


PLAY REVIEW

For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Hue Gets Too Heavy, by Ryan Calais Cameron and co-directed with
Tristan Fynn-Aiduenu
(The Royal Court Theatre, London, April 2022)

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For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Hue Gets Too Heavy is on its second run, having premiered at the New Diorama Theatre last year.

Written and co-directed (with Tristan Fynn-Aiduenu) by award winning playwright Ryan Calais Cameron, co-founder and artistic director of the young company Nouveau Riche, this sold out play—an exploration of black masculinity—arrives with perfect timing.

Originally conceived following the killing of Travon Martin (an unarmed teenager in the USA in 2013), it arrives for its second showing following international Black Lives Matter demonstrations, COVID-19 complexities, and openness about mental health issues.

The curtain opens to reveal six young black men. They are bathed in glowing sunshine, and the stage set depicts all colours of the rainbow, as if to suggest that this show we are about to witness is an all-encompassing story about our unique multi-cultural society, in the here and now. What makes this show different though is that the story is told through the words of a distinct, marginalised, minoritised group of young black men.

These men, all with names that depict blackness (Onyx, Jet, Pitch, Midnight, Sable, and Obsidian), take it in turns to tell their story about how it feels to be young, black, and British today. Moving between the light-skinned charmer to the dark-skinned roadman, we hear their stories of childhood and adolescent experiences of colourism, anxiety and depression,

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suicidal ideation, erotic flirtations, powerlessness, homophobia, police harassment, violence, abusive parental relationships—and all under a glaring white gaze.

In one scene, Onyx expresses his frustrations:

And look, I know black boys ain't supposed to need love...

But I didn't know that till the world taught that

Fleeing from me like the plague, like

my overwhelming blackness must be contagious.

See how many faces turn drastically into fear, in my

presence

Locking car doors as I pass, hiding their

wallets their phones, their

manners, their smiles from me.

I must be less than human, right? (Cameron, 2022, p. 45)

It does not take the audience long to realise that this is a group counselling session extraordinaire. Held without a group facilitator, we have black men, vulnerable, expressing themselves and supporting each other in ways previously not experienced, using dance, literature, music, and history. Like in any clinical session, it is the 'confession' of vulnerability, the connection with those who truly care, and the envisioned empowerment of the disenfranchised that offers real hope to these young, black, desperate men. Brotherhood, it suggests, is indeed the only way forward.

The use of jokes (which are very funny but sometimes a little too 'insider'), rap, rhythm, and dance was a wonderful device to share both harrowing and joyous circumstances.

Though split into two parts, at 150 minutes, the play is rather long, with all scenes taking place in-group. There was so much to contend with, a tour de force of issues, issues, and more issues. At points during the play, I felt myself wanting to scream 'Stop! Let's deal with this one before we move on to the next'. Reflecting on my experience, I can only but surmise that as a black, male counsellor myself, with a training in a white, Eurocentric, psychotherapeutic tradition, I would have liked to have seen an example of individual self-reflection and perhaps with acting clinical professionals in situ giving interpretations of what is shared.

However, that may have left the play open to accusations of a white, Eurocentric way of dealing with global majority problems when instead, this wonderful piece of art clearly served its purpose of encouraging 'black male youth to follow their own dreams of finding themselves and aspire to become more than what society expects them to be'.

As the play ends, there is a standing ovation. I came away from this performance with a strong feeling that society is finally waking up to the emerging mental health emergency, and some musing about how it takes a black playwright and an excellent production team to force home again the fact that young black men are particularly at risk due to the discrimination faced in white, privileged society.

Unusually, there was no event programme available at this event, but the script notes were obtainable (Cameron, 2022). Going through my copy on the London Tube, I was reminded of the way the play ends—almost like it started:

And this is for the black boys who have considered suicide but decided that our stories must be told and our joy forever rising and our strength as much as our vulnerability has got to be as strong as our ancestors. (The voice of All the Boys, in Cameron, 2022, p. 54)

REFERENCES

Cameron, R. C. (2022). *For black boys who have considered suicide when the hue gets too heavy* [Script notes]. Methuan Drama.