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GOOD GRIEF: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT OF  
TONYA IN AUGUST WILSON'S *KING HEDLEY II* THROUGH THE LENS OF  
"THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF"

By  
Kala Ross  
B.S., Tennessee State University, 2017

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences of the  
University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in Theatre Arts

Department of Theatre  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2020

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A Thesis Approved on

April 3, 2020

by the following Thesis Committee

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Johnny Jones

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Dr. Baron Kelly

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Dr. Edna Ross

DEDICATION

*This thesis is dedicated to my late grandparents*

*Willie and Mary Clayton*

*and*

*Caudrey Ross*

*who*

*loved me unconditionally and supported my dreams since the beginning of time.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my thesis advisor, Professor Johnny Jones, thank you for shaping my confidence as a writer. Thank you for supporting all of my ideas and offering yourself as a resource and guide throughout my thesis journey and matriculation as a student of the University of Louisville Theatre Arts Department. To Dr. Baron Kelly, I am forever grateful for your mentorship and support as an actor and student. Thank you for introducing me to opportunities at the university and beyond. To Dr. Edna Ross, thank you for joining my committee, challenging me to further develop my ideas, and offering your wisdom throughout this process. To all of my professors, faculty, and staff, thank you for teaching me to trust the process. To my professors of Tennessee State University, thank you for providing the foundation that I needed to excel. To my cohort, thank you for being who you are, for in your transparency, I have learned who I am. To my parents, Reginald and Tara Ross, I offer my gratitude for setting an example of excellence and for your love and support during my journey of becoming an actress. To my family and wonderful friends, I love you, and thank you for believing in me. To my students, thank you for challenging me as an artist. To the person who dreams of becoming an actor: if you match your hard work with your faith, any dream is possible.

## ABSTRACT

### GOOD GRIEF: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT OF TONYA IN AUGUST WILSON'S *KING HEDLEY II* THROUGH THE LENS OF "THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF"

Kala Ross

April 3, 2020

An actor who is portraying a grieving character can also grieve simultaneously about the character's given circumstances, which affects the character development and mental health of the actor. This thesis assesses how the character Tonya, in August Wilson's *King Hedley II*, engages with grief as an African American woman and offers a process for the actor to engage and disengage with loss. "Good Grief" will unpack Constantin Stanislavski's system of acting, focusing on the Magic "If" and the given circumstances, while also introducing the "Five Stages of Grief" coined by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Through the scholarship of theatre practitioners and psychologists coupled with critical self-reflexive analysis, as it relates to constructing the character Tonya, I hypothesize that grief directly impacts character development.



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## INTRODUCTION

### **Narrative**

On March 3rd, 2018, the closing date of my first lead role as Undine “Sharona” Barnes in Lynn Nottage’s *Fabulation, or The Re-Education of Undine*, my grandpa passed away from colon cancer.

My grandpa was there for every milestone; he was present for my high school and undergraduate graduation and took pride in knowing that I was attending the University of Louisville. At the beginning of my graduate school journey, my grandpa would call from Georgia to check on me or ask about “his grades.” He often referred to my grades as *his* grades; we were in this together. In an instant, I went from receiving phone calls to say, “This is your grandpa just checking on you,” to mourning his death and the loss of his voice.

On March 3rd, 2018, I learned the meaning of the adage, “The show must go on.” I made a commitment to my director, cast, and crew, and it was my job to fulfill the commitment. I attributed my performance to God, who heard my prayers, my mother, who reminded me to be strong, my grandpa whom I did not want to disappoint, and my character who was also grieving.

In *Fabulation*, Undine “Sharona” Barnes was grieving the loss of a fabricated life in which she abandons her real family by claiming that they all died in a fire. By the end of the play, Undine has lost her job and her successfully fabricated life, and she returns

home to her family. Undine is also pregnant. Her conscience causes her to tell the truth about the life that she has fabricated for many years. As her truth is realized, she grieves the loss of her fabrication and the new life that is to come as a result of her lies. Though most of Undine's pain was a result of her deceit, she gave me the space to grieve. Instead of burying my relationship with loss, I used the stage to grieve. After the production, I never unpacked the process of performing while grieving. I did not discuss how the performance or my grandpa's death made me feel. I simply flew home, attended the funeral, and went back to school, as if grief did not steal my normalcy.

Unfortunately, over the course of my journey in graduate school, I continued to lose my grandparents. My paternal grandmother, "Granny," passed away in December 2018 and my paternal grandfather died in 2019. In September of 2019, I performed my thesis role of Tonya in August Wilson's *King Hedley II*, which required me to portray yet another character who is grieving.

Wilson once said, "Confront the dark parts of yourself. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing" ("A Quote by August Wilson"). During my first and second years of graduate school, I was unwilling to wrestle with my relationship to grief. I did not want to interrogate how death affected my mental stability as a performer. However, as I close the curtain on my graduate school career, I want to unpack how grief affected my performance process. My curiosity led to my thesis, "Good Grief."

### **The Role**

My cohort consists of two African Americans (one male, one female) from historically black college/university (HBCU) undergraduate experiences, one first-

generation Nigerian-American woman, and one Afro-Colombian man. In the academic year of 2019-2020, the graduate program of UofL consisted of twelve students, ten of whom were of African descent. Recognizing the value of producing plays that embraced the cultural backgrounds of the students, particularly from my graduate cohort, the University of Louisville Theatre Arts Department and its African American Theatre Program introduced its mainstage season theme, “A Season of Black Plays.”

In a UofL news article previewing the season, Department Chair Kevin Gawley said, “Our season brings the African American experience to the forefront, delving deeply into crucial questions surrounding race, past and present” (King). August Wilson’s *King Hedley II* is a play that deals with the effects of race and raises questions about how far we have traveled in history. As such, *King Hedley II* was a fitting play to position in this season’s theme.

In 2013, I was introduced to *King Hedley II* through the August Wilson Monologue Competition. I was one of many high school students across the nation selected to perform monologues from the August Wilson Century Cycle at the August Wilson Theatre in New York City. I chose to perform Tonya’s monologues in which she expresses her resistance to have a child in the play, *King Hedley II*.

August Wilson is credited for being the only playwright to compose “a century cycle” of plays that tells the stories of one group of people—the African American community—for each decade in a whole century. Through Wilson’s work, he created a space for African American actors to use their voices to convey truths of the African American experience on stage. *King Hedley II* is set in 1985, but it is the ninth play in the August Wilson Century Cycle (originally premiering in 1999). The play tells the story of

an ex-convict named King, who is trying to find his place in the world. King struggles to find his place because of his desperate desire to follow the path of the man whom he respected as his father. Tonya is his wife and a mother of a seventeen-year-old daughter named Natasha, whom she conceived with a man who is currently incarcerated. Tonya is pregnant and refuses the idea of mothering another child that she fears she will lose to senseless acts of violence that could also leave another child fatherless. King's decisions are going to cause him to either die by the streets or return to prison. The ambiguity of bringing a life into this world due to the social climate of Pittsburgh and King's lifestyle results in her monologue.

The year 2013, which is the year that I was introduced to *King Hedley II*, mirrored the societal circumstances of the play. 2013 was the year that the #BlackLivesMatter movement started "in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman" (Herstory). The #BlackLivesMatter movement aimed to highlight the racism and biases against black lives. In *King Hedley II*, Tonya says, "I ain't raising no kid to have somebody shoot him. To have his friends shoot him. To have the police shoot him" (Wilson 41). In 2013, several black men lost their lives to police brutality and senseless acts of violence. These men became the faces of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The societal circumstances of Pittsburgh reflected the societal circumstances of America.

When given the opportunity to contribute to the narratives that are told onstage for our "Season of Black Plays," I thought it was befitting to not only tell the story of King, but also the story of Tonya. America's begotten black sons are the faces of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and sometimes America forgets about the mothers who

have lost sons to trauma. Similarly, the title of the thesis production is *King Hedley II* and places the focus on the male lead character. We know the story of King is foregrounded, but what about his wife, partner, and mother of his future child?

The theme, “A Season of Black Plays,” was inspired by African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks’ article, “New Black Math.” In Parks’ article, she wrote that:

the definition of a black play is housed in the reality of two things that occurred recently and almost simultaneously: 26 August 05, playwright scholar poet-king August Wilson announces he is dying of cancer, and hurricane Katrina devastates the Gulf Coast (Parks 576).

Parks’ article inspired me to interrogate social traumas and personal events that are the catalyst of my graduate journey in this department, my relationship with “A Season of Black Plays,” and ultimately my thesis role and writing. My reality is heavily impacted by my introduction to Tonya during the year of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the death of my grandpa. The death of August Wilson and Hurricane Katrina were the catalysts of Parks’ article “New Black Math” which led her to unpack the infinite definitions of a black play. My introduction to Tonya and the death of my grandpa are the catalysts of my thesis. I want to unpack my relationship with grief while portraying my thesis role of Tonya in August Wilson's *King Hedley II*.

## CHAPTER ONE: GRIEF AND THE ACTOR

### **The Statement of the Problem**

I have noticed that when it comes to performing pieces of work that deal with race, gender, and class, particularly of the African American culture, the circumstances on stage often mirror the tension of society. Due to the social climate and racial history of America, sometimes the character's imagination or world of the play reflects societal realities. For example, the actor no longer 'imagines' "raising a kid to have somebody shoot him," but witnesses the injustice and unrest from the 2013 death of Trayvon Martin, the 2014 death of Mike Brown<sup>1</sup>, and other black men (Wilson 41). The actor soon realizes that the play's given circumstances extend beyond the curtain call. While performing in a "Season of Black Plays," a theme that delves deeply into the racial trauma of America, the actor/student must protect the body that tells the story. The artistry of performing pieces of work that convey messages of suffering and pain, can potentially affect the actor mentally. In fact, I believe that, unbeknownst to the actor, she or he can experience what Elisabeth Kubler-Ross terms as the "Five stages of Grief." I believe that an actor can undergo the five stages of grief while playing a character affected by the justice system due to their race, gender, class, and other components.

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see Bosman. Mike Brown was murdered in 2014 by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. He was left in the street for four hours.

## Research Question

This thesis poses the question: How does the black actor portray realism onstage when actual social disparities are similar to the given circumstances of the play? This topic is being studied to prove that it is possible for the black actor to experience grief after portraying roles that confront social trauma. Similarly, to how black people treat mental health, this thesis interrogates how black actors treat their mental health after performing trauma. In a study conducted about the effects of police brutality and mental health in the black community, Dr. Atheendar S. Venkataramani amongst other authors found that:

Between 2013 and 2015, nearly 39 percent of more than 100,000 black adults were exposed to at least one police killing of an unarmed black American in the three-month period...When asked how many days in the last 30 days their mental health was “not good,” there was an increase in the number of black Americans reporting it was “not good” (Barajas).

