

**WITH LIBERTY
AND JUSTICE
FOR ALL** BY JEYNA LYNN GONZALES



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With Liberty and Justice For All**

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WITH LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

A PLAY IN ONE ACT BY
Jeyna Lynn Gonzales



With Liberty and Justice For All
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Casting

IM, 3F, 1 Trans M + 3 Any Gender

***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.

*Real name of an interviewee.

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. In its research style and writing execution, this play draws inspiration from monologue/scene cycles such as *The Colored Museum* (George C. Wolfe, 1986); *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* (Nora Ephron, 1995); *The Vagina Monologues* (Eve Ensler, 1996); *SLUT* (Katie Cappiello, 2013); *Now That We're Men* (Katie Cappiello, 2016); and *Alone Together* (Arnold Theatre, 2019).

In the time that this script is written (2020), its contents are provocative. Throughout the creative process, the heaviness of the subject was clearly evident. The goal of this script is simply to amplify the voices of those so often silenced.

As a minority, there is something empowering about seeing people like yourself represented in theatre, media, movies, education, medicine, business, leadership, etc... There are too many people who have never seen a character share their same name, and there are too many people who have never watched a play that represents their lives and/or history. We make history every day; however, only certain stories are told. For this reason, it was clear that the voices of these marginalized communities need to be documented and shared.

There are some points in this script where the usage of “they/them” pronouns refers to a singular person out of respect for their gender identity and in some cases gender neutrality. This is fully intentional and is not a grammatical error. By interviewing people and using their names, this show is a step in the direction of love, community, diversity, and inclusion.

Theatre gives us an opportunity to see things from a different perspective. As thespians, we analyze a character's wants and intentions to portray them in their

truest light. As an audience member, we receive what is presented to us and take something away as we exit the lobby. Theatre develops the social and emotional learning (SEL) skills necessary to manage life, relationships, and empathy whether we are the thespian in action or the audience member. For readers of this play, please take the time to place yourself in someone else's shoes. Think their thoughts. Feel their feelings. See the world from another set of eyes to the best of your ability.

If we practice this, then maybe – just maybe – it will bring us closer to a kinder, more compassionate world.

Edits to Language

For educational purposes or amateur productions by school programs, the author permits edits to the language of this script for the purposes of accessibility and inclusivity. All damns, hells, shits, fucks, and phrases including these terms may be omitted or substituted.

For others or suggested omissions and substitutions, please contact the author through Theatrefolk via help@theatrefolk.com

SCENE 1: PLEASE RISE

Lights up on a street in Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta, Georgia. It's June 2020: prime time for COVID-19 in the United States. There are multiple areas for actors to sit/perch: benches, chairs, picnic blankets, etc... They remain here when inactive in a scene. Upstage center, there is a collection of flowers and pictures – a memorial you wouldn't have really paid attention to unless you knew the person. It's almost decorative.

The actors stand socially distant (at least six feet apart) with their right hands over their hearts. When inactive, all performers should remain socially distant as much as possible with face masks on.

At rise, "The Star Spangled Banner" is heard. The song should sound like it is coming from a dated speaker system – underfunded American public school-esque. At this time, the actors are not in the park, nor are they aware of one another. Rather, they are in their own spaces. Projected on a screen upstage, a display of patriotic videos and images runs: the United States' flag flying, military personnel, fireworks, etc...

It resembles the type of video that would be displayed on the morning announcements or at a military banquet.

Following the song, the actors recite the following line, still holding their right hand to their hearts.

ALL: I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America,
and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God,
indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

When this line is finished, the barrier between their worlds is broken. They see one another, greet, converse. Actors move to their places in the park.

The volume of their conversations fade with the lights.

Blackout.

SCENE 2: BACKPACK

Projected on the screen is a street map of Atlanta. Lights up on TALYA in a center special. They are young, bright-eyed – a ray of sunshine; however, this should not be confused with submissiveness. They speak a little too quickly for their own brain to keep up with sometimes. They care, but avoid going into too much detail about things and speak about potentially alarming subjects with cool nonchalance – the way you’d tell your parents about something without getting them concerned.

