

WITH LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

A PLAY IN ONE ACT BY
Jeyna Lynn Gonzales



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

With Liberty and Justice For All is a monologue/scene cycle based on people's experiences attending a Black Lives Matter protest. The play is inspired by first person interviews and was originally submitted for the Northwest Florida Regional Thespian Festival.

Playwright Bio

Jeyna Lynn Gonzales is an 18-year-old Filipino playwright currently based in Panama City Beach, Florida. Jeyna Lynn serves over 130,000 theatre students in the International Thespian Society as one of the six International Thespian Officers (ITOs) 2020-2021. On the ITO Board, she co-chairs the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion subcommittee where she advocates for underrepresented communities in theatre. Aside from writing, she is a professional performer at hotel resorts appealing to the beach tourist scene. After high school, she plans to study theatre in college as a BA drama major or BFA musical theatre major to continue her passion and pave the way for women of color around the world.

Synopsis

It's June 2020. Set on a street in downtown Atlanta, *With Liberty and Justice For All* follows eight people as they attend a BLM protest. They come together as a community, share their voices, and share their stories. But as day turns to night, and the curfew comes and goes, it's every person for themselves. There's only one thing on their mind: run.

Characters

(*NOTE: Real name of an interviewee)

TALYA*: White, Jewish, any gender

MARCUS: Any ethnicity, male

ONA: Black, female

BAILEY*: Black, any gender

ROMAN*: Any ethnicity, transgender male

LATYANA: Biracial but not white-passing, female

GEORGIA: Any ethnicity, any gender

MARA: Black, female

Themes

Race, death, illness/health, kindness, overcoming odds, personal responsibility

Author's Note

This play is based on true events. Each name with an asterisk belongs to a real person and has been included with their permission. Interviews were conducted throughout the writing process to understand the perspectives of a variety of people from Atlanta, Georgia; New Orleans, Louisiana; Houston, Texas; and Tallahassee, Florida. When this script was written (2020), its contents were provocative. Throughout the creative process, the heaviness of the subject was evident. The goal of this script is simply to amplify the voices of those so often silenced.

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ Have you ever read or acted in a play that was based on true events?
- ★ In your opinion, what are the challenges of writing a play based on true events?
- ★ Have you ever attended a protest? What was your experience?
- ★ Have you ever attended a BLM event? What was your experience?
- ★ If not, what do you think they are like? Where does your opinion come from?
- ★ Are protests safe for those protesting? Why or why not?
- ★ When should a protest be stopped?
- ★ What is the purpose of a protest?

- ★ Do protests work?
- ★ Do you believe you have a voice? Why or why not?
- ★ Do you believe people listen to you? Why or why not?
- ★ Do you believe that people can change their opinion of others?
- ★ Have you had a hostile experience with a police officer? What happened?

Pre-Read Activities

Background Interview

- ★ If you have BIPOC students in your class, have others interview them about their background, their likes/dislikes, their aspirations. The point is to steer clear of questions that reduce a BIPOC student to race. It is a personal connection interview.
- ★ Note: Discuss this with your BIPOC students before you introduce this activity. Make sure they feel comfortable talking about themselves and their experiences. It's not the job of your BIPOC students to teach or instruct others, and if they feel they are being pushed into this role, do not do this activity.

BIPOC Student Share: Race

- ★ Discuss with BIPOC students if they feel comfortable sharing their feelings about race. Have they had experiences where they were reduced to race? Have they experienced racism in a situation that surprised them? How do they handle situations where they expect racism?
- ★ Students may not realize how their peers deal with racism on a regular basis.
- ★ Again, do not do this activity if students are uncomfortable or feel they are being pushed into a teaching role.

Research Project: Black, Indigenous, and people of colour

- ★ In small groups students will research an individual from a race that is not their own.
- ★ Give students a selection of categories to choose from. For example: arts, sports, technology, science, inventors.
- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
 - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
 - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)
- ★ As students work on this project, observe how they are presenting their research. At no point should students take on a character who is of a race that is not their own. If they want to present a monologue about their individual, make it clear they cannot “be” the individual. Let them problem solve how they can show the individual without becoming the individual.

Research Project: Black Lives Matter Protests

- ★ In small groups students will research what happened during the BLM protests following the death of George Floyd.
- ★ NOTE: This will be an uncomfortable topic for many students. Make sure you have time for any necessary debrief discussion. Do not rush through this activity.
- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
 - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
 - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

- ★ As students work on this project, observe how they are presenting their research. At no point should students take on a character who is of a race that is not their own. If they want to present a monologue about their individual, make it clear they cannot “be” the individual. Let them problem solve how they can show the individual without becoming the individual.

Interview Monologue

- ★ Divide students into pairs.
- ★ Have them interview each other about their background, their traditions, what they do on a daily basis, what hobbies they have, how they feel about school, etc.
- ★ Each person will write a monologue about their partner using what they’ve learned from the interviews.
 - » You may want to discuss the criteria of a good monologue so that students aren’t writing a story about their partner. Be specific that they are to write a monologue.
 - » For example: They should write in first person, there should be a specific want in the monologue, and they should identify a listener — who is the character talking to?
- ★ Once students have written their monologue, they will give it to their partner to read out loud.
- ★ Have some volunteers read the monologue aloud.
- ★ Discuss the experience. Did students feel the monologue represented them? Why or why not? What did their partner get right? What surprised them?
- ★ Ask students: How easy or difficult is it to write a play based on interviews?

Identity Scene

- ★ In small groups, students will create a one-minute scene on the theme of identity. How will you visualize, “Who am I?”
- ★ Groups will rehearse and present.