People of the African American community are exposed to social traumas inflicted by racism and live with these traumas without seeking treatment for the adverse effects on their mental health. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, “In the African American community, many people misunderstand what a mental health condition is and don’t talk about this topic” (“African American Mental Health”). This thesis does not seek to imply that all African American actors are facing mental health issues due to performing plays that deal with racial trauma. However, the research of Dr. Venkataramani and the National Alliance on Mental Illness highlights the challenges



of African Americans to unpack their relationship to certain racial traumas and potentially their grief.

### **Significance and Purpose**

Some African American actors are beginning to openly discuss the pertinence of maintaining mental stability both in actuality and whilst performing. Actress Taraji P. Henson, the founder of the Boris Lawrence Henson Foundation, an organization promoting mental health, said, “We in the African American community — we don’t deal with mental health issues; We don’t even talk about it” (Shen-Berro). Henson addressed the Congressional Black Caucus petitioning support for mental health advocacy in the African American community.

Another actor speaking about mental health is Michael B. Jordan. In an interview for Oprah’s *Super Soul Sundays*, Michael B. Jordan confessed to seeking therapy after portraying the character Erik Killmonger in the movie *Black Panther*. Jordan said, “I went to therapy, I started talking to people, started unpacking a little bit...I didn’t have a process for being Killmonger...I just did whatever I felt I needed to do or whatever I felt was right in the moment every step of the way” (Reed). Jordan expressed that he did not have a process for engaging with the trauma of Erik Killmonger, and this resulted in a need for therapy. This thesis is significant because it no longer petitions the actor to simply survive the performances but raises awareness for the difficulties of portraying such roles. Furthermore, it will provide a procedure for the actor to disengage from the grief encountered during their character development process.

In a time where black life is the subject of police brutality and racial discrimination, the purpose of this thesis is to help the African American actor find a way to confront the realities of August Wilson's *King Hedley II* and other works. I will contribute my findings from my rehearsal process and surveys with actors and directors of the season. "Good Grief" provides tactics for the actor to mentally cope with grief and emphasizes how grief impacts performance.

### **Scope and Limitations**

"Good Grief" will unpack the character's relationship to their given circumstances and assess the actor's relationship to grief respective to their character. "Good Grief" contains research on the Magic "If," Given Circumstances, and the "Five Stages of Grief." Practitioners such as Constantin Stanislavski and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross will be examined. Unfortunately, this project will not cover the Euro-American actor's relationship with grief. Though I recognize that grief can be experienced by all actors, I believe that it is important to interrogate the African American actor's relationship with grief during the UofL's "Season of Black Plays." Furthermore, I am not suggesting that the actor must attempt to grieve as a means of character development. I am instead using the five stages of grief to listen and respond to my process as an actor. Grief theory serves as my entry point to self-reflection and more critical self-reflexivity.

### **Method and Organization**

"Good Grief" will assess how the black actor portrays realism onstage when actual social disparities are similar to the given circumstances of the play. To understand the evolvment of the actor's grief, I will use various forms of research. This research will include self-reflexive writing, a comparative-analysis, and surveys. My findings will

not only answer how the actor confronts their grief but will use the results to develop a process to disengage.

In the beginning, I unpack my discoveries through self-reflection or what African Studies Professor, D. Soyini Madison terms as the “labor of self-reflexivity.” In Madison’s article, “The Labor of Reflexivity,” she stated that reflexivity is a viable method for performers to conduct research by way of their personal experience, which encompasses the data in this thesis. Madison stated that “the ‘broadly defined’ understanding of reflexivity is what Charlotte Aull Davies (1999) describes as a ‘turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference” (qtd. in Madison 131). Self-reflexivity requires one to return to personal experiences using deep critical thought as the inspiration for creative work.

Ethnographer, Tami Spry who wrote the article “A ‘Performative-I’ Copresence: Embodying the Ethnographic Turn in Performance,” said “a performative-I positionality emphasizes this critical potential of dominant cultural narratives deployed upon bodies by retelling those narratives from the body subjected/assigned to those narratives” (Spry 243). Spry suggested that by using the dialogical “I”, the writer or performer is empowered to use their voices to tell their narratives. Therefore, I will be using my self-reflexive voice as an African American woman to unpack my process of portraying Tonya.

Next, I will compare the “Five Stages of Grief” of Tonya in *King Hedley II* to myself during the rehearsal process. This comparative analysis will provide examples of grief from the script and throughout my journal, which is an integral part of the graduate actor’s work throughout the rehearsal process for university productions.

Lastly, I will survey the participants of the “Season of Black Plays.” I will survey the African American actors of this year’s season examining how they dealt with grief. I will also survey all of the directors to evaluate how they aided the actors through their grief. The surveys confirm that it is possible to experience grief while performing and offers the director’s response to the actor’s grief. Through analysis, I will answer the research question: How does the black actor portray realism onstage when actual social disparities are similar to the given circumstances of the play? As such, the following chapters encompass this thesis: Chapter One: Grief and the Actor; Chapter Two: What Others Have Said; Chapter Three: Building the Emotional Architecture; Chapter Four: I’m Grieving; Conclusion.

Chapter One introduces the idea that grief directly affects performers onstage, particularly African Americans who are performing works rooted in the racial and social trauma of the United States. This chapter examines the theme of the theatre season and argues that there is not a process for releasing the character for the African American actor asked to portray these traumas. This problem leads to the research question: How does the black actor portray realism onstage when actual social disparities are similar to the given circumstances of the play? Following, will be a discussion of why this topic is pertinent to this day and time. The next section entails the scope and limitations of this topic. The last portion provides information on the methodology and organizational pattern of this study. Ultimately, this project will seek to discover a process for the actor to engage and disengage with grief.

Chapter Two is a literature review comprised of the following sections: acting theory, black mental health, and grief theory. This chapter introduces the research of

theatre practitioner, Constantin Stanislavski, who introduces the idea of the imagination, the Magic “If”, and the given circumstance. Following Stanislavski is a brief discourse on the stigma of mental health in the black community. The last section presents Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s “Five Stages of Grief” or the grief cycle, as well as the cultural criticisms of the cycle. These claims will help me understand the foundations of the imagination, given circumstances, black mental health, and grief.

Chapter Three describes how I built the emotional architecture of a character from this grief. The first section explores history using black feminist criticism to understand black motherhood in the United States. Using critical race theory, the second section unpacks the history of Pittsburgh in the 1980s and the racial trauma of the United States through the deaths of Emmett Till and Mike Brown. Chapter Three will demonstrate how the playwright’s given circumstances sometimes mirror America’s history.

Chapter Four offers a comparative analysis of Tonya’s grief in respect to the actor’s grief. Furthermore, this chapter surveys actors and directors about their experience with performing or directing a play rooted in the historical trauma of the United States. Lastly, this thesis will conclude with my findings collected through self-reflexivity, comparative analysis, and surveys. I will also explain the significance of my findings and its relevancy today. Finally, this chapter will include future research as it relates to the performance of trauma. An appendix will follow the conclusion, offering a process entitled “The Disengagement Cycle,” which introduces strategies for the actor to release their grief.

## CHAPTER TWO: WHAT OTHERS HAVE SAID

### **Section One: The Actor's Imagination**

An actor who is portraying a character that is grieving can also grieve simultaneously about the character's given circumstances, which can affect the actor's respective character development and the mental health of the actor. This thesis particularly examines the African American actor's response to the given circumstances. The given circumstances, developed by Constantin Stanislavski, are "the historical and social research as well as whatever the director and designers of the production have decided" (Carnicke 14). This thesis creates discourse about the given circumstances and the Magic "If" which are foundational principles in the Stanislavski System. Stanislavski said, "there is no such thing as actuality on the stage...the aim of the actor should be to use his technique to turn the play into a theatrical reality. In this process imagination plays by far the greatest part" (Stanislavski 59). Indeed, there is no such thing as actuality on stage.

Furthermore, he claimed, "During every moment we are on the stage, during every moment of the development of the action of the play, we must be aware of the external circumstances which surround us" (Stanislavski 69). The given circumstances and Magic "If" of the Constantin Stanislavski System of Acting does not acknowledge that the African American actor's response to this system might be shaped by personal or observed experiences rooted in the racial trauma of the United States.

Constantin Stanislavski "...became the first practitioner in the twentieth century to articulate systematic actor training..." (Carnicke 4). Today, theatre practitioners whether they believe in the Stanislavski System or not, often use the given circumstances and the Magic "If" as tools for character development. Sharon Carnicke, a current practitioner and teacher of the Stanislavski System stated, "The System values an actor's capacity to treat fictional circumstances as if real, to visualize the details of a character's world specifically, and to daydream or fantasise about the events of the play" (Carnicke 11). Stanislavski is the first theatre artist to publish a cohesive system of acting, which is the foundation of most theatre techniques. The system articulates a process for the actor to actively engage with their imagination.

However, the Stanislavski System is not the only system of acting. In fact, there are several theatre practitioners who have developed processes to aid the actor with character development. Founders of "Method Acting" such as Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner were a few of the actor trainers who either rebuilt or refined his work. David Krasner, who served on the editorial advisory board for Stanislavski studies and former pupil of Stella Adler, said:

the Method combines Stanislavsky's<sup>2</sup> techniques and the work of his pupil Eugene Vakhtangov for the purpose of understanding and effectively performing a role. Although there are many instructors, directors and actors who have contributed to its development, three Method acting teachers are behavioered as having set the standard of its success: Lee Strasberg (1901–82), Stella Adler (1901–92), and Sanford Meisner (1905–97). (Krasner 143).

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see Moore. Constantin Stanislavski's last name is also spelt Stanislavsky.

These three artists are regarded as the pillar of the system that rebuilt or refined the work of Stanislavski. Krasner added:

...For Strasberg, the essence of acting is psychological; resources abound in the actor's memory. For Adler, the essence of acting is sociological; actors draw from the given circumstances of the play. However, Ellen Burstyn, who studied with both, remarked: 'Stella stresses imagination and Lee stresses reality. You use Stella's imagination to get to Lee's reality. They are finally talking about the same thing' (quoted in Flint 1992). For Adler, the building blocks of acting are discovered in the imagination and are arranged according to the play's given circumstances and the exigencies of physical actions (Krasner 155).

While Strasberg, Adler, and Meisner created "method acting," a practice that deviates from the Stanislavski System, they still argued that the given circumstances and imagination were the sources of inspiration for the actor. These tools are the foundation for the actor's character development. Likewise, Stanislavski wrote:

"Imagination and Awareness go hand-in-hand for the actor—and for the ordinary mortal who learns to use his awareness and imagination, life becomes more interesting and exciting...When you give your character a past, present and future, you make him real to the audience" (Stanislavski 19).

Failing to acknowledge pasts that are impacted by racial trauma of the character's respective background can be problematic for the actor.

Stanislavski "believed that there are three basic drivers behind creativity: 'mind'(for analysis and understanding), 'will'(for control) and 'feeling'(which fosters passionate and zestful relationships with the characters we create)" (Carnicke 22). The Magic "if" is the



result of this system of acting and challenges the actor to imagine themselves in the given circumstances of the character. The Magic “if” is a vehicle for the actor to respond through the mind, body, will or feeling.