TALYA: I was so excited.

Not that the subject was anything to be excited about, but I was happy to just be a part of something. At that point protests were happening literally every day. I don’t remember the day of the week. It was a part of the routine, like the dinner rush – everyone knew what time protests would start and adjusted their schedules. It was get your backpack on, go out, protest, come home.

I was a little hesitant at first because I started out just fundraising with some friends. And even through that, we’d get people calling us with threats saying, “We’re gonna get you kicked out of your schools. We’re gonna go to the HOA and get you evicted.” So uh, that’s unsettling. I don’t even think they can do that, but still. That’s not what any high schooler should have to worry about.

So that aside, most of the protests I’ve known about in Atlanta were pretty peaceful. I was seeing all over the news that people were getting arrested for protesting, and that was scary. But I was going with my friends, so I felt more comfortable knowing we’d look out for each other. I wore long clothing just in case anything got out of hand. A mask, long sleeves, jeans, clothes without logos in case they tried to identify people. You never know. I brought water, my phone – lots of water, actually. And I didn’t have pepper spray, but I had my little knife disguised as a key, so I was good. It was all good.

Overall, I had a great time. It was pretty peaceful. A few cars tried to run through the crowd, but that was pretty much it. Once people started getting irritable though, that’s when my parents said, “Start heading home now. We don’t want you getting hurt.” So even before curfew hit, we were like, “Oop, gotta go now.”

Nothing awful usually happened during the day, but at night... Everyone knew that the night is where things got worse.

Their center special fades. The map zooms in on a street called "Piedmont St." and places a pin or some sort of marker on the street.

SCENE 3: PIEDMONT ST.

Lights up on MARCUS in the downstage center special. The way he holds himself makes him seem just slightly out of place.

MARCUS: I headed toward Piedmont Street by myself. I was new to the area, blah blah blah – you know the drill. Looking back on it though, I didn't really think that through.

You know, coming from a small town, it's a little difficult to find your people in Atlanta, and especially since COVID flipped the world upside down. So when I heard about the protests on Piedmont, I was for sure going to go. And sure enough, on my way toward the protests, I noticed this girl also heading the same direction. She was like, "Hey, are you going to this thing, too?" And I said, "Yeah, yeah." And so I told her I was new to the area, didn't have anyone to stick with, you know? I tell you, this girl took me in so quickly. Nothing else, just shwoop. "Okay, you're with me now." Do you know how easy life would be if every friendship I made started like that?

While MARCUS describes this last section, the cast shifts their resting positions to a lower level. This is to put emphasis on whoever is standing. The map zooms in further on a nail salon.

Anyway, we made it to Piedmont Street and joined the crowd, and after we were marching for a while, we stopped in front of this nail salon who was kind enough to let us use their stairs. People went up to speak their minds and all.

As it went on, I found myself making those easy connections with more people. I mean, of course if you get enough people together, you're bound to make friends, but I've never felt such a strong gravitation before. And it's never been this quick. I think we all just had this sense of security with each other.

Needless to say, by the end of the day I for sure didn't feel alone.

MARCUS sits. His light fades.

SCENE 4: SUPERWOMAN

Lights up on ONA downstage right. The group shifts their focus to her now. She looks average. Like an extra in life's movie. She doesn't call much attention with her presence, but there's something underneath her surface that gets her stuck in your head.

ONA: I'm not usually one to speak up. I'm very easily the quietest in the crowd. I have opinions. I have strong feelings, and ironically enough, I know I'm a strong orator. That's always been the case... but I just don't really like that much attention. I'll show up, show my support – but I would much rather support from the sidelines, not the spotlight.

So I don't know what it was that compelled me to get up on those stairs.

I mean, I can hardly order food by myself at a restaurant, but... there was something about the energy of the crowd that just lifted me up. I don't even remember walking up there or what I even said. Just that it was right. That getting up there and speaking my mind was exactly what I was supposed to be doing.

And I choked.

A flash of white light, either from the stage lights or on the screen, is seen.

