

An aerial photograph of a park at dusk or dawn. In the center, a large, colorful mural of the words 'BLACK LIVES MATTER' is painted on the pavement. The letters are filled with various patterns and colors like sunbursts, chains, and abstract designs. People are walking around the mural. In the background, there are green sports fields with yellow lines, some trees, and a few tents or structures. The overall scene is a public gathering or protest.

AMERICAN SON

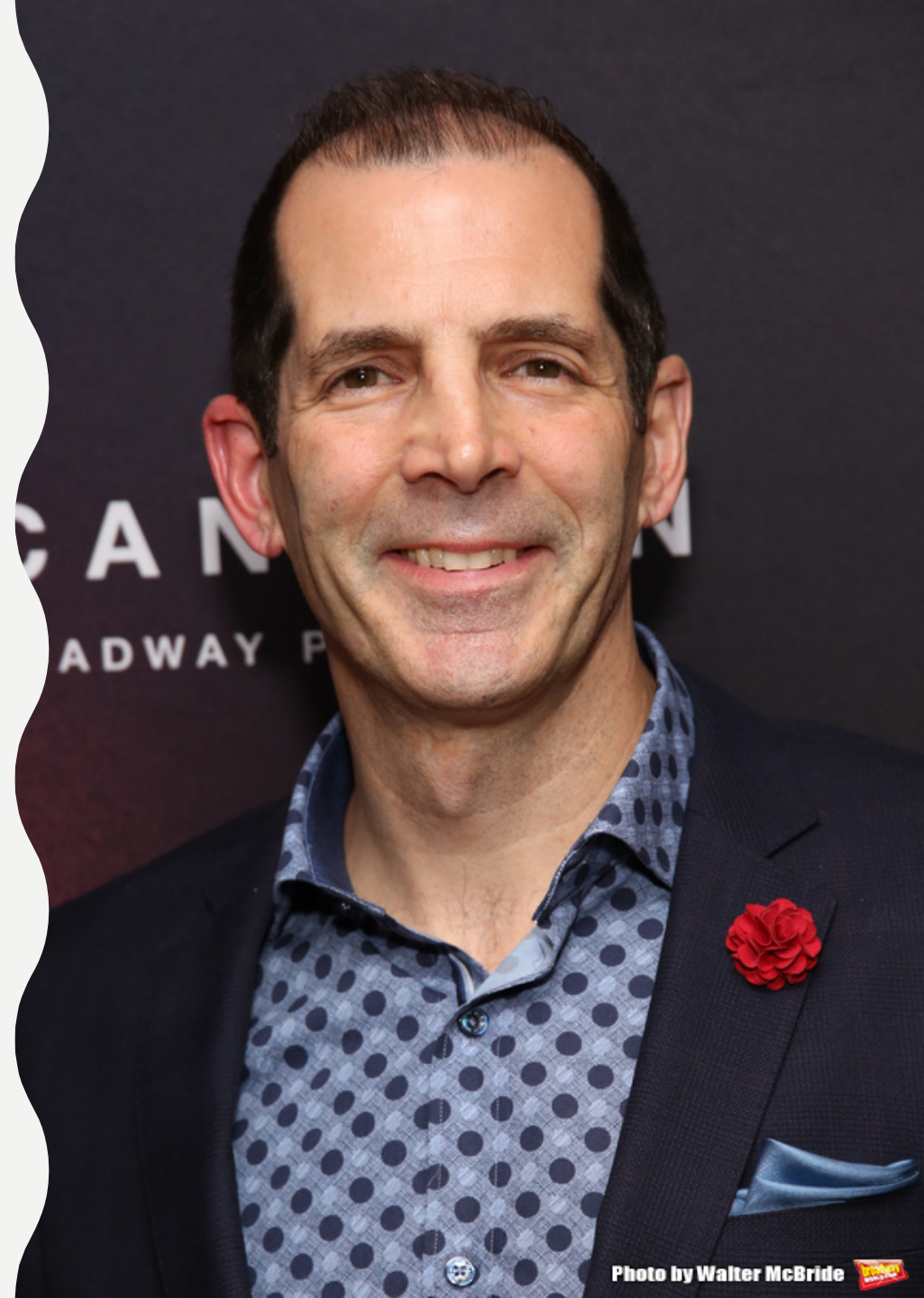
A DRAMATURG PRESENTATION BY LJ BRODIE

ACCORDING TO THE NY TIMES:

“*American Son* is not a subtle play; it barely feels like a play at all. With its unrelentingly high tension on every level — maternal, marital, societal — it’s more like a slice of a nightmare, with few contours despite its surprises. Its abrupt ending doesn’t even offer a chance for catharsis; it just spits you out.”