Dr. Baron Kelly, who was also the director of my thesis role production, is “among the first Black practitioners to author books on acting” (Luckett and Shaffer 7). There are not many African Americans who have published books on the study of acting. In Kelly’s book *An Actor’s Task*, he stated:

Because creative impulses are not subject to our direct command, we have to lure them out indirectly, using Stanislavski’s “Magic If”. The imagination is explored through three sources, personal experience, observed experience, and spontaneous creativity (Kelly, xvii).

Instead of the ‘mind’ and ‘will’ that Stanislavski mentioned, Kelly said that the basic drivers are personal experience, observed experience, and spontaneous creativity; these experiences aid the actor in developing the character. Kelly acknowledged and recognized that the personal experience and narratives of the actor are important to the actor’s creativity.

Likewise, in an interview with Stella Adler on “The Reality of Doing” she said:

The background life of the character will be made up of the social, cultural, political, historical, and geographical situation in which the author places him. The character must be understood within the framework of the character’s own time and situation.

Through the proper use of craft, the actor will see the differences of social, historical, and cultural environment between himself and the character. Through his craft he will

be able to translate these difficulties and use them to arrive at the character (qtd. in Krasner 153).

Indeed, there is a distinction between the actor and character; one must acknowledge how the social, cultural, political, historical, and geographical situation contributes to the character development. For the black actor required to revisit and unpack traumas associated with black lives, there is a residue left in the soul of the actor. Both Kelly and Adler understood the pertinence of personal and observed experiences in the actor's character development process.

Some African American theatre practitioners have critiqued Kelly's work, believing that his studies are not rooted in Afrocentric principles. In *Black Acting Methods*, Sharell Luckett and Tia M. Shaffer wrote: "[E]ven when Black American acting teachers Susan Batson and Baron Kelly published their books on acting, their thoughts were firmly rooted in a Eurocentric thought-stream of embodiment" (Luckett and Shaffer 7). Luckett and Shaffer argued that Kelly's book is rooted in Eurocentric principles but emphasize that he is African American. One questions how the thoughts of an African American male would be rooted in Eurocentric principles; the dichotomy of Kelly serving as a theatre artist and African American male are not independent. Therefore, he does not deny his blackness when serving as a writer, his blackness contributes to his work. Stanislavski is one of the founders of modern theatre; no matter the race or ethnicity, most artists were influenced by his principles. Instead, Kelly's acting principles are rooted in personal experience, observed experience, and spontaneous creativity; all of which are rooted in the creativity of the actor.

## Section Two: Mental Health in the Black Community

Stanislavski encouraged the actor to:

try to always to begin working from the inside, both on the factual and imaginary parts of a play and its setting. Put life into all the imagined circumstances and actions until you have completely satisfied your sense of truth, and until you have awakened a sense of faith in the reality of your sensations. This process is what we call justification of a part (Stanislavski 141).

If the justification of a part requires the actor to confront past circumstances inflicted in a specific form of racial trauma such as Tonya in *King Hedley II*, and the actor does not have a process to confront these traumas, the mental health of the actor is compromised.

Though performances onstage lend itself to the imaginary world that the playwright creates for its audience, an offstage character exists for the black actor/human being. This offstage character is racism. On racism, David R. Williams and Ruth Morris wrote the article “Racism and Mental Health: the African American experience.”

Williams and Morris state: “We use the term racism to refer to an organized system that leads to the subjugation of some human population groups relative to others” (Williams and Morris 244). Several articles have been published on the ways that racism and perpetuated stereotypes affect black mental health. Again, “Good Grief” does not suggest that performing certain roles affects your mental health or causes mental illness.

However, this thesis does place mental health into significant conversation with blackness. From such conversations, implications can be made on the effects of portraying characters whose given circumstances are rooted in racial trauma.

According to the article “Police killings and their spillover effects on the mental health of black Americans”:

Police killings of unarmed black Americans might compromise mental health among other black Americans through various mechanisms, including heightened perceptions of systemic racism and lack of fairness, loss of social status and self-regard, increased fear of victimisation and greater mortality expectations, increased vigilance, diminished trust in social institutions, reactions of anger, activation of prior traumas, and communal bereavement (qtd. in Bor et. al 302).

Studies reveal that police brutality might not only cause mental trauma but communal grief amongst the community affected. Whether a person is directly connected to the victim by way of familial relations or friendships, “these events might have spillover effects on the mental health of people not directly affected” (Bor et. al 302). One can trace the same communal mourning caused by police brutality back to the 1960s Civil Rights Era. As of today:

Black Americans are nearly three times more likely than are white Americans to be killed by police—accounting for more than 40% of victims of all police killings nationwide—and five times more likely than are white Americans to be killed unarmed (Bor et. al 302).

To live with such awareness leads to fear and anxiety in the black community. Such anxiety towards the reduced value of black life directly harms black mothers.

In an article titled, “Anticipated Negative Police-Youth Encounters and Depressive Symptoms among Pregnant African American Women: A Brief Report,” scholars found that “the widely publicized violent encounters between police and African

American youth have unknown consequences for the emotional and mental health of pregnant African American women” (Jackson et.al 259). The consequences of these violent encounters further emphasize the character Tonya’s resistance to bring another life into this world. Scholars argue, “Concerns about the future safety and well-being of children are universal stressors for expectant mothers; however, historical and contemporary police violence targeting African American youth present an added burden for pregnant African American women [1–5]” (Jackson 260). Black mothers anticipate the grief of losing a child at the hands of violence whether it is by fellow members in the community or law enforcement.

Attica Scott, member of the Kentucky House of Representatives, recalled her experience as a mother of teenagers affected by the justice system. Scott said:

I am a single mom of two teenagers, both black, one female and one male, and we have to have “the talk” more regularly than I would have ever imagined. In 2013, we had this conversation after the Trayvon Martin verdict. My son was 17. How does a mother of a black son tell him that his life has value or that there is any respect for him or his community when you see pictures of Michael Brown’s body inside of yellow police tape and no one has bothered to fully cover his corpse? How dehumanizing (Scott).

Scott challenged law enforcement to consider the detriment not only on a mother’s mental health, but her African American children who survived in spite of the racial injustices of America. Scott concluded, “We are weak in this community and in this country when it comes to having honest conversations about race. We are not post-racial”

(Scott). Not only is it difficult to have honest conversations about race, it is difficult to have honest conversations about black mental health.

Williams and Morris argued “The age-old proverb that ‘sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me’ does not ring true for the effect that believing hurtful words and negative cultural images can have on an individual’s health” (William and Morris 225). Negative cultural images were not promoted in this year’s “Season of Black Plays”; however, the words or “text” of the playwright can potentially evoke sensations that result from performing racial trauma.

Few articles discuss how the actor’s mental health is affected by playing particular roles whose given circumstances are rooted in the racial trauma of the United States. However, actor Michael B. Jordan discussed the mental challenges of playing the villain Erik Killmonger in the movie *Black Panther*:

Of course, [the Killmonger character is] an extreme, exaggerated version of the African diaspora from the African-American perspective, so to be able to take that kind of pain and rage and all those emotions that Erik kind of represents from being black and brown here in America ... that was something I didn’t take lightly (Reed).

Jordan discussed his process of grappling with the ambiguity of the imagination and reality when the screenwriter’s text is rooted in racial trauma. Without developing a process for the actor to engage with these traumas, the actor is subject to devise their own coping mechanisms or worse the actor does not devise a method of dealing with the emotional burden of a role. Michael B. Jordan expressed that he did not have a process for engaging with the trauma of Erik Killmonger, and this resulted in a need for therapy.

According to Williams and Morris, “Several lines of evidence suggest that the internalization of cultural stereotypes by stigmatized groups can create expectations, anxieties and reactions that can adversely affect social and psychological functioning” (Williams and Morris 255). Such internalization of how it feels to portray cultural stereotypes to predominately white audiences, can adversely affect the black actor. In the address to the Congressional Black Caucus, actress Taraji P. Henson spoke on mental health concerns in the African-American community. Henson said, “We need each other. This is me reaching across the table, trying to lend a helping hand in the best way I can...” (Shen-Berro). This thesis seeks to lend the same helping hand to the black actor who carries their grief in silence. In an academic setting where the actor is encouraged to articulate their process of character development, they should also articulate their process for releasing the character.

### **Section Three: Grief**

In order to understand the term “grief” and the way it is used in this discourse, one must examine what psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross introduced as “The Five Stages of Grief.” Kubler-Ross is credited for creating the “Five Stages of Grief” or the grief cycle associated with near-death experiences. Kubler-Ross’s book *On Death and Dying*, explores the five stages of grief relating to hospital patients who are struggling with terminal illnesses. She argued that the patients experience five stages consecutively: 1.) denial and isolation; 2.) anger; 3.) bargaining; 4. depression; 5.) acceptance.

In the book *African American Grief*, authors Paul Rosenblatt and Beverly Wallace stated:

The standard views of grief do not speak at all to how African American grief might be shaped by and responsive to racism, economic disadvantage, the substantial difference in life expectancy of many African American families, and, for some African Americans, the powerful influence of drugs and community devastation (Rosenblatt and Wallace, xiii).

Wallace argued that Kubler-Ross' grief cycle does not acknowledge how race impacts the grieving process. Rosenblatt and Wallace created a discourse about the given circumstances of a human affected by grief and how these given circumstances potentially alter a person's response to the grief cycle. By providing this counter claim, these authors are acknowledging the voice of a group of people that are often left out of the conversation.

Rosenblatt and Wallace argued that "most scholars who study grief are, like the first author of this book, white" (Rosenblatt and Wallace, xii). Rosenblatt and Wallace believed that race directly influenced the type of research conducted between ethnic groups:

Everyone gains when we learn about the grief experiences of people in a group that has been neglected...[Grieving] is also about the collective loss from the ongoing oppression, and it is also about terrible things that have happened in the African American community as people try to cope with their many losses or, in a sense, give up on trying to cope (Rosenblatt and Wallace, xx).

The way that African Americans cope with grief has a direct effect on the grief cycle or the stages in which they experience grief. For example, "for an African American who is aware of the shorter life expectancy, there may be a heavy burden of anger and



resentment entangled in grief” (Rosenblatt and Wallace 6). Whereas Kubler-Ross isolated “anger” as a singular emotion or phase of the grief cycle, Rosenblatt and Wallace suggested that resentment is a category associated with this stage of grief. Again, these emotions are often a result of the given circumstances. Unfortunately, “racism leads directly or indirectly to greater poverty, a less healthful environment, poorer health, fewer physician visits, poorer pregnancy care, poorer nutrition, and poorer access to health care” (Rosenblatt and Wallace 1). None of the health patients that Kubler-Ross studied were identified as African American, and each patient had access to healthcare.

Rosenblatt and Wallace “offers an analysis of grief as described by 26 African Americans who had experienced the death of someone important in their lives” (Rosenblatt and Wallace, xii). These authors intentionally focus on the grief of African Americans with hopes of offering a perspective from a group often disregarded.