I choked up at one point because it was just so powerful to see so many people fighting for compassion. I had to take a second to breathe because for the first time in my life I felt seen, I felt heard, and I liked it. I felt like Superwoman or something.

As a woman of color, I have been stifled. I have been silenced. And I have been ignored. So suddenly having this large crowd of people listening to me... Listening to me...

I don't know what else there is to say except that if there is a higher power of some sort, I definitely felt it that day. Nothing I can think of could compare to that one moment in time, and I will never forget it for the rest of my life.

She sits. Her light fades.

SCENE 5: 8 MINUTES AND 46 SECONDS

Lights up on BAILEY. The focus shifts again. BAILEY is stoic. Or at least they'd like to be. Messy emotions of any kind aren't a thing that they tend to partake in.

BAILEY: There were maybe around 500 people – could've been more. The whole park was just filled. And I think that's when it really hit me that this is a serious issue. People care about this stuff, and no one is alone here. Turn to your right, you've got a friend. Turn to your left, you've got a friend. Everyone there was there for the same reason.

When we stopped, different people went up to speak. Everyone was so open. They were honest. It was just this outpour of raw emotion and power. I didn't speak, but I went up with a friend. She got me up on the stage and led everyone into the position George Floyd was in when he died.

As they describe this, the cast rises and assumes their positions. Everyone, with the exception of BAILEY, lays face down on the floor with their hands behind their backs as if they were handcuffed.

For every minute that passed, I announced it. I counted all eight minutes. We weren't in any danger, but it was just so... surreal. So as I'm in this position lying on the floor, I was thinking, "Wow. Someone would actually do this to a man."

And these girls in the front started crying. I know we were just pretending, but I could only imagine how it felt. Time just ticked. It felt like forever. And not to get dramatic or anything, but honestly? It became hard to breathe. And before I knew it, I started crying. I'm lying on the floor counting the minutes, and my voice is cracking. It's just "6," "7," and I can hardly keep it together enough for people to hear me now but it's so silent that you could hear a friggin pin drop. Explaining this moment couldn't do it justice, I know, but if you were there, that's the type of solidarity that you would never find anywhere else.

So when the time was up, it was silent for a good like twenty seconds. We just hugged each other and held each other as tight as we possibly could because that situation could happen to any one of us.

I'm... I feel so lucky to live in an area where I have access to a community that backs me up on this stuff. Because if I didn't, I don't even know where I'd be right now.

SCENE 6: INTO DOWNTOWN

The cast resets. Lights up on ROMAN. He has a camera around his neck for the entire show. For the majority of his life, he's seen the world through a narrow lens.

ROMAN: I wanna say it was maybe 3 o'clock in the afternoon. I was on Piedmont Street, nowhere crazy or anything. Piedmont was a heavy spot for protesting, but it wasn't the end all be all. Everyone knew that. It was a good checkpoint, but it wasn't the place to be to protest.

The map moves further south to downtown.

That being said, those of us who wanted to started to move farther into downtown. And let me tell you, that shift was for real. It was getting later, and people were out for longer. The entire time I was out, I saw the National Guard prepping. There were, I kid you not, actual tanks lined up along the streets – the kind you'd think were only used in the fields of Iraq. I don't think they actually planned on using them – more like a fear tactic, right?

So once we moved into downtown, that was when it became really set-in-stone aware to me that downtown – as much as you wanted to voice your freedom of speech – wasn't the place to do it unless you were prepared to get your shit rocked. Now, me not having friends from Atlanta, I didn't know that. So initially, I was alone. I had come alone, but once I got there, I realized it's so clear that no one really is alone. People will watch out for another. Total strangers were being so kind – making sure I had water, giving out free masks, checking to see if I could continue. Breathing was difficult considering that we were on the move and simultaneously chanting until our voices gave out. For me specifically though, it was a little more challenging because I wear a binder and that makes it harder to breathe. So in addition to the masks and the walking and the chanting, my chest was compressed. So my heart was with any other transgender guys that could spiral into anxiety attacks due to improper breathing.

As for the rest of the day, I'm trying to remember... There's so much happening at those rallies. The one thing I will say is that I just remember I came back home and my voice was gone.

