back in. I realized that I tend to yell from certain places in my vocal cavities, particularly my throat. Thus, I had to find out where I was placing Johnnie Taylor's speaking voice and hone in on those same cavities when I yell. This would allow me to maintain the vocal work I had established.

Singing

Singing was a deep struggle for me given the fact that Johnnie Taylor sings out of my natural range, which is typically baritone and bass. To address this, I first began to find a way to fix the pitch of the song to a more feasible range. Once that was done then I could focus on the singing itself. In Scott Hafso's class, acting through singing, I realized that I relied on my throat to help me sing. After doing a lot of warm-ups and exercises, along with Alexander Technique, I learned that I must allow the sound to go where it wants to go, so it can project it in a way that doesn't require my throat. Early in the process of singing Johnnie Taylor's songs, my throat would tighten, causing me to strain my voice. So, I had to constantly figure out where I was instinctually trying to use my throat to sing, discover where that sound wanted to go, and allow it to go there to produce a fuller sound. This would take a lot of strain off my throat, allowing it to be the "big dumb open tube," as Scott Hafso would say. Meaning the throat serves no purpose in the production of sound.

Viewpoints/Chekov

I have been on this journey of trying to create characters that are rooted in my truth, characters that transcend into someone, who is not easily identified as myself. Much like the dialectic work of Tom Hanks in the movie *Elvis*, or the behavioral shifts of Leonardo DiCaprio in *Django*. One of the most pivotal moments I had was in Alexander Technique with Cathy Madden, our Alexander professor, when she stated, "We have to accept that we are the house that characters

live in, meaning, we must understand that we are the characters at the end of the day. It isn't possible to become someone else." So, I began working a lot with Gestures. I named this section "Viewpoints/Chekov," because I learned, over time working with these two techniques, they have several commonalities including gestures. For this process, I use the viewpoints approach that I found helpful in Jeffrey's classes. This approach was to let the gesture happen instinctually and investigate them. As Johnnie Taylor is a musician, he uses gestures to process rhythm. In the play, every time he would explain something about the song, the gesture would allow him to physicalize the rhythm. It can almost appear like he is dancing. However, I have learned that the gesture represents the essence of the instrument that he is describing. Furthermore, I started experimenting with making the gestures staccato and legato. I found it quite interesting to see this character live in a staccato essence but move with a legato essence. For example, when Mr. Taylor gives musical directions, to explain it, his gestures are very staccato. When he walks or when he is moving his head to indicate that he is feeling the music, his movements are very legato. However, my approach to movement was from a "viewpoints" lens. I worked with tempo considerably. In the performance, there is a moment Mr. Taylor is looking for his manager, Alan Walden, before entering the space. During this time, he is moving with the purpose of trying to find Mr. Walden. His movements are very high in tempo. Then he enters the studio. This is where his facade starts to emerge, so the tempo of his movements instantly starts to slow down.

Alexander Technique

This brings me to what has tied all these concepts together. Throughout my thesis, I have referenced Alexander Technique. Each approach has Alexander connected to them in some way.

Whether it's to help me continue or to logicize something for more efficient movement.

Alexander is the first step in which I approach any technique. The biggest struggle that I have had through my grad school experience was memorizing lines. I noticed a type of anxiety that starts to form when it feels like I'm starting to blank on a line. Recently, Cathy said: "Start working on coordinating, so my head can move so all of me can follow, so I can continue to tell the story." This has particularly helped me to regain lines as I feel anxiety. I should have consulted this much earlier than a week before I am done with grad school. Furthermore, I have become very interested in how actors cry. Where does that come from? I began investigating this interest with Cathy. We acknowledged that every individual who begins to cry is fighting the urge to. No one wants people to see them shed tears. So, if we feel somewhat of an urge to cry and we say to ourselves: "Don't cry," the urge becomes stronger. Also, different people have different ways of achieving this. This is particularly true for me because, during my performances, I noticed opening the door for tears was different for me every time. Particularly, I noticed one night how my getting sad started to affect people in the audience. I could see the faces start to curl into saddened frowns due to my character's circumstances. This allowed me to become more emotional for myself. This brings me to "inviting" an audience into your performance. This is something we worked with our entire time at the University of Washington. I did not understand this concept for most of my time learning it, until recently. I was on stage during the run of Tarell Alvin McCraney's, *Choir Boy*, at ACT Theatre. ACT is an Arena Stage Theatre. Meaning the audience is sitting all around you. Unlike a traditional proscenium theatre. Because of this stage structure, it is hard to block out the audience. I found myself constantly catching people's eyes while performing. Then it dawned on me. That is inviting the audience in. Acknowledging the audience's presence as you tell this story. This allows for the receiving of the

story with openness, as the performer tells the story with openness. This was something I found most helpful while performing my solo show. Inviting the audience in.