Rosenblatt and Wallace argued:

Until African American life expectancy has moved up to the level of Euro-American life expectancy, until African Americans can stop feeling the deaths in their community are caused by racism and discrimination, until the economic situation of African Americans and Euro-Americans is identical, and until African Americans no longer experience racism and discrimination, those who are compassionate about grief need to be compassionately interested in ending racism and discrimination” (Rosenblatt and Wallace 171).

Rosenblatt and Wallace suggested that factors such as discrimination directly affect the given circumstances associated with grief. The life expectancy for Euro-Americans is

significantly longer than African Americans. August Wilson's *King Hedley II* reflects this societal issue in The Hill District of Pittsburgh in 1985.

As Rosenblatt and Wallace mentioned, the varying life expectancy caused by racism and discrimination affects the African American community. Different forms of literature have been published from those interested in terminating racism and discrimination. These forms of literature explicitly and implicitly offer commentary on the current state of discrimination in America. For example, Randall C. Webber published *A Balm in Gilead: Eulogies of Comfort*, a compilation of eulogies delivered by prominent members of the African American community for the funerals caused by acts of racial discrimination.

Most of the eulogists in Webber's book are members of the Louisville community. However, Webber also provided eulogies delivered by national figures, such as former President Barack Obama. In 2015, then President Barack Obama gave a eulogy for former senator and pastor Clementa Pinckney, who was one of nine individuals murdered by a young white man in Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Barack Obama said, "For too long, we've been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present" (Webber 124). Obama is alluding to the fact that it is easy to become blind to the ways that injustice shapes society because it was considered normal. It is the job of the people to acknowledge the effects of these injustices and create ways to move forward. As such, Rosenblatt and Wallace charged Kubler-Ross to acknowledge how these injustices affect the grief cycle.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler responded to the criticism of the "five stages of grief" in their book, *On Grief and Grieving*. The authors later argued that:

The stages have evolved since their introduction, and they have been very misunderstood over the past three decades. They were never meant to tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives (Kubler-Ross and Kessler 7).

Kubler-Ross was not offering the “five stages of grief” as a means to limit the grieving process of the patients; she offered a system for the patient and caretaker to simply articulate their grief.

In the article, “Cautioning Health-Care Professionals: Bereaved Persons Are Misguided Through the Stages of Grief,” authors Margaret Stroebe, Henk Schut, and Kathrin Boerner respond: “[In] the midst of such emotional complexity as characterizes the bereavement experience, the stages [of grief] offer something to hold on to, both descriptively and prescriptively” (Stroebe et al. 467). Stroebe, Schut, and Boerner further suggested that people simply need a system for handling their specific emotional responses to grief.

Likewise, Constantin Stanislavski yearned to offer a system for actors to assess their processes towards creating performances. Constantin Stanislavski wrote, “The System is a guide. Open and read. The System is a handbook, not a philosophy.” (Carnicke 16). Stanislavski was offering a way for the actor to engage with their imagination and given circumstances. The given circumstances and Magic “If” extrapolated from the Constantin Stanislavski System of Acting or the given circumstances of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross patients does not acknowledge that the African

American actor's response to these systems might be shaped by personal or observed experiences rooted in the racial trauma of the United States.

This literature review seeks to challenge these foundational works and argumentative scholarship by asking and answering the following questions: How does a black actor address a play's given circumstances that are influenced by race? Does s/he undergo the stages of grief due to cultural conditions of the time period? If so, how does the black actor engage with the given circumstances and grief and progress to the next work?

### CHAPTER THREE: BUILDING THE EMOTIONAL ARCHITECTURE

The following section describes the construction of what director Baron Kelly calls the “emotional architecture” of Tonya. The materials the actor uses to manufacture the emotional architecture of a character are the historical and social research of the given circumstances of the play. It is the actor’s responsibility to act as the dramaturg of the world that he or she wants to create for the audience. Stanislavski said, “We are asked to interpret the life of human souls from all over the world. An actor creates not only the life of his times but that of the past and future as well” (Stanislavski 208). In order to create the past and future of the character, the actor must understand the character’s relationship to the time period in which they exist. In African history and symbolism, the practice of returning to past experiences is termed as “Sankofa.” Sankofa means to:

learn from or build on the past. Pick up the gems of the past. [It is a] constant reminder that the past is not at all shameful and that the future may profitably be built on aspects of the past. Indeed, there must be movement with the times but as the forward march proceeds, the gems must be picked up from behind and carried forward on the march (Temple 17).

The “constant reminder” to pick up the gems of the past and use it for futurity was partly the goal of the UofL Theatre Arts Department’s “Season of Black Plays.” The Sankofa symbol was repeated on the promotional flyer ushering its audience members and participants of the season to pick up the gems of the past to create stories for the present.

In order to “Sankofa,” I acknowledged the history of what it meant to be an African American woman in the 1980s and other mirroring historical periods with efforts that this research will support future work in the study of grief and acting. Stella Adler said, “The background life of the character will be made up of the social, cultural, political, historical, and geographical situation in which the author places him...”(qtd. in Krasner 153). Chapter Three will analyze the social, political, and historical given circumstances of Pittsburgh and the United States. This section offers the historical research in efforts to help truthfully create and build the emotional architecture of Tonya.

### **Social Circumstances**

Using black feminist thought and criticism, I analyzed Tonya’s resistance in August Wilson’s *King Hedley II*. In 1990, Patricia Hill Collins published *Black Feminist Thought* as a response to the oppressions, social injustices, and stereotypes of black women. Collins stated that “the overarching purpose of U.S. Black feminist thought is also to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it” (Collins 22). *Black Feminist Thought* provides the support and perspective that justifies Tonya’s resistance to societal views of black womanhood and motherhood during the period in which *King Hedley II* is set and when *Black Feminist Thought* is initially published.

Collins wrote:

In the context of a sexual politics that aims to control Black women’s sexuality and fertility, African American women struggle to be good mothers. In contrast, motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women’s

empowerment. These tensions foster a continuum of responses. Some women view motherhood as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression (Collins 176).

From my perspective, Tonya does not view motherhood as a burdensome condition that stifles her creativity or exploits her labor. She was not burdened by the oppression that she faces as a mother but is instead burdened by the oppression that Natasha and her unborn child could face, and she does not want to continue the cycle. Hence, Tonya suggested that she does not want to be a partner in her own oppression.

The given circumstances of the character Tonya are as follows: African American Woman, thirty-five years old, married to King for a few years, pregnant, and parent to teenage mother Natasha. Considering these circumstances, Tonya says, “I don’t understand what to do, how to be a mother. You either love too much or don’t love enough. Don’t seem like there’s no middle ground” (Wilson 40). Tonya vulnerably expresses her confusions about motherhood admitting that though society says that the woman is supposed to understand motherhood innately, she does not. Collins explained:

All of the adult mothers worked hard to support them, and were deeply disappointed with their daughters, but for different reasons. Lower-income mothers felt their pregnant daughters had failed them. Until the pregnancy, this group had hoped their daughters would do better with their lives than they had (Collins 186).

Tonya is crying out to King that she failed Natasha. This failure is not only disheartening but produces more resistance for Tonya to have a child. Tonya is afraid of failing yet

another offspring. An *Ebony* magazine article dated March 1985 entitled, “What Must Be Done About Children Having Children” written by Dorothy Height, provided a direct account of a black mother’s response to teenage mothers. During the 1980s, Dorothy Height was the president of the National Council of Negro Women, whose mission was to advance the economic position of African American women and families. Dorothy Height said that black women struggle to raise their children because they often have to raise them alone. Height stated, “With every single mother struggling alone in poverty; the black community becomes weaker” (Height 78). Understanding this struggle, Tonya does not want to put another adolescent into a cycle of conflict.

Though King desperately wants to leave a legacy behind through a child, Tonya feels that carrying the legacy is a burden that she is not yet ready to face. As Collins puts it, “Coping with unwanted pregnancies and being unable to care for one’s children is oppressive” (Collins 195). The ambivalence that Tonya feels towards motherhood contradicts societal norms of women being caretakers.

The same discourse about motherhood and sexual politics is a conversation today. The *Wall Street Journal* published an article by Jason Riley entitled “Let’s Talk About the Black Abortion Rate.” In this article, Riley discussed the alarming amount of African American babies born each year (Riley). *Eternal World Television Network* interviewed Pastor Clenard Howard Childress Jr. who responded stating, “the most dangerous place for an African American is the womb...Over 20 million African Americans have been killed by abortions and I am grieved over that” (Eternal World Television Network). Again, the African American male provided opinionated commentary on what the black woman chooses to do with her body and their potential children.



In June 2018, journalist Yamani Hernandez responded to the conversations of black women and abortions in her article entitled “Black Women’s Abortions Are Not Black on Black Crime.” Hernandez’s article is in response to *Fox News* journalist Jason Riley who said abortions are “black violent behavior.” Hernandez argued,

...trying to coerce Black women into continuing their pregnancies or expanding families is advancing white supremacist notions about what Black women are here for. Why is it so offensive to imagine that every Black woman in America may not have the desire or means to have or expand their family? We have been coerced enough. Black liberation is not measured in numbers of Black births; it is measured by thriving, autonomous Black lives (Hernandez 1).

Tonya’s husband King is trying to coerce her into having another child. I believe that King assumes that as the woman, Tonya is not only supposed to know how to be a mother but that she should be a mother. Tonya’s fearlessness to resist marital expectations are important to note while building this character. Through the arguments of Patricia Collins, Dorothy Height, and Yamani Hernandez, I found empathy for Tonya’s resistance. Though I am not a mother, I am affected by the comments of Jason Riley and Pastor Cleonard Howard Childress Jr. who are rather opinionated about the woman’s choice of how she governs her body. August Wilson created a timeless character whose strong points of view reflect societal realities.

## Political Circumstances

Not only does Tonya resist bringing a child into this world because of the ambivalence of motherhood, but I believe that the political and environmental conditions of her world also caused concern. In a study on violence of the Hill District between the 1960s and 90s, reporters found that:

African Americans are at a much greater risk of homicide victimization than whites... Males are between four and six times more likely to be homicide victims than females. Males accounted for 81 percent of all homicide victims within Allegheny County, and at least 85 percent of victims in the City of Pittsburgh (Dalton 10).

African Americans are more likely to die at the hands of violence more than Euro-Americans. A mother's inability to protect her child because of their respective environment is oppressive. Tonya says, "I'm not raising no kid to have somebody shoot him. To have his friends shoot him. To have the police shoot him" (Wilson 41). Tonya anticipates the grief of losing a child to the violence of the Hill District of Pittsburgh in 1985.

August Wilson's *King Hedley II* also takes place in the post-civil rights United States in a community marginalized by a lack of economic progress. The lack of economic advancement directly affects African Americans as their struggle for employment and equal opportunity is vastly different from white Americans. The gap of equal opportunity widens under the presidential leadership of Ronald Reagan. Specific reforms under Reagan's programming such as (AFDC) Aid to Families with Dependent Children significantly changed the economic development of the black household. The

inherent poverty led to crime in the black community, and the incarceration rate for black males was substantially higher than any other race or gender. Using the given circumstances of Reagan's America, August Wilson fashions a play that speaks to the untold struggle of the African Americans that this government system directly affects.