His light fades.

SCENE 7: DON'T SHOOT

Lights up on LATYANA center. Her energy exudes a powerful sophistication. You wouldn't want to be up against her in a debate. As she begins, the rest of the cast rises and creates a line downstage of her on one knee. They raise their hands up with their heads down. "Don't shoot."

LATYANA: I was hanging downtown maybe around 6pm. And that's when there was a line of white – maybe Gen Z – people who had taken it upon themselves to be the heroes. They decided they were gonna be the barrier between law enforcement and people of color. They had their hands up like–

ALL: "Don't shoot."

LATYANA: – that hand signal. And they were just knelt on one knee. And I remember because their strategy was clearly "Stand behind me. They won't shoot y'all." Or "They'll shoot us first before they shoot y'all..."

And that was sweet.

That was admirable.

But me and a good majority of the Black people around me knew that wasn't gonna happen.

I think that was really admirable of these white citizens, but the vibe that I and the rest of my Black friends got was that they're not gonna shoot these white people. They think they're doing a service, but they're not gonna be the ones to get shot. I understand the intention. I get it, but we're looking around like, "That's not gonna work." But I'm standing here, still standing my ground because things aren't going to change and people aren't going to get the message unless we show them we're serious.

I learned in high school that the safest position you could be in during a shooting is–

ALL: On the ground.

LATYANA: If they were going to shoot, anyone taking a knee was still in the safest position.

How white people thought they were gonna protect Black people was so misguided. I understand they were really doing their best to grasp at how they were gonna help people of color, but at the end of the day, if people of color were to put their arms up like–

ONLY PEOPLE OF COLOR: “Don’t shoot.”

LATYANA: Do you really think a person so full of hate would suddenly be like, “Oh sorry, we’re gonna put our guns down now.” No.

No.

That’s not how our world works.

Some people cannot even accurately imagine a world in which they can protect us that is realistic. And I don’t say that to make non-white people feel bad, I say that to make sure everyone’s on the same page about where exactly they stand when it comes to protecting people of color.

And it sounds radical. It sounds disheartening, but it’s just realistic.

SCENE 8: PICTURE PERFECT

The cast resets. GEORGIA takes LATYANA’s side. LATYANA becomes the “other girl.” GEORGIA is a force of nature, and they know it. They’re the friend that asks for 5 extra ketchup packets without any worry of what the fast-food employee might think. They may be a little reckless at times, but their chaos inspires.

GEORGIA: The night that this all happened, I remember me and this other girl were right up at the front gate where the National Guard and policemen were. And— and I remember looking this cop in the face. We made eye contact, and I asked, “Do you really not see any problem? In your mind, do you not see why people are protesting?” And he said—

GEORGIA & ROMAN: (*as the cop*) “Racism isn’t a problem anymore.”

This stirs the cast. “That’s some bullshit.” “Hell nah.” They pause to let them react.

GEORGIA: So I asked him “Can you explain to me how you feel? We’re seeing different things. Can you explain it to me?”

Uh, he didn’t. It was just something like—

ROMAN: “No matter what, we all want justice.”

GEORGIA: Something cheesy and vague.

And— and so when I get to this next part, I want to point out just how quick it was.

At the time this officer did this, he took a knee for George Floyd, and the girl next to me, she was this biracial girl, she asked him—

GEORGIA & LATYANA: “Will you take a knee for George Floyd?”

GEORGIA: And he took a knee for twenty seconds.

The screen shows a clock with its second hand indicating the time is just before 9:00PM. It freezes as soon as it reaches the new hour.

In just twenty seconds, it passed into curfew, and as soon as the clock struck 9:00, the Atlanta Police started blowing whistles. He — I swear to God — as soon as he heard those whistles, he stood up, took out his baton, and along with the police department started macing people and swinging. I watched. I watched as the clock struck 9:00, and he pepper sprayed that poor biracial girl. And before I knew it, I was running.

The clock unfreezes and continues.