To Conclude, I began reading, *The Viewpoints Book*, By Ann Bogart and Tina Landau. In the earlier parts of the book, it states: “This is not a technique that will get you precisely to a product. This is more so, to assist with the continuance of the process.” When beginning grad school, I was confident that I was going to learn all the techniques that were going to make me a better actor. As my time at the University of Washington comes to an end, I must say the process is the path and the technique are the suggestions of how you can walk that path. However, the destination will never be reached, because it constantly changes. Therefore, the destination only becomes a desire that we are determined to continuously investigate. That is life. Which is why ART IMITATES LIFE.

The silence of the room where magic happens, is cut by a heavy presence. We dont see this presence, we can only hear it. This voice sounds like it means nothing but business and you shouldnt dare mess with it.

Johnnie (O.S)

Mr. Walden? Mr. Walden?!? Take this for me, baby. Hang it up somewhere.

Johnnie (O.S.)

Mr. Walden?!?... I'm ready. I hope I can say the same about this studio I'm about to walk into! Motherfuckers always want me to be on point. Who gone be on point for me? Where is everybody when it's time to show up for Johnnie Taylor?!?! Aw now it's Silent in this motherfucker! Well I'll tell you what, this band better be ready to play and I better have my Whiskey.

Mr. Johnnie Taylor enters the room dressed to the nines, Nice afro, fur coat, rings on the pinky and third finger, gator boots. And his personality is just as lavish as the clothes that occupy his body. He inspects the space to approve if it's to his liking. He sees the wiskey and is satisfied

Johnnie

We off to a good start Mr. Walden! That's what I'm talkin' bout. Fellas It's good to see yall. I want to thank yall in advance for being on point cause I would hate to fire somebody for they lack of professionalism. But it dont feel like I'd have to do something like that. Because yall the best of the best. Cream of the crop. We gonna get us a grammy this year. Yall dont seem too enthusiastic..... I said we gone get us a grammy this year fellas. Yall dont seem too excited and I damn sho' dont mind finding a group of musicians who just excited about this as I am... Damn Lou Rawls..... I don't know what music is coming to... They aint even look my way this year.... They Looked at Lou Rawls Natural Ass though.. Ain't that some shit? Standing in for Jody had way more sells that natural man I don't know what the hell they talkin' bout....

Mr. Taylor takes a sip of his whiskey.

Mack Rice wrote us a hit and I'm confident in it. so lets get to work. I aint got no time to be wasting. a 1.2.3. And (The music for 'Cheaper to keep Her' begins)

If you're tied up

You'd better stay tied up

'Cause it's cheaper to keep her

This is from T it says

It's cheaper to keep her

It's cheaper to keep her

When your little

Girl make you mad

And you get an attitude

And pack your bags

Five little children

That you're leaving behi-

Johnnie

Stop, pause, pause... Let me hear the music from the top.

The music begins from the top as Mr. Taylor finds a flaw in the ensemble. He signals to stop.

Johnnie

BJ, I want the drums and the piano to work together to sound more percussive. It'll sound like this.

Mr. Taylor demonstrates

Johnnie

Give me more staccato on the piano. Let's take it from the top.

If you're tied up

You'd better stay tied up

'Cause it's cheaper to keep her

This is from T it says

It's cheaper to keep her

It's cheaper to keep her

When your little

Girl make you mad

And you get an attitude

And pack your bags

Five li-

Mr. Taylor gives a hand signal to stop the music once again. He takes a drink of his whiskey. The bite revives his soul!

Johnnie

How the hell you gone give me one drop of whiskey and expect me to feel a buzz?

Mr. Taylor takes a bump of coke from his ring. Does he feel more confident to continue

Johnnie

Let's speed the tempo up and I want to make a statement with that intro... Let's hit the drums a little harder and bring in the snare with that intro. On the downbeat let's button the intro and go back to that ride/Hi-hat combo. Got it? Cool

Johnnie takes his first drink of his Whiskey, and he begins to smoke his cigarette

Johnnie

Let me hear it...

Johnnie

Good from the top. A, 1.2.3 and

If you're tied up

You'd better stay tied up

'Cause it's cheaper to keep her

This is from T it says

It's cheaper to keep her

It's cheaper to keep her

When your little

Girl make you mad

And you get an attitude

And pack your bags

Five little children

That you're leaving behind

Son, you're gonna pay some

Alimony or do some time

That's why

It's cheaper to keep her

Help me say it, y'all

It's cheaper to keep her

(It's cheaper to keep her)

See, when you get through

Staring that judge in the face

You're gonna wanna cuss

The whole human race

That's why

It's cheaper to keep her

(It's cheaper to keep her)

(It's cheaper to keep her)

(It's cheaper, it's cheaper)

(It's cheaper, it's cheaper)

(It's cheaper to keep her)

You didn't pay but two dollars

To bring the little girl home

Now you're about to pay

Two Thousand to leave her alone

You see another woman out there

And you wanna make a change

But She ain't gon want you

Cause you aint gon have a Damn thang

Thats why its Cheaper to keep her

A phone rings bringing the session to an abrupt stop.

Johnnie

Mr. Walden, this better be good. You inter-.... Fellas Can I get a second? I apologize. I'll make sure yall are compensated for the extra time. Give me 5...