The tension between the characters Tonya and King is not merely the result of their opposing ideals, but the scarcity of opportunity and advancement for blacks. Tonya, the only legally employed adult in the Hedley household works every day for an insurance company. She tells the character Elmore, who is a street hustler, "I'm going down here to pull these cards for the insurance people. That's the only way I pay my bills" (Wilson 81). Tonya has no other means for income. She is the parent of a 17-year-old teen-mother, and she herself recently discovers that that she is pregnant at age of thirty-five.

Ideally, Tonya benefits from government assistance programs, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The AFDC is "meant to provide an economic cushion for families with young children (under the age of 18) which cannot adequately support their members" (St. Pierre 330). Programming such as the AFDC helps families living in poverty support their children. During the 1980s:

the poverty rate in 1984 among Black children under 18 years was 46.5%, compared to 16.5% for White children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984, p. 3).

Also, in 1984, fully 51.7% of all Black female-headed households lived below the poverty level (St. Pierre 331).

Not only is Tonya the head of the household, she only has one source of income.

Reagan's administration cut the funding of the AFDC by roughly two million dollars "to

refocus AFDC on its original goal...to serve as temporary aid where the resources for complete self-support did not exist” (St. Pierre 332). If Tonya did benefit from the Aid to Family with Dependent Children programming, the budget cut would have caused a strain on her ability to take care of Natasha, especially considering that Tonya is the only parent with legal employment.

Tonya says to King, “When I had Natasha, I was as happy as I could be...I had something nobody could take away from me” (Wilson 39). Tonya’s lines often suggest that she grew up with very little. She later says she “spent 35 years without things and has enough” (Wilson 90). The economic difficulties of Reagan’s America, coupled with the hard-stricken society of Pittsburgh, influences her decision to abort her current pregnancy. Tonya argues that she “couldn’t give [Natasha] what she needed” (Wilson 40). The actor must empathize with the political and environmental circumstances in which Tonya becomes pregnant. The time is 1985, the homicide rate of Pittsburgh is extremely high, and the poverty level for black people is significantly higher than whites.

### **Historical Circumstances**

I must acknowledge the history of what it means to be an African American woman in the 1980s and other mirroring historical periods with efforts that this research will support future work in the study of grief and acting. During Tonya’s monologue, she explains to King that she does not want to have another baby. Tonya gives a rather vivid description of the dead black bodies that lay in the morgue in the care of the undertaker:

This one so big and fat if he fall off the table it take six men to pick him up. That one aint got no cheek. That one’s eyes won’t stay closed. The other one’s been dead so long, he got maggots coming out of his nose. The family can’t pay for

that one. That one's mother won't go home. The other one...I ain't goin through that. I ain't having this baby and I ain't gotta explain it to nobody (Wilson 42).

Tonya described the physical conditions of black men who are now dead and under the care of the undertaker. She said that there are too many bodies for the undertaker to remember. Kelly's note during the rehearsal process was to see these men in my mind's eye or imagination. I was tasked to create the imagery for the audience so that they see what Tonya's sees when she gives the line.

In order to create the imagery of these black men, I studied Mamie Till-Mobley. Mamie Till-Mobley is the mother of the late Emmett Till. Emmett Till was:

a 14-year-old Black boy who allegedly flirted with a White woman and was brutalized and killed by a mob of White males, is one example of how violence was used to ensure that Black men did not move beyond their social location relative to Whites—particularly in encounters involving White women that could be construed as sexual or intimate (Aymer 3).

The death of Emmett Till is an example of how racial tensions in America caused many deaths of young black men. Emmett Till's death occurred in 1955. However, it is still regarded as a traumatizing experience in America. I will use Critical Race Theory to examine how the intersectionality of race and oppression affect the minority, which is relevant to the given circumstances of the character Tonya.

Critical Race Theory:

has established that the liberation of Black people in America cannot occur without interrogating and analyzing how the horrific reality of enslavement, centuries of discrimination, and unequal treatment have affected this group. Critical discussions and analyses of racial oppression must be located in a historical context to understand the precursors to manifestations of contemporary social injustice (Aymer 374).

Samuel Aymer created critical discourse about how the Civil Rights Movement and #BlackLivesMatter foreshadow contemporary injustices. Critical Race Theory suggests that the accusation of Emmett Till was solely because of his race. Aymer said, “A fundamental question that can be raised regarding this form of racial violence against Black men is: What was the role of law enforcement and the government in 1955 when Emmett Till was murdered?” (Aymer 368) The government of Pittsburgh mirrored the violence of 1955.

Another analysis of racial oppression is the documentary of The “Untold Story of Emmett Luis Till.” This documentary included a direct account of Emmett Till’s murder through the lens of his mother Mamie Till-Mobley. Emmett Till is the first young man documented in America’s history to have a public viewing of acts of violence committed upon the black body for all spectators to see. Mother Mamie Till-Mobley provided the imagery of his body via descriptions such as:

I saw that his tongue had been choked out and was lying on his chin. This eye was out and was lying about midway to cheek. I looked at this eye and it was gone. I

looked at the bridge of his nose and it looked like someone had taken a meat chopper and chopped it (Beauchamp).

Mamie Till-Mobley's account of her son's body aided me in creating the imagery for the moment that Tonya speaks of when she describes the men in the undertaker's care.

Mamie Till-Mobley provided a visceral account that helps me to not only imagine the bodies of the six black men but helps me empathize of Tonya's resistance to motherhood.

Mamie Till-Mobley also described her process of grieving and overcoming this loss, particularly when she viewed her son's body at his funeral. She said, "my father was on the side of me...and I shrugs them and said turn me a loose, I got a job to do and I don't got time to be fainting now" (Beauchamp). The fortitude and strength of this mother is the beginning of a seemingly unending cycle of mothers who are grieving their sons to senseless acts of violence. Mamie Till-Mobley is my entry point to viscerally understanding the six men that August Wilson describes in Tonya's monologue.

Furthermore, Tonya paints the picture of the fictional character Little Buddy Will, who is a teen killed in a drive-by shooting. She says:

[His mother] was waiting for him to come home and they bring her a corpse. Say, "Come down and make the identification. Is this your son?" Got a tag on his toe say "John Doe."... Somebody come up and tell her, "Miss So-and-So, your boy got shot." (Wilson 41).

Tonya described the pain that Little Buddy Will's mother endured when the cop arrives to tell her to make the identification of her son. Again, these are the circumstances created by the playwright. However, American history repeatedly tells the story of "Little Buddy Will's mother" and many mothers comparable to her.

A parent similar to Little Buddy Will's mother is Lesley McSpadden. Lesley McSpadden is the mother of Michael Brown or Mike Brown. Mike Brown was an 18-year-old African American male fatally shot by a police officer in 2014. The *Washington Post* provided footage of Lesley McSpadden after hearing the acquittal of the police officer who murdered her son. Mike Brown is one of the faces of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The footage from the *Washington Post* offered a first-hand account of how police brutality affects black women and its surrounding community.

Lesley McSpadden's physical gestures mirrored Tonya's description of Little Buddy Will's mother upon discovering his death. Lesley McSpadden's "knees start to get weak, she shaking her head, she don't wanna hear it" (Wilson 41). Soon after, Ms. McSpadden begins to cry out in pain and outrage for the loss of her young son. The cry and outrage of the black woman is all too familiar in American history. The labor of researching America's list of black women who grieve over their children abused by the justice system is an extensive task. In fact, the limited accounts discussed in this section do not attest to the black women who fought for justice for their sons, sexual reproductive rights, equal pay, and more.

The weight of the decision to keep or terminate her pregnancy coupled with the historical climate of Pittsburgh is a great burden for Tonya to carry. It is an equally heavy burden on the body of the actor who has to inhabit this character. After I have unpacked the character's relationship to the past, it is my duty as actor to use the past to create the present onstage. I return to Stanislavski, who charged the actor to remain aware of the external circumstances of the play (Stanislavski 69). I begin to think of how the external circumstances of America also affect my storytelling. It is almost "as if" Stanislavski asks



the actor to maintain what pioneering African American sociologist and historian, W.E.B. DuBois, termed as a double consciousness:

“Double-consciousness” is a concept in social philosophy referring, originally, to a source of inward “twoness” putatively experienced by African-Americans because of their racialized oppression and disvaluation in a white-dominated society” (Pittman).

The dichotomy of being a black woman and an actor are not independent of one another. Both worlds influence how the black actor inhabits their character. Aymer wrote, “To be male and Black in America means that one must contend with omnipresent occurrences of racial and gender profiling on multiple levels (e.g., being arrested while Black, shopping while Black, driving while Black) of society” (Aymer 3). A black male is burdened with experiences such as various levels of racial profiling. Likewise, the mothers are tasked to keep their sons from the dangers that result from profiling. The historical circumstances of mothers such as Mamie Till-Mobley, Lesley McSpadden, and more who have lost their sons to brutality, exposed the actor portraying Tonya to the realities of what Stanislavski termed as the external world of the play.

The social, political, and historical realities are a heavy burden for the actor portraying Tonya. As such, the actor can potentially become vulnerable to the character’s response to such circumstances. The actor can potentially grieve which affects their respective character development.

## CHAPTER FOUR: I'M GRIEVING

### **Tonya's Grief vis-à-vis Kala's Grief**

The sole purpose of this thesis is to argue that while playing a character that is grieving, the actor is exposed to the character's grief, which can cause the actor to grieve. Though the actor may not share the same experience with grief as the character, he or she is vulnerable to the same phases of the grief cycle. This chapter offers a comparative analysis coupled with self-reflexivity as it relates to the five stages of grief and the character development of Tonya. This chapter also includes surveys conducted with some of the participants of this "Season of Black Plays" and their relationship to grief. During each stage of the grief cycle, I use self-reflexivity to compare Tonya's grief as well as my grief. Each section begins with Tonya's perspective ending with my account.

In order to understand Tonya's grief, I must first preface that although Tonya does lose her husband to gun violence at the end of the play, she of course does not know that this will happen. Tonya experienced anticipatory grief<sup>3</sup>. Tonya grieves for the potential death of the new life that she plans to bring into this world, her husband King, and Little Buddy Will, who lost his life too soon. Knowing how Tonya is potentially grieving, will help the reader understand her relationship to the five stages of grief.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on anticipatory grief, see *Eldridge*. "Anticipatory grief is defined as grief that occurs before death (or another great loss) in contrast to grief after death (conventional grief). Grief doesn't occur in isolation, and often the experience of grief can bring to light memories of other episodes of grief in the past" (Eldridge).