PLAYWRIGHT: CHRISTOPHER DEMOS-BROWN

- Miami Trial Lawyer, turned playwright
- Day Job inspired his work
- *American Son* is his 8th completed work
- His bio as it appeared in the George Street Playhouse production of *American Hero*: “**Christopher Demos-Brown** (Playwright) *American Hero* is Chris’s second show at George Street Playhouse. His play, *American Son*, produced here last season, will open on Broadway this fall. Chris has received multiple honors for his work including the Laurents/Hatcher Award, a Steinberg Award Citation from the American Theatre Critics’ Association, two Carbonell Awards, and the inaugural Berkshire Theatre Award for Outstanding New Work. Chris is a Dartmouth College alumnus and holds graduate degrees from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and the University of Geneva. He and his wife, Stephanie, are co-founders of Zoetic Stage, an award-winning theatre-in-residence at The Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts in Miami, Florida.



THE PLAY

- “[It’s] about race and gender and the treatment of marginalized groups. It’s about the American family.” (Demos-Brown in an interview on Broadway.com)
- Demos-Brown was moved to write about an interracial couple waiting for word about their missing teenager at a Florida police station by both the book *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates and by “several incidents involving African-American children being victimized by our system in various ways,”
- *American Son* received its world premiere at the Berkshires’ Barrington Stage Company in 2016
- The play didn’t received any attention until “star power” was used bringing in Tony Award-winning director, Kenny Leon,; *Scandal* star, Kerry Washington; and Broadway names including Steven Pasquale, Jeremy Jordan and Eugene Lee



THE MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTER IS THE ONE THAT NEVER COMES ON.

Jamal is truly the star of this play and here's why:

1. All of the events that happen in the play center on his identity as a biracial black teenager (a “man” in they eyes of the law because he is 18).
2. His whereabouts sparks the debates in this show (Kendra v. Larkin, Kendra v. Scott and Kendra v. Stokes)
3. Their reason to connect at all meet occurs because of his disappearance, the police incident and eventual murder.

THEME: INTERRACIAL COUPLE

- The fact that an interracial couple is being displayed through a serious play rather than a musical such as *Hairspray* emphasizes the reality of the issues.
- Virginia v. Loving (1967). This is the Supreme Court case that legalized marriage between persons of different races. That was 53 years ago.
- This interracial couple come from very different backgrounds which make their views of how to raise their son and what his future would like. These different points of view regarding their son ultimately prove to be his demise.
- Some of the parents' conflicting issues include Kendra v. Scott over Jamal's name, his schooling, his friends and his career choices.
- A lack of understanding can also tie into this.



THEME: BREATHE

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LmVcdhpLIk
- The fact that part of the de-escalation process is that they're told to calm down and breathe.
- Scott's health condition emphasizes the last line in the play as he says "I can't breathe."
- These bring to mind Eric Gardner and George Floyd.

THEME: SEXISM

Reflection question: Do you observe sexism in the play in any of the following?

- The interaction between Larkin and Kendra
- The interaction between Larkin and Scott
- The language Larkin uses with Kendra
- The language Larkin uses with Scott.
- Does play have examples of toxic masculinity?

THEME: SHADES OF BLACK

Definition: Uncle Tom: a negative term meaning a black man who is subservient to white people and who has turned a blind eye to his own race for money or status. The name stems from the novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which many historians claim this novel laid the groundwork for the Civil War.

How does the play reflect the status of the black characters?

- Stokes v. Kendra
- Black Cop v. Black professor
- Generational Gaps (Kendra v. Jamal)

THEME: POLICE BRUTALITY

- Kendra being an educated black woman, who has struggled with systemic racism, makes it clear that from her perspective the system disadvantages people of color.
- Systemic Bias: Research shows that Black and Latinx communities historically experience racial profiling and other disadvantages within the criminal legal system even when they are less likely to commit certain crimes. However, in many communities, Black and Latinx officials administer the criminal legal system and are the primary faces of the criminal legal system (e.g., Black police officers, Black judges, Black corrections officers).

OVERTOWN AND LIBERTY CITY

- In the 1926 landmark Supreme Court case zoning regulations were justified as a use of governmental power. These emerging land-use powers would be also be used by cities throughout the nation in the early 20th century to maintain racial segregation, even after the U.S. Supreme Court declared a Louisville, Kentucky, racial zoning ordinance unconstitutional in 1917. To circumvent this ruling, Miami's city commission designated most of residential "Colored Town" (Overtown) as "industrial" in the 1920s.
- Miami's black commercial and cultural center.
- In 1937, the Miami Housing Authority opened the first public housing development in Florida, Liberty Square

