

BLM*: A Solo Performance to Bring Awareness

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Abstract

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BLM* is a solo performance piece that questions the exclusion of black trans lives from the black community. This inquiry derives from my own experiences during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and the conversations it sparked.

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Graduate Thesis – BLM*

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2020 was a year that I can guarantee no one will ever forget for a multitude of reasons. As a black man in America, a huge piece of that memory is the BLM movement and how it took over the world. It was amazing to see the black community band together and fight for equality. Unfortunately, the black community did not include everyone like I thought it would. There has always been a disconnect in the black community when it comes to anything outside of the “norm” aka being queer, yet that wasn’t the glaring topic for ridicule this time around. Somewhere along the way, the black community decided that black transgender humans were a problem.

The topic of Black Trans Lives Matter became a part of the BLM narrative, but not in a good light. There was this constant chanting of all black lives matter, yet that was not the case when it came to black trans lives. Seeing the hate and constant dehumanizing of these individuals in our community made my blood boil, because how can we fight for equality that we don’t have in our own community. From the moment I started working on my solo show, I knew this was the story I wanted to tell. I just wasn’t sure how.

It wasn’t until solo shows with Val that I begin to find some sort of understanding about how to tell this story. I initially went into this process somewhat afraid of portraying a villain, but that was something that I needed to explore. I began doing research by simply googling and

reading the many arguments that people had for why transgender people are a “problem”. I took on the mindset of the individuals making these arguments and put them into my character John for my first draft. In doing so, John 1.0 was aggressive, unwilling to learn, and closed off. Since we were in COVID times during the first iteration of my solo show, I was able to film my solo show and watch it back. Watching my solo show back like I did my scenes in screen acting helped to inform me of the many things I couldn’t see being inside of it as an actor.

After watching it back, I knew that John needed to change. I then sent my script off to Professor Yeboah for some insight and feedback. She then gave me the offering of making John more likeable, and from there everything started to slowly make sense. In making John more likeable it welcomed the opportunity for a much wider range of people to see themselves in John and connect with him. The other piece that was super important was using the Integrative Alexander Technique (IAT) to invite the audience into these worlds. Even though the audience was viewing what felt like “a private moment,” I wanted them to feel welcome, and that was why IAT was so important. Upon solving the dilemma of fleshing out John, then came Starzie and her part of the story.

I mostly kept BLM* in a world of realism, but I found myself wanting to depart from the world of realism just slightly with Starzie. The explorations that I had in my composition courses helped me to accomplish that, particularly when it came to creating the ending of BLM*. When working in my composition class I very often found myself drawn to the use of sound and imagery, and I knew I wanted to implement that into this ending. Using Billy Porter’s audio from his Emmy Acceptance Speech, speaking of equality while the eyes of the audience watched the erasure of a trans woman, gave the exact effect that I wanted. I also found myself utilizing a lot of my archetype work while building Starzie because she was very different from me as an

individual. Using knowledge from my archetypes class I was able to find just the right cocktail to create Starzie. For instance, Starzie has the strength of the warrior archetype but also the curiosity of the innocent-child, and those two archetypes are vastly different. So, I had to constantly explore when and how each of those archetypes showed up in Starzie.

Continuing work with this process down the road, I would like to flesh out Starzie's story even more. I don't feel like the audience has enough time to get to know her and love her the way that they should. In fleshing out Starzie I will hopefully be able to make those ending moments of the show hit that much harder. I also say this knowing that this is ultimately my show, and it is only done when I say it is done. That is one huge takeaway that I have acquired from my grad school experience. My art and my work are ultimately mine and always will be because no one can take that away from me.

BLM*

John - a gay black man in his late 20s he is not a devout Christian, but he was raised in a Christian household. He works for Microsoft but is working from home because of the Pan-Fried Tomato. He loves going to the gym (he doesn't love having to do home workouts). He is a sweet kindhearted guy who always means well and everything he says comes from a place of love.

Derek – also a gay black man is both Starzie and John's best friend they have known each other for years. Derek has always been the open-minded level-headed human of the group. He believes in allowing people to make their own decisions and is always very supportive.