Mr. Taylor, picks up the phone.

Hey, Tasha. Im recording, whats going on?.... Fonda.... I dont have the words to explain the pain I probably put you through. I was young and I made a mistake. I know you my daughter. I dont ever want you to question that. I Just didnt know... What to do. I was newly married and my wife Gerlene was pregnant with my first baby. Your oldest sister, Latasha, I needed a release from all the pressure that was starting to build up. That's when you get tested by temptation the most and that's when you most likely to fall to it. I fell to it and you were a result of that. I wanted to love you I wanted to give you everything I could. But I didnt know how to tell Gerlene I was having another baby. I was scared. As a man you told not to show fear, you told to be strong and hide from your vulnerabilities. You told you're a weak ass person if you show fear and you start to be treated like a weak ass person by everybody. So I didnt show fear. I hid from my fear, which was the unknown. I didnt know if Gerlene was gone leave me if I told her. I didnt want that to happen. Then I finally reached back out to your mother to see how I could become apart of your life... Ah yeah im still here. The reason I didnt ah come around was because your mother remarried. I didnt want to intrude. So I stepped back... Ah im in a recording session right now. Is it ok if we continue this conversation Later?.... I appreciate you for calling. Whats a good number I can reach you at?

Johnnie writes the number on the back of his sheet music

Johnnie

Got it. We'll talk soon.... Bye,Bye..... I love you

Johnnie sits in Silence. Did he just lie to her? If not, how much was the truth? Was it all the truth? He rushes to his Whiskey Bottle that appears to be empty. He doesnt have any more cigarettes left. Johnnie begins to pace around. He comes to a stop.

Johnnie

Lord how did I end up here. I made a mistake. I need you to guide me. You put me through the test and I failed. I failed bad Lord. I dont know how to bounce back from it. Everybody always look at me like I got everything together, But they just know I'm gon' mess up. It seem like people just ready for me to mess up, So they can laugh, tell me how I ain't about nothing. So they can have a reason to frown at me.

Dont nobody care about me. Dont nobody want to see me happy. People smile in my face and it feel genuine. I start to trust them. Next thing you know They in competition with me. People scared of me winning Lord. They dont support me because they care. They support me because it make them look like a good person. They want me to fail because it affirm them. It make them feel good about not being nothing. I need your help.. Lord deliver me from evil. Continue to Lead me not into temptation. Forgive me for my sins, Lord. I was young. I didnt know that girl was 16. Peggye didnt tell me she was that young. How was I supposed to know? I'm tired of people looking down on me. I'm tired of becoming who the people want me to become. I thought we supposed to fail, Lord? I thought that was a part of life. If we suppose to fail, why everbody try to make me out to be a failure everytime I fail? It feel like I ain't got room to fail. Lord, I want to start being true to myself. Lord, I just want to be true for my family. I want to be true to Gerlene. I want to be true to my children. I'm tired. I dont want to live a lie no more. Lord Forgive me for my sins please lord. That's all I want. Please lord....

Silence

Johnnie

Fellas, I'm ready... I'm sorry about that... Uh I got a different song on my heart. BJ You remember the arrangement Perry gave us? Can you play that for me? I'll follow yall. Dont worry about tempo or nothing. Whatever yall play is good for me. Just dont stop. That's all I ask, Just dont stop.

Music begin

I'm tired of lying, peeping and hiding

In low class places Oh I'm so tired, baby

I'm tired of worrying, whenever I come home late

With your lipstick traces Oh yes I am, babe

You can rest assured my woman's no fool

She can tell I been loving you

Stealing your love is getting harder and harder

The excuses I been giving just won't hold water

I'm running out of lies

Getting hard to think of an alibi

Running out of lies

Getting hard to think of an alibi

Please say goodbye

I've got too many alibis

Oh yes I do

I'm spreading myself a little too thin

Trying to do the job of too many men

You can rest assured my woman's no fool

She can tell just as good I been loving you

Stealing your love is getting harder and harder

The excuses I been giving just won't hold water

I'm running out of lies

Getting hard to think of an alibi

Running out of lies

Getting hard to think of an alibi

No my woman ain't no fool, y'all

She can tell just as good that

I been out with somebody else

You know a lot of times

I don't wanna talk about it

I try, I try to get it off of my mind

But then my conscience, you know everybody got a conscience

My conscience get to bothering me

And when I try to go to sleep at night

Seem like to me I can hear my conscience say

Johnnie you oughta be ashamed of yourself

You know you got a good woman and you oughta treat her right

I made a deal with my conscience

That if my conscience didn't bother me

I sure wouldn't bother my conscience

But every now and then it comes around to me and tells me

Johnnie you know you been wrong, yes you have

A lot of fellas out there been wrong

You oughta go to your baby and tell her honey oh

I'm sorry for taking you through all of these changes

I'm sorry baby. I'm sorry that I did you wrong

I'm sorry I broke your heart baby

And it seem like to me I'm running out of lies

It's getting hard to think of an alibi

Johnnie sits in a deep silence with his thoughts

BLACKOUT.