I was running. Everyone was running. We ran to the other end of the street. They closed it off. We tried the other. They closed it off. We were trapped. And that's when it became clear to us that if you were out past curfew, you weren't supposed to get out. They took these big ass shields and just started pushing us in. This mob of us still out was just being pushed closer and closer. Their sole purpose was to trap you. The time to have gone home was way before then. It's 9:05 and curfew's 9:00? Forget it. You're not getting out.

But still, there were mobs of people running, trying to figure out where to get out so they could get home, but there was no way. You're running and running, and there's the National Guard saying, “Nope.” And once they had us trapped, they just started arresting people left and right.

I remember his face. I remember FOX and CNN were there along the gate. They were filming him. He knew it. He knew the drill. He knew if he got down to take a knee for George Floyd like this girl asked, he knew they'd film it. He knew. And sure enough, as soon as he got on one knee, FOX and CNN were there right up in his face.

(Beat. After taking a breath of recomposure.) No justice.

ALL: No peace.

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.”

Their light fades.

SCENE 9: RUN

The clock rewinds to the seconds before 9:00PM. Lights up on MARA. She’s a trooper. Not in a military-like demeanor sort of way, but rather you can tell that, no matter what, she could take a blow from life. And she’d probably hit it back.

MARA: When I saw him take a knee, for a second I naively thought, “Oh damn, maybe we’re in the wrong. What if they’re right? What if we’re doing too much?”

But as soon as curfew hit, as soon as there were no more photo ops, it was mace and race. They closed off the streets, and there were just herds of people trying to escape. It all happened so fast, I accidentally ended up with a video of me running, trying to get past the National Guard’s whole ass blockade to get home. And they were just arresting anyone they could get their hands on. I mean, I made eye contact with two National Guard members, and as soon as I saw them make eye contact with me and start moving toward me, I ran. I knew for a fact they were about to arrest me. Now I’d love to think I was balls to the walls down for the cause, but in that moment of time, I didn’t give a fuck. I didn’t care what I had to do, but I was not going to jail that night.

The screen zooms out to display the map of downtown again.

So I’m running and running, and I’m hopping fences – doing whatever the hell I need to do to get out. I lost my shoe – my favorite friggin Nike. And somehow I managed to stumble upon a group of people yelling, “Under here!”

I didn’t even ask questions. The next thing I know I’m crawling underneath a construction building. I just did it. It was like a checkpoint of people saying “Keep running! Keep going that way!” I didn’t even know where this building would lead me. They just told me to keep running, and I kept running.

The map moves north to midtown.

And I ran for a good 15 minutes into midtown after that. That was the only thing I knew to do because at that point, if you stopped running, you were going to get arrested. And I stopped for a second because I didn't know where I was, but as soon as I stopped, two people to the right of me got arrested. I turned to my left and saw another person getting arrested. Mm mm, fuck that.

I ran and ran and luckily – by the grace of God – this guy was in his car looking for people running from protests. He asked if I needed a ride, and I was so scared for my life I said, “Yes. Yes, I need a ride.” And I got in his car, and we drove the fuck off.

It could have been a very sketchy situation, but – thank Jesus – he turned out to be a very nice guy. Turns out his son is biracial, and he just wanted to help however he could.

It was terrifying. It was aggressive. It wasn't something I was even aware of. I went out to these protests thinking I knew exactly how to handle myself, but it got to the point where I was so afraid that I was willing to get into a stranger's car just to get home safely.

And I'm not gonna downplay it. It was traumatizing.

So I don't take for granted what people say about what they go through during protests. I can't.

I went out that night knowing damn well I might not make it back home, and the only reason I got out is because some guy – out of the grace of his heart – took me into his car.

And I still don't know where my damn shoe is.

The map shows a circle radiating like a tracker where they were downtown. It's labeled “Shoe.” A bit of comedic relief. Her light fades.

SCENE 10: A CALL TO A FRIEND

Police sirens are heard, and the screen flashes blue and red for a few seconds. The sirens and lights fade out. Lights up on MARCUS downstage left. The screen now shows “Marcus's Location” in midtown: his home. His phone rings. He answers.

ONA: (downstage right, still catching her breath) MARCUS.



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