Anastasia (Starzie for short) - is a young black trans woman who has recently come out and has big plans for the world.

Black people get your shit together

There is the sound of the news coming from the television (it's all about the protest happening in America as a result of George Floyd's murder)

John is seated in his favorite IKEA chair in his apartment. It's a studio apartment nothing too fancy. He has a neat and tidy space. Very minimalistic if you will. John is wearing a black muscle tank and black joggers.

John is sitting there watching tv. We aren't sure just how long he has been sitting there maybe it's been a while or maybe he has just sat down. The news of the protest and the coverage clearly has him uncomfortable.

He flips off the tv.

[beat]

John:

(clearly mocking the reporter) When the violence escalates no one wins. Man shut yo dumb ass up. You try getting murdered just because of your skin color and see how you like it. Ya know what. This is exactly why I'm going to this protest. Let me put on something else.

He flips on RuPaul's Dragrace not really watching it while he scrolls through social media on his phone. He scrolls for a bit getting lost in his newsfeed laughing here and there at a few posts/videos but then something stops him in his tracks.

His entire mood shifts. He sits up, turns the tv off, and just sits in silence for a moment. He is clearly reading something. He reads it a few times. He takes a screenshot of whatever it is.

John:

I gotta call Derek.

He pulls out his phone to call his best friend Derek.

The phone rings and Derek picks up

Derek:

Hello

John:

Hey! You got a second to chat?

Derek:

Yeah! You know i'm not doing shit until this protest.

John:

Ok cute! Before I get to the real reason, I called you. Did you see that they eliminated homegirl on drag race?! The white twink's are about to riot.

Derek:

...Why are you like this?

John:

You know I'm right. Anyway that's not why I called you. Did you see Jerome's post?

Derek:

No, I haven't seen anything. You know I've been trying to take a break from all that social media especially right now. If I see one more all lives matter post I'm gonna-

John sends the screenshot he took earlier.

John:

Check ya messages.

Derek:

Oh yay. She finally did it.

John:

Wait what do you mean finally? You knew about this?

Derek:

Well yeah Starzie talked to me about this a few weeks ago.

John:

Oop. Not you withholding informatiooon. Hmm Starzie.

Derek:

...What?

John:

Nothing. It's a cute name.... bad timing though don't you think?

Derek:

What do you mean?

John:

Well, you know with the current state of the U.S. and the BLM movement.

Derek:

What about it?

John:

I am just worried that this might not be the best time for her to live her truth ya know? Like don't get me wrong I fully support her decision but now of all times?

Derek:

You're kidding me, right?

John:

Not at all. I mean think about it. You see how America already treats us just for being black and gay. Throw trans into the mix with this current climate and it is a recipe for disaster.

Derek:

Ok. I guess I can see your point, but you know that really isn't your decision to make?

(No answer from John)

Derek:

You didn't hear it from me, but she got her first dress for the protest today.

John:

Oh, she did?

Derek:

What's wrong?

John:

Nothing.

Derek:

John.

John:

....I'm just worried about her safety showing up to a protest in a dress. She hasn't even started transitioning or anything yet so it would probably draw some attention and not necessarily the good kind and I am really not in the mood to deal with anymore nonsense than I have to.

Derek:

Chile.

John:

It's true! We don't know what kind of people are showing up to this protest. I mean yeah sure there will be fellow black folks but that doesn't mean shit these days. You know our own people are the first ones to point a finger and laugh...if not something worse.

Derek:

John. I see what you're saying, and I get it but all we can do is be there and support her.

John:

Yeah. Well, I'm gonna go ahead and let you go. I just caught the time and I gotta finish this poster!

Derek:

Promise me that you are not going to say anything to her.

John:

(hesitates) I won't.

Derek:

John. I swear to you if you mess with her I am going to personally knock both of your eyebrows STRAIGHT to the back.

John:

AH!

Derek:

I am not joking. This is not about you and what you think. Shut up and support her. That's it.

John:

Alright. Damn.