## **Denial**

Denial is the first stage of the grief cycle. According to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, denial is “usually a temporary defense and will soon be replaced by initial acceptance” (Kubler-Ross 35). When receiving terrible news, denial is the first line of defense because it is difficult to come to the terms with the truth. Kubler-Ross also said, “if we are willing to take an honest look at ourselves, it can help us in our own growth and maturity” (Kubler-Ross 43). As such, I took an honest look at my character and myself to unpack the relationship to the first phase of the grief cycle.

I believe that Tonya, however, is not willing to take an honest look at her relationship with King. King is Tonya’s husband and his inability to separate his responsibilities as a husband from his illegal choices causes tension in their relationship. The relationship between Tonya and King is so tense that Tonya denies that King has any part in her decision to have her baby. Tonya says, “King thinks it’s all about him. He thinks he’s the only one in the world. I done told him I ain’t having this baby. He act like he got something to do with it” (Wilson 43). Tonya believes that King does not play a role in her decision to have another child. As Yamini Hernandez said, “trying to coerce Black women into continuing their pregnancies or expanding families is advancing white supremacist notions about what Black women are here for...” (Hernandez 1). Tonya believes that King’s attempt to coerce her into having this child is selfish. Tonya is in denial about his relationship to the child.

During the rehearsal process, I also wrestled with denial. My encounter with the first stage of grief was not a result of tension with a spouse, but a result of an attempt to

avoid the stereotypes of an angry black woman. I did not want to wrongfully portray Tonya as “too angry” or “too harsh” which were my judgements of the character.

Tonya’s first few lines of the play are as follows:

Natasha think she smart. I told her about wearing my clothes. She done took my red blouse over to my mother’s. Got my make-up and everything. She don’t know she on borrowed time with me (Wilson 16).

Tonya is upset with Natasha for wearing her clothes and make-up. During the audience’s first encounter with Tonya she appears frustrated. This frustration could have easily been mistaken for anger. When developing Tonya’s voice and physicality, I intentionally used my higher resonance so that her pitch is softer. When developing Tonya’s physicality, I ensured that her footsteps were soft as well.

Professor Kelly confronted my need to overcome this stage of denial. I was told that my choices did not support the character. He often reminded me that Tonya was nothing like me, and that I should allow the director to act as a guide to assess if my anger or frustration is more than what is supported in the text. I started to ask myself, *what is so wrong with being angry?* Why am I allowing my judgment of a character to prevent me from portraying her truthfully in the rehearsal process? I realized that I was confronting my need that I have to be likable whether that is in a rehearsal process or in life. August Wilson’s characters always seem to make you confront the truth of yourself. By confronting the demon of insecurity so early in the process, I can make room for the confidence that I need to truthfully tell Tonya’s story.

## Anger

The next phase of the grief cycle is anger. Kubler-Ross wrote, “When the first stage of grief cannot be maintained any longer...the next logical question is ‘why me?’” (Kubler-Ross 44). This questioning occurs during the second stage of grief. During this phase, Kubler-Ross charged those dealing with the patient to empathize with them by simply considering their present circumstances. Gregory, a researcher of the grief cycle, explained why anger is an essential part of the cycle. Gregory argued, “it is not healthy to suppress your feelings of anger – it is a natural response – and perhaps, arguably, a necessary one”(Gregory 3). According to Gregory, it was necessary for the patient to have the room to express their rage towards their present circumstance.

Not only is Tonya angry that she is pregnant, she is angry that King refuses to understand her perspective. After a heated argument with King, Tonya confides in King’s mother Ruby about her frustration with King’s response. Tonya repeatedly tries to tell King why she refuses to have another child, but King refuses to accept her decision. Tonya’s anger stems from his unwillingness to support her point of view. Kubler-Ross stated, “The problem here is that few people place themselves in the patient’s position and wonder where this anger might come from. Maybe we too would be angry if all our life activities were interrupted so prematurely” (Kubler-Ross 45). Kubler-Ross charged the person who cares or interacts with the patient to empathize or place themselves in the patient’s shoes. In the context of *King Hedley II*, Tonya is charging other characters, particularly her husband King, to empathize with her circumstances. As an actor, Ross’s point puts greater emphasis on the need for the black actor playing Tonya to empathize with her anger as it relates to social circumstances of the Hill District of Pittsburgh.

Moreover, I also experienced anger during the rehearsal process. I tend to be very critical of my character development during any rehearsal period. As such, I prepared for rehearsals. Preparation meant that I complete my warm-ups prior to my arrival and memorizing my lines for the scenes of focus. One night during the rehearsal, Kelly requested that I adjust the pacing of my monologue. Unfortunately, I was not malleable; I could not make the adjustment without losing my lines. While attempting to adjust the rhythm, I became very frustrated and stopped speaking. For a moment, I gave up, and became very angry with myself that I could not convey the lines that I knew so well. I was angry that I could not adjust to the new demands of the rehearsal process. I was angry that I was showing my flaws versus telling Tonya's story. For some reason, I did not want my cast and crew to see my struggle with my lines. Similarly, Tonya does not want her second child to see her struggle with motherhood.

Kubler-Ross said that anger is essential in the grief cycle; this means that I must give myself and character permission to experience anger. My director said that he always tells the actor when she should pull back. Instead of worrying whether anger takes up too much space in a rehearsal room, I am going to allow myself to embrace how I feel in the moment.

Kubler-Ross suggested that one should place themselves in the shoes of their patient. Placing myself in Tonya's shoes made me angry. I was angry that she did not feel that she can simply have a child and hope for the best. Collins said, "Coping with unwanted pregnancies and being unable to care for one's children is oppressive" (Collins 195). Tonya is tired of living in oppression. The actor not only needs a place to express this anger, but to release the anger.

## **Bargaining**

Bargaining, the third phase of the grief cycle, is “really an attempt to postpone; it has to include a prize offered ‘for good behavior’ it also sets a self-imposed deadline” (Kubler-Ross 72). Gregory wrote:

You might falsely make yourself believe that you can avoid the grief through a type of negotiation. You are so desperate to get your life back to how it was before the grief event, you are willing to make a major life change in an attempt toward normality (Gregory 4).

Bargaining is your attempt to right your wrongs with hopes for a second chance. During this play, Tonya is attempting to avoid two types of grief. First, she wants to avoid the grief of a child that she can potentially lose to violence. She says, “I don’t want to raise no more babies when I got to fight to keep them alive” (Wilson 41). Tonya grieves the life of her unborn child due to the social climate of Pittsburgh. Tonya does not want to raise another child to become a percentile in the homicide population of Pittsburgh.

Second, Tonya grieves the potential loss of her husband King. Tonya constantly worries that King will end up dead or in jail, because he will not adjust his lifestyle. Tonya again, confides in Ruby saying:

[King] walking around carryin’ that gun. Now you got to wonder if he ever gonna come through the door again or not. Every time he go out somewhere I hold my breath. I’m tired of it. I’m suffocating myself (Wilson 82).

Tonya is tired of worry about King’s decisions. Tonya’s choice to have an abortion is not only influenced by the social climate of Pittsburgh, but it is informed by her unwillingness to raise another child by herself. She says to King:

You going back to jail. You gonna be right down there with J.C. Talking about you wanna have a baby and time he one or two years old you look up and he ain't gonna see you again till he's twelve. I got to sleep by myself...I ain't gonna have you sitting down there in jail talking about you did it for me (Wilson 81).

Tonya raised Natasha alone. Natasha has followed in the footsteps of Tonya. She is a teenage mother without a clue of how to raise a child. Tonya does not want this for her children. However, she loves King. For the first time in Act II, Tonya seems to bargain with King about being a father. She says:

...Do your job but understand what it is. It ain't for you to go out of here and steal money to get me things. Your job is to be around so this baby can know you its daddy. Do that. For once, somebody do that. Be that. That's how you be a man, anything else I don't want (Wilson 90).

For the first time, Tonya discusses the possibility of King being a father. The audience does not know if Tonya has gone through with the abortion. The audience simply knows that she makes a bargain with King. Maybe Tonya makes this bargain because she notices that King is going down a path to lead him back to the penitentiary.

In Kubler-Ross's study, bargaining seems more so a conversation between a patient and their God. The bargain is the negotiation that they make for more time on this earth. As an actor, the negotiation is made with the director. The director is the person in control, and a good actor is able to marry their vision with that of the director. During the rehearsal process, I made a bargain with the director. This day was one of my favorite days throughout the entire rehearsal process. I entitled this day of rehearsal as "the day I earned my monologue."



*King Hedley II* is one of August Wilson's longest plays. For the sake of doing this play in the academic setting, Kelly decided to make internal cuts. Tonya's monologue was one of the pieces that he wanted to make internal cuts for the sake of timing. However, this was my favorite monologue, and I wanted it to stay in the play in its entirety. Therefore, I told myself that I had to earn this monologue. I challenged myself to come to rehearsal off book having memorized all of Tonya's lines including her longest monologue. I asked the director if I could perform the entire monologue for the first table read. If my performance was good enough, the monologue could stay in the play. At the end of rehearsal, I earned my monologue. Memorization alone did not afford me the opportunity to perform the entire monologue, but my preparation to breathe life into the words of Tonya. I found Tonya's objective in the play. In the beginning of the rehearsal process, I simply thought that Tonya wants to explain to King the circumstances in which she cannot give birth. However, I believe the Tonya's objective is to persuade King to change his lifestyle so that he will be around not only for his child, but for Tonya.

Bargaining is an interesting phase of the grief cycle. Again, I do not mean to add the same weight to a phase of the grief cycle that compares to Kubler-Ross's patients. However, I argue that bargaining in this circumstance was life or death for the character. Tonya bargains with King about being a father hoping that by telling him how to be a man, she will persuade him to change. Likewise, my bargain to say Tonya's entire monologue determined whether or not I would be able to breathe life into the character. Johnny Jones, UofL Theatre Arts professor, teaches that characters in a script are simply text and that the actor must give life to the character. As an actor, it was my duty to give life to Tonya by fighting for her right to speak.

## Depression

The next phase of the grief cycle is “depression.” Kubler-Ross wrote:

When the terminally ill patient can no longer deny his illness, when he is forced to undergo more surgery or hospitalization, when he begins to have more symptoms or becomes weaker and thinner, he cannot smile it off anymore (Kubler-Ross 75).

Additionally, Kubler-Ross described “preparatory depression” as the second type of depression is one which does not occur as a result of a past loss but is taking into account impending losses” (Kubler-Ross 76). Tonya believes that not only will she lose her husband, but she will lose her unborn child due to the social climate of Pittsburgh.

Tonya says to King:

...You take Little Buddy Will’s mother up on Bryn Mawr Road. What she got? A heartache that don’t never go away. She up there now sitting down in her living groom. She got to sit down ‘cause she can’t stand up. She sitting down trying to figure it out. She trying to figure out what happened. One minute her house is full of life the next minute it’s full of death... (Wilson 41).

Tonya refuses to have another baby because she does not want to suffer like Little Buddy Will’s mother. Little Buddy Will was a teenager killed in a drive by shooting.