Original Scenes

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create a one-minute theatrical moment on the topic of racism. These moments can be traditional dialogue, tableaux, music, movement, or whatever students think best fits the situation.
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create a one-minute theatrical moment on the topic of protests. These moments can be traditional dialogue, tableaux, music, movement, or whatever students think best fits the situation.
- ★ Groups will rehearse and present.

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it’s being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can’t highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *With Liberty and Justice For All*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. Where does the play take place?
3. Why is Tayla excited?
4. Who says, "I think we all just had this sense of security with each other"?
5. What is the title of scene 4?
6. What is Bailey counting?
7. Why does Roman find it hard to breathe?
8. Who says, "Racism isn't a problem anymore"?
9. What happened for Mara as soon as curfew hit?
10. What happened to Ona?
11. Who says, "Never in my life would I have thought I'd ever run away from the
12. police"?
13. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why does the playwright choose to share this story using the monologue format?
2. What is the significance of the tableaux used in the play?
3. Analyze Georgia's use of language. What kind of words does she use? What can you infer about her character based on her vocabulary and word choice?

4. What is the significance of the line, "As a woman of color, I have been stifled. I have been silenced. And I have been ignored"?
5. What is the significance of the stage direction, "For the majority of his life, he's seen the world through a narrow lens"?
6. What is the significance of the stage direction, "The sound of this call and response should resemble a call and response between a priest and the congregation":

P: "The Lord be with you."

C: "And with your spirit."
7. What is the significance of the line, "It sounds disheartening, but it's just realistic"?
8. How would you costume Ona? Use the text to support your answer.
9. What is the significance of the final moment in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *With Liberty and Justice For All*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about racism? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is the playwright trying to say about personal responsibility? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with racism with what happens in the play.
5. How does the author want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ Which scene stood out to you the most? Why?
- ★ How have the characters changed by the end of the play?

Post-Read Activities

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize it in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Line Tableau

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a line from the play such as, "I'm so scared something's gonna go sideways, and it shouldn't be that way."
- ★ Each group will discuss and decide how they will visualize this line in a tableau.
 - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?

Protest Original Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will discuss the concept of protest in connection to what they read in the play.
- ★ Based on their discussion and what they read in the play, have each group create their own theatrical moment on the concept of protest.
- ★ How does this moment differ from what students presented in the pre-read activities?

Playwright Process

Playwright Jeyna Lynn Gonzales talks about her process writing With Liberty and Justice For All. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

1. What was the originating idea for the play? Where did you start?

Back in June 2020, I was having a passionate phone conversation with a friend about the Black Lives Matter movement because she had been attending protests in her city. In this conversation, she told me a story about how she lost her shoe running from the police. I found myself thinking about that story even months after our conversation and wanted to find a way to both creatively express how I felt and amplify the voices of underrepresented communities. While I didn't actually start working on it until November, I had the idea for my script in September 2020. I was inspired to work on it as a submission to the North West Florida Regional Thespian Festival.

2. What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

Throughout the writing process itself, I found it challenging to navigate conveying my interviewees' stories as truthfully as possible. I wanted to ensure I was representing their most authentic selves. Additionally, I'd have to say a large part of the reason why *With Liberty and Justice For All* was so successful is because I had an initial timeline of 10 days that pushed me to complete the first draft. I completed four interviews and a full script within that week and sent it off for adjudication. During that time, I dedicated my focus to the project and was able to create a work that I'm proud of because there was no room for procrastination. Thankfully, the script received Superior ratings at Regional and Top Honors (highest in my category's room) at State.

3. As a playwright, what is your favourite moment/character in the play?

My favorite moment is definitely the ending. The character Ona is inspired by a 19-year-old Black Lives Matter activist from Tallahassee, Florida who was murdered. I learned of her story through one of my interviewees; it really struck me to hear such a horrifying story of another woman of color — who was only a teenager — with whom I shared common beliefs. I saw a lot of myself or who I wished to be in her, so apart from her ending, I put myself into Ona's character the most. Originally, the dialogue in the script revealed that Ona died to display the reality of the situation; however, I chose to leave it open to interpretation, giving the audience a sense of uncertainty that so many friends and family members of people of color face when the fate of their lost loved ones remains unknown.

4. Which is harder for you, first drafts or rewrites?

I find first drafts more difficult because one actually has to finish a script before making it pretty. Since recreational playwriting is typically lower on my priority list than schoolwork and leadership duties, it easily falls to the back of my mind before a first draft is even completed. However, when I have enough time and space to focus on my writing, I really enjoy the outcome.

5. What is your writing process like?

I would describe the actual writing part as an ugly, caffeine-fueled, nocturnal frenzy. Many writers and readers may relate to the late-night night light environment in which you simply cannot stop creating or consuming. When I'm passionate about a project, I will be hyper-focused on it, which leads to a few sleepless nights.

For this play, I reached out to a few people over social media to schedule semi-structured phone interviews. Using the information gained, I pieced together parts of their story to write a documentary-style script capturing an event from multiple perspectives. Before submitting it to the Regional Thespian Festival, I had multiple peers and one teacher proofread and comment on it, which was greatly beneficial in the long run.

6. What engages you about playwriting?

In a recent Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion panel that I had the opportunity to speak on, the discussion about the importance of student playwriting was brought up. Many students agreed that it was important for them and their peers to have the opportunity to write their own pieces because, for too many people, they have not seen people like them represented in theatre, film, television, etc.

My high school theatre teacher's philosophy is if you don't see opportunity, create it, and that has been prevalent in the way she has raised me as a student and how I continue to move forward in my arts journey. I love using my voice to share stories that matter to me and those I hold dear.