ERIC GARNER - JOHN CRAWFORD III - MICHAEL BROWN - EZELL FORD
DANTE PARKER - MICHELLE CUSSEAU - LAQUAN MCDONALD - GEORGE MANN
TANISHA ANDERSON - AKAI GURLEY - TAMIR RICE - RUMAIN BRISBON - JERAME REID
MATTHEW AJIBADE - FRANK SMART - NATASHA MCKENNA - TONY ROBINSON - ANTHONY HILL
MYA HALL - PHILLIP WHITE - ERIC HARRIS - WALTER SCOTT - WILLIAM CHAPMAN II
ALEXIA CHRISTIAN - BRENDON GLENN - VICTOR MANUEL LAROSA - JONATHAN SANDERS
FREDDIE GRAY - JOSEPH MANN - SALVADO ELLSWOOD - SANDRA BLAND
ALBERT JOSEPH DAVIS - DARRIUS STEWART - BILLY RAY DAVIS - SAMUEL DUBOSE
MICHAEL SABBIE - BRIAN KEITH DAY - CHRISTIAN TAYLOR - TROY ROBINSON
ASSHAMS PHAROAH MANLEY - FELIX KUMI - KEITH HARRISON MCLEOD - JUNIOR PROSPER
LAMONTEZ JONES - PATERSON BROWN - DOMINIC HUTCHINSON - ANTHONY ASHFORD
ALONZO SMITH - TYREE CRAWFORD - INDIA KAGER - LA'VANTE BIGGS
MICHAEL LEE MARSHALL - JAMAR CLARK - RICHARD PERKINS - NATHANIEL HARRIS PICKETT
BENNI LEE TIGNOR - MIGUEL ESPINAL - MICHAEL NOEL - KEVIN MATTHEWS - BETTIE JONES
QUINTONIO LEGRIER - KEITH CHILDRESS JR. - JANET WILSON - RANDY NELSON
ANTRONIE SCOTT - WENDELL CELESTINE - DAVID JOSEPH - CALIN ROQUEMORE - DYZHAWN
PERKINS - CHRISTOPHER DAVIS - MARCO LOUD - PETER GAINES - TORREY ROBINSON - DARIUS
ROBINSON - KEVIN HICKS - MARY TRUXILLO - DEMARCUS SEMER - WILLIE TILLMAN
TERRILL THOMAS - SYLVILLE SMITH - ALTON STERLING - PHILANDO CASTILE - TERENCE
CRUTCHER - PAUL O'NEAL - ALTERIA WOODS - JORDAN EDWARDS - AARON BAILEY
RONELL FOSTER - STEPHON CLARK - ANTWON ROSE II - BOTHAM JEAN
PAMELA TURNER - DOMINIQUE CLAYTON - ATATIANA JEFFERSON - CHRISTOPHER WHITFIELD
CHRISTOPHER MCCORVEY - ERIC REASON - MICHAEL LORENZO DEAN - BREONNA TAYLOR
G E O R G E F L O Y D

SAY THEIR NAMES

Tamir Rice

Philando Castile

Eric Gardner

Arthur McDuffie

Breonna Taylor

Ahmaud Arbery

Rashad Brooks

Countless Others

GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

- It's caused by events that target a group of people. Thus, even family members who have not directly experienced the trauma can feel the effects of the event generations later.
- For further research:
 - Epigenetics-Study on how trauma is passed down.
 - How outside factors can effect what genes are expressed
 - “History is not about the past. It's about the present!” – Dr. El-Kati
 - The Moynihan Report 1965

MENTAL HEALTH

- Sixteen percent (4.8 million) of Black and African American people are reported as having a mental illness, and 22.4 percent of those (1.1 million people) are reported as having a serious mental illness over the past year.
- Blacks and African American adults are more likely to have feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness than white adult.
- Blacks and African Americans are less likely than white people to die from suicide at all ages. However, Black and African American teenagers are more likely to attempt suicide than white teenagers (9.8 percent v. 6.1 percent).
- Black and African American men are particularly concerned about stigma.
- Stigma and judgment prevent Black and African American people from seeking treatment for their mental illnesses. Research indicates that Blacks and African Americans believe that mild depression or anxiety would be considered “crazy” in their social circles. Furthermore, many believe that discussions about mental illness would not be appropriate even among family.

WAR ON DRUGS

Areas of discussion:

- Presidents Nixon's and Reagan's "war on drugs."
- Crack v Cocaine
- Marijuana
- La Guardia Report (1944)
- Shafer Commission (1972)



TALKBACK QUESTIONS

- Christopher Demos-Brown is a Caucasian playwright. Does that affect your response to the play?
- Do you believe that *American Son* exposes white saviorism in the play? If so, how? Please begin by defining "white saviorism" as you understand it.
- What is the hierarchy of power between the characters and where do those power differences come from? Do these dynamics ever shift? If so, how and why?
- We never see Jamal, but in many ways he is the story's most important character. What do we know about him? How do the various characters describe him, and to what aspects of Jamal do they attach meaning?
- What are ways we can balance the danger associated with police work with the rights citizens have in America?
- The police officer who killed Jamal is black. How does this scenario measure up to the reality of our current situations of black males being shot mostly by white police officers?
- What are your thoughts on the arguments that Lieutenant John Stokes articulates to Kendra? Are his arguments representative or mis-representative of the dominant perspective within the black community? Why do you think Christopher Demos-Brown chose to portray this character in the way he did?
- How do Kendra and Scott's personal racial and class identities influence their differing assumptions about the treatment their son likely received at the hands of the police?
- How do Kendra's desperate attempts to contact her son demonstrate her fears about raising a Black boy in the United States?
- What call to action does the play encourage you to take?
- What should be the role of the church in America when it comes to engaging the political, historical and racial ills of America? Should the church have anything to do with it all?
- Is there a message of hope that can be taken from *American Son*? If so, what is it?



If you dare to struggle, you dare to win. If you dare not struggle, then damn it, you don't deserve to win.

— *Fred Hampton* —