In *King Hedley II*, there are only two women in the play, Tonya and Ruby. Ruby is King’s mother and seems to offer companionship to Tonya. Prior to Tonya’s conversation with King about the baby, Tonya’s interactions with King’s mother Ruby are pleasant. After Tonya’s conversation with King, she says, “He don’t understand there’s other people in the world” (Wilson 43). It seems as if Tonya is stuck in a space of sadness, unsettled with the fact that King does not understand her perspective. King does not have a legal job

and works illegally with his friend Mister. King is also looking to kill Pernell's cousin, who is supposedly looking to avenge Pernell's death. Years earlier, King was incarcerated for murdering Pernell after he cut King and left a visible scar on the side of his face. King puts Tonya through a lot of pain and does not realize that his actions affect her willingness to trust him as a father.

As it relates to preparatory depression, Tonya grieves her impending loss, comparing herself to Little Buddy Will's mother or the mothers of those dead corpses under the care of the undertaker. According to Kubler-Ross, Tonya is depressed and rightfully so. Tonya says, "I done told him if he go back to jail I'm through with it. I gonna pack up my little stuff and leave. I ain't goin' through that again" (Wilson 82). Tonya has lost hope in King and has finally made the decision to leave if he gets in any more trouble.

Similarly to Tonya, I faced depression within this process. During this phase of the grief cycle, my depression was comparable to Tonya's feelings. All of this research on Tonya's grief and her relationship with loss made me feel heavy. I started thinking of the two realities that were catalyst of my thesis: the death of my grandpa and #BlackLivesMatter. I realized that I was affected by the understanding that my grandpa will not witness my final moment onstage.

In my sadness, I felt stuck in my own world without a way to return to my character. Also, I thought of #BlackLivesMatter. The journal that I purchased for my thesis composition is from the Ebony G. Patterson's exhibit entitled "Three Kings" at the University of Louisville Speed Museum. I returned to the exhibit to see her staple piece "...while the dew is still on the roses..." Patterson's exhibit featured six caskets covered in flowers.

With each casket, I imagined the black body that I described in the monologue. I used my visit to rehearse the text while in the space; this private rehearsal helped me with finding the imagery for the men in this monologue. Furthermore, each casket sat high above the ground and featured glass memorabilia of the person who lost their life. One casket featured glass tennis shoes and chains while another had a glassed stuffed teddy bear and backpack. The glass items hidden in the flowers represent material things that remain while death takes its course. I thought of Tonya's line "King you don't understand. I don't want everything. That's not why I'm living, to want things" (Wilson 90). Tonya teaches King that things are not as important as human life. Black life matters and the senseless acts of violence that ends life too soon weighed heavily on my mind during this process. Likewise, these acts weigh heavy on Tonya's mind as she talks about Little Buddy Will.

### **Acceptance**

The final stage of grief is acceptance. Kubler-Ross said, "we have found that those patients do best who have been encouraged to express their rage, to cry in preparatory grief, and to express their fears and fantasies to someone who can quietly sit and listen" (Kubler-Ross 105). Tonya expresses her rage when she tells King that she will not have a baby; she says, "Why? look at Natasha, I couldn't give her what she needed" (Wilson 40). Tonya is encouraged to express her rage based off of King's response to her choice on motherhood. Tonya cries alone with Ruby when she confides in her about King's self-centered behavior; "King thinks it's all about him. He don't understand there's other people in the world" (Wilson 43). Tonya is sharing the frustration that she feels for her husband who does not value life but wants to create life. Tonya expresses her fear that she has for King each time that he leaves the house. She states, "every time he go out somewhere, I hold my breath"

(Wilson 82). Tonya is afraid that King will not return home. Throughout the play, Tonya tells King that he will end up dead or in jail if he does not make better decisions. Unfortunately, Tonya foreshadows the death of King. King learns that his mother Ruby lied to him about Hedley being his father. In a visit to Pittsburgh, Ruby's ex-lover Elmore reveals that he is responsible for the death of his real father, Leroy, who owed him money.

Tonya attempts to calm King. She says, "come on King. Please, just come on in the house" (Wilson 107). Tonya realizes however, that she cannot persuade King to change his mind from seeking revenge on Elmore. King attempts to pay his late father's debt and Elmore pulls a gun on King. Surprisingly, King does not kill Elmore; "unable to harm Elmore, King turns around and sticks the machete into the ground" (Wilson 108). King finally makes a choice that seems to be for the wellbeing of his family. Unfortunately, it is too late for King. Ruby, his mother, accidentally shoots him in her attempt to protect him from Elmore. Tonya's response to King's death is shocking. Tonya does not scream; she does not blame Ruby. She simply says, "Call 911. Call 911" (Wilson 109). Tonya's response to King's death demonstrates her acceptance. Tonya tried to warn King throughout the play that he was going to end up dead or in jail. The text does not offer that Tonya has yet gotten the abortion. As of now, she is a widow with yet another child who will not have a father. In the beginning of the play, she says, "I'm not raising no more babies when you got to fight to keep them alive" (Wilson 41). I believe that Tonya ends up terminating the pregnancy and accepts the death of her beloved husband.

I encountered acceptance during the final dress rehearsal for *King Hedley II*. Like Tonya, I have had time to "express my rage, cry in preparatory grief, and to express [my] fears..." (Kubler-Ross 105). I expressed my rage when I forgot my lines during the

rehearsal process, cried while remembering my deceased grandparents, and expressed my fears. By unpacking Tonya's relationship with grief as well as mine, I find that I am impacted by the grief of my character.

### **Survey of a "Season of Black Plays"**

Surely, other actors have expressed the same concern after portraying heavy characters. In September of 2019, actress Melisa Pereya wrote an article entitled, "We Have Suffered Enough: The Cost of Performing Trauma for Women of Color." Pereya's article is significant because it starts a conversation about performing grief on stage from the perspective of a woman of color. Pereya said:

What's in it for me? What do I gain by exposing my heart on the stage, drawing from a well of trauma audiences might never understand?" We carry the weight of grief on our shoulders so often that it is difficult to navigate when and where it is okay to allow ourselves to feel something else, to tell a different story—one in which we use our bodies to express the joy that makes us warriors and survivors (Pereya 2).

Pereya is asking about the futurity of the performance. What happens to the actor once the curtains close? Not only was I carrying Tonya's grief, but I was working through my grief.

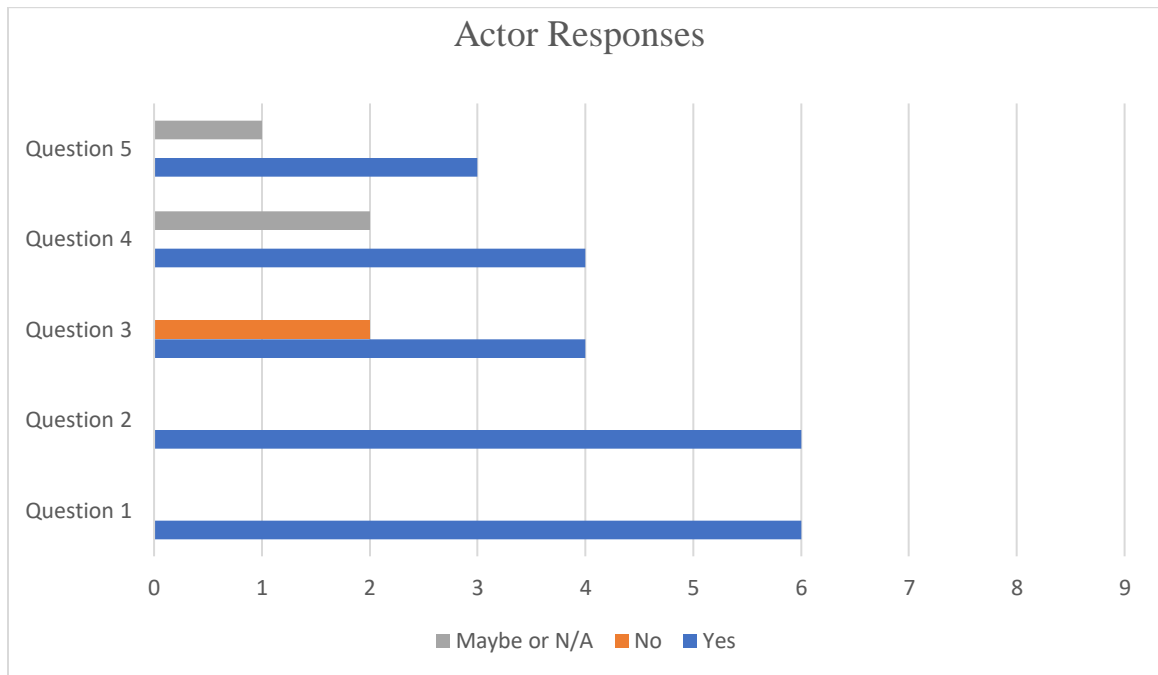
After completing a comparative analysis of Tonya's grief and my grief, I wanted to know if the process of working through grief affected other actors in this "Season of Black Plays." Since the scope of my research studies the African American actor's response to grief and the given circumstances, I surveyed the nine African American actors (excluding myself) in the department as it relates to this year's season. Six of the

nine students participated; all responses were voluntary. Therefore, I asked the actors the following questions: *All questions are in reference to your performance in this year's "Season of Black Plays."* All questions may be answered with "yes" or "no"; however, you may elaborate as you see fit.

1. Were the given circumstances of your play rooted in racism and or the historical trauma of the United States?
2. Were any of your character's given circumstances developed from racism or the historical trauma of the United States?
3. Were you ever impacted by your character's grief?
4. Did you have a process to disengage or release grief after playing such characters?
5. Would you like suggestions on processes for the actor to disengage with their grief after playing such characters?

Six of the nine students responded to the survey. For question one, all students believed that the given circumstances of the play were rooted racism and or the historical trauma of the United States. For question two, all students believed that their character's given circumstances developed from racism or the historical trauma of the United States. The results varied for question three; four of the six actors were impacted by their character's grief. For question four, only half of the students identified a process to disengage with their grief. Lastly, for question five, five of the six respondents are interested in suggestions to disengage with their grief. The results or responses to the questions are listed in the chart below. The X-axis represents the number of students who received the survey and chose to respond. Moreover, the color key denoted as "yes"

(blue), “no” (orange), and “maybe or N/A”(gray) are located on the X-axis. The Y-axis lists the questions.