Derek:

See you soon. Bye.

John:

Bye.

John hangs up and stands there for a moment

John:

I'm a grown ass man I can do whatever the fuck I want...and will.

John dials another number while mumbling to himself. The other person answers but we do not hear the other person's voice.

John:

Congratulations bitch! I saw your post!...I'm surprised you were able to keep this from me as long as you did.....Yeah you right.....Oh I can only imagine. I know it probably feels like such a huge relief to put that out there.... I am so proud of you. I also heard from a little birdy not named Derek that you got your first dress to wear to the protest! I can't wait to see it.... I also wanted to talk with you about that. I was thinking maybe you should hold off on wearing the dress at least when it comes to the protest. It is just such a heavy climate out there right now and I want you to be safe that's all....You are still showing up 100% yourself even if you aren't in the dress because that dress doesn't make you who you are love. Jero- Sorry Starzie have I ever steered you wrong?.....So why would this be any different?.....I knew you would understand. You know I have nothing but love for you baby. Alright I am gonna let you go so I can finish this damn poster. It shouldn't be that hard, but my hand writing is shit. It's ok Je- Starzie. You can wear the dress another time. Don't pout. I'll see you soon!

He grabs the pack of poster board that he has nearby and the thick ass markers he got to write on them. He writes out all black lives matter in big bold letters. Slaps on his shoes grabs his mask and heads out the door.

[Blackout]

The lights come up on a singular door.

The door opens and in walks Anastasia (Starzie for short) with a bag. She is dressed in her usual athletic wear with a headwrap and she is just beaming.

Starzie:

Hey google play Finally by Amorphous.

Finally by Amorphous starts to play and she sets her bag down and pulls out a dress. We see her look at herself holding the dress in front of her in the mirror. She hangs the dress on the door because homegirl is about to break it down to this song!

Then her phone rings and reluctantly she answers.

[During this conversation we don't hear the other person's voice but we know who it is]

Starzie:

Hello?...Oh my god! Thank you, John.....Well, it wasn't exactly the best kept secret. I thought me excessively saying I want to be the next Laverne Cox would have given you a clue or two, but I digress....It was definitely nerve wracking making that post but I did it!....A huge relief is an understatement. I feel like I can finally breathe.....Thank you, John that really means a lot....I knew I shouldn't have told Derek's ass shit. That boy can't hold water. I wanted it to be a

surprise.....Why not?.....You know good and well that I can handle my shit if I need to John. I also want to show up fully and authentically me. I'm done hiding. John.....I know the dress doesn't make me who I am but if that is what I want to do then who's to stop me....No John you haven't ever steered me wrong....alright I won't wear the dress. Yeah I know. *Sighs*

She hangs up the phone. Spends a moment looking at her dress hanging on the door before going to it.

As she contemplates the dress it begins to disappear and a high pitched ringing begins to fill the room and then the audio from Billy Porter's Emmy Acceptance Speech begins to play

During this audio Starzie walks into a singular pool of light and begins to disappear before our eyes.

Billy Porter Audio Transcript:

The category is love, y'all, love. I am so overwhelmed, and I am so overjoyed to have lived long enough to see this day. James Baldwin said, "Took many years of vomiting up all the filth that I had been taught about myself and halfway believed before I could walk around this earth like I had the right to be here. I have the right. You have the right. We all have the right. I have more questions. Yeah baby. So is it bittersweet to you first of all did the math you're an Oscar away from an e got congratulations is it bittersweet for you to know that this win is amazing and historic but the women from pose were kind of ignored? They weren't nominated? I don't live in B I don't live in bittersweet. I live in the present. I live in the positive. The fact that we're in the building. The fact that we're in the building is the point right? We're in the building the world has changed. Period. That's where we are and now we got another season and now they'll get their shot.

Angelic Ross Audio Transcript:

Ultimately I want...I need you to understand this. That I am so tired. I'm working around the clock to get our society to value trans lives and black trans lives and listen I'm I feel what I feel because I feel like there is nothing we can do

In pitch black darkness a voice says "What are you going to do?"