Similarly, I wanted to survey the directors of this year’s season. The directors are the leaders of the production and have the most interactions with the students during their play development process. As such, I wanted to assess the director’s awareness of the historical and racial trauma in their productions as well as the African American actor’s relationship to this trauma. The ethnicity of the director does not affect this questionnaire; I simply want to assess the process of the five directors who participated in the season. The responses were voluntary. Therefore, I asked the directors the following questions: *All questions are in reference to the play that you directed in this year’s “Season of Black Plays.” All questions may be answered with “yes” or “no”; however, you may elaborate as you see fit.*

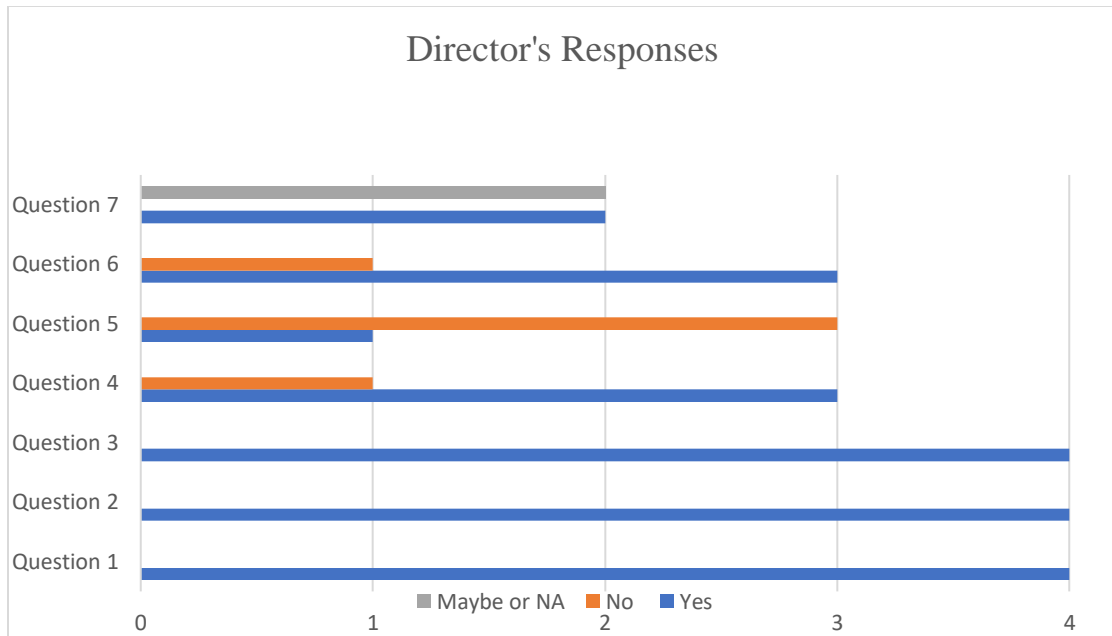


1. Were the given circumstances of your play rooted in racism and or historical trauma of the United States?
2. Were any of the African American character's given circumstances developed from racism or the historical trauma of the United States?
3. Were any of the African American characters in the play grieving?
4. Did it ever seem like the African American actors were affected by their grief?
5. Did you include a process for the African American actors to express the impact of playing characters whose grief is result of racism and or historical trauma of the United States?
6. Would you like suggestions on processes for the actor to disengage with their grief after playing such characters?
7. Did you feel prepared to direct the African American actors under such circumstances?

The questions and results varied for the directors of this year's "Season of Black Plays." Four of the five directors responded to the survey. For question one, all directors believed that the given circumstances of the plays were rooted in racism and or the historical trauma of the United States. For question two, all directors believed that some of African American character's given circumstances developed from racism or the historical trauma of the United States. For question three, each director said that all of the African American characters in the play were grieving. For question four, three directors said that it seemed as if the African American actors were affected by their grief whereas one director said that the African American actors were not affected. For question five,

only one director said that they included a process for the actors to disengage with their grief whereas others did not. For question six, some directors wanted suggestions on processes for the actor to disengage with their grief after playing such characters. Lastly, for question seven, half of the directors felt prepared to direct actors under such circumstances whereas others responded with “maybe.”

The results or responses to the questions are listed in the chart below. The X-axis represents the number of directors who received the survey and chose to respond. Moreover, the color key denoted as “yes” (blue), “no” (orange), and “maybe or N/A” (gray) are located on the X-axis. The Y-axis lists the questions.



## CONCLUSION

### Summary

This thesis argues that the actor is exposed to the character's grief, which can cause the actor to grieve. In this case, the actor is vulnerable to grief and can experience phases of the grief cycle. According to Stanislavski, imagination is the beginning of great storytelling; imagination plays the greatest part in creating theatrical reality. Stanislavski said that the actor must "put life into all the imagined circumstances and actions until you have completely satisfied your sense of truth, and until you have awakened a sense of faith in the reality of your sensations. This process is what we call justification of a part" (Stanislavski 141). The actor justifies their part through thorough research and an offering of personal experiences, observed experiences, and spontaneous creativity. Kelly stated that "the imagination is explored through three sources, personal experience, observed experience, and spontaneous creativity" (Kelly, xvii). The personal experience is the parallel that the actor finds between the self and the character.

For example, Tonya and I are both African American women who if we chose to give birth would be subject to weighing our decision amid the American social climate. At any moment, we could become Little Buddy Will's Mother on Bryn Mawr Road or mothers who share similar stories. Observed experience would be considered the visual research on mothers such as Mamie Till-Mobley and Lesley McSpadden. Through observed experience, I witnessed exactly what Tonya says that she does not want to go through as a mother. Both mothers lost their sons, Emmett Till and Mike Brown, to violence.

Lastly, spontaneous creativity is the last source of imagination. Spontaneous creativity occurs during the rehearsal process when I am finding Tonya's voice or her physicality. When interacting with personal experience, observed experience, and spontaneous creativity one discovers the five stages of grief.

For the actor who discovers and seeks to unpack their grief, this thesis offers a review on what scholars have said in literature, the actor's relationship to the given circumstances, a comparative analysis between the character and actor's grief, and a survey of actors and director's responses to grief. Kubler-Ross and Kessler said that "grief is an emotional, spiritual, and psychological journey to healing" (Kubler-Ross and Kessler 227). My journey to healing could not come at a more befitting time. Engaging and learning about the stages of grief helped me analyze my own encounters with grief during my matriculation as an actor in the University of Louisville Theatre Arts Department.

### **Findings**

Through research on the historical given circumstances, comparative analyses of grief and self-reflexivity, and surveys, my findings prove that *King Hedley II* mirrors traumas of the African American experience and that it is in indeed possible to experience grief while portraying a character who is grieving.

In my comparative analysis, I found that both Tonya and I experience aspects of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Sometimes, the circumstances that informed our grief varied; however, we both had a relationship with grief. Our relationship to grief occurred simultaneously by way of studying the history that informed the playwright's given circumstances.

The survey of participants in a “Season of Black Plays” proved that most actors were impacted in some way by grief. For the actors who were impacted by their character’s grief, some mentioned having a process to release their grief. Only actors who worked with specific directors, mentioned a disengagement process in rehearsal. Five of the six actors who participated in the survey responded that they would love suggestions on how to engage or disengage with grief.

All of the directors agreed that their plays were rooted in the historical and racial trauma of the United States and that the African American actor’s given circumstances were developed from this trauma. Likewise, all directors agreed that some of the African American characters were grieving. Now, only some directors seemed to note that the actors portraying these characters were impacted by their grief. Only one of the directors stated that they included a process for the actor to disengage with their grief. Only half of the directors felt prepared to direct the African American actors under such circumstances. Most of the directors wanted suggestions on how to help the actors to engage or disengage with their grief.

These findings do not suggest that it is the responsibility of the director to include a process for the African American actor to disengage with grief. However, in the academic environment, it would be helpful to have guidance in such practices to prepare the student for professional work that deals with content that is rooted in the racial and historical trauma of the United States.

The mission of the UofL Theatre Arts Department is:

to create Art in Action: theatre that is engaged and inclusive, rigorous and enjoyable, thoughtful and transformative. Theatre Arts at UofL challenges

students to become critical thinkers who take pleasure connecting with local, national, and global communities through live performance... (“Theatre”).

In order to indulge in the issues of the community at large, one must assess the resources available for graduate students to explore such work. Essentially the UofL Theatre Arts Department calls its students to be actors in action or activists. Even activists must care for their mental and emotional states. Ashely Yates, a #BlackLivesMatter organizer in Oakland, California, stressed the importance of self-care. John Eligon wrote an article on activism in the United States entitled, “[Activists] push. They protest. And many activists, privately, suffer as a result” (Eligon). Eligon highlighted that “an essential part of activism these days, those on the front lines say, is ensuring that they and their comrades work through all the stress, whether it’s with meditation, therapy or just taking breaks from the struggle” (Eligon). There is no need for the black actor to suffer in silence. One should not assume that the actor is built to tell these stories because of their cultural background.

The black actor finds that U. S. history sometimes reflects the given circumstances of the play. Again, the given circumstances are defined as “the historical and social research as well as whatever the director and designers of the production have decided” (Carnicke 16). When this historical and social research is rooted in trauma, the black actor is exposed to grief. Being a black actor in a “Season of Black Plays” at a Predominately White Institution, requires a double consciousness of the actor and summons the actor and director to create a process to confront and disengage with the material of the play.

## Further Research

Suzan-Lori Parks said, “a black play is housed between two distinct realities: August Wilson announces he is dying of cancer and Hurricane Katrina” (Parks 576). August Wilson is the first American playwright to compose a century cycle centered around the plight of the African American people. What does his death mean to the theatre community? Hurricane Katrina is the most devastating urban disaster of U.S. history. What does Hurricane Katrina mean for the well-being of black people displaced in New Orleans?

Likewise, my thesis is housed between two realities: the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the death of my grandfather. #BlackLivesMatter began in 2013 after the death of Trayvon Martin. How does #BlackLivesMatter inform my relationship to the theatre? Furthermore, in 2018 my grandpa announces that he is dying of cancer. My grandpa was there for the matriculation of my college career and would no longer be present for my accomplishments. What does my grandpa’s death mean to my journey at the University of Louisville? The answers to these questions are revealed by doing the work of the artist. I must offer myself as a vessel to tell stories onstage so that I can learn about the complexities of my story.

Future research would interrogate how grief affects my current realities: May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020, my former graduation date and the birthday of my late granny Caudrey Ross has been disrupted by COVID-19 Global Pandemic. COVID-19 “is Coronavirus disease 2019, a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person...COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China in November 2019” (“CDC’s Response to COVID-19”). Due to COVID-19, several people have lost their lives; America is

attempting to adjust to the new normal of self-quarantine. Recent studies have shown how African Americans have been greatly impacted by this disease.

The CDC of Chicago released the following information: “African Americans hit hard by coronavirus, 33% of those hospitalized are African Americans, 13% of the US population is African American, 68% of coronavirus deaths in Chicago were African American” (Maqbool). There is an apparent difference in the racial disparities of this pandemic and how it affects the black community. Similar to the Hurricane Katrina being identified as the most devastating urban disaster of U.S. history, COVID-19 joins the list of one of the deadliest pandemics.

In lieu of this tragedy, I would survey theatrical artists who are not only mourning the loss of loved ones, but the loss of their sense of normalcy. Not only would I examine their grief, but I would examine how the media’s use of language informs their relationship with mourning and loss. The U.S. has been divided by essential and non-essential workers. Theatre artists and entertainers are considered non-essential. How does one’s societal status during tragedy affects one’s willingness to perform whether that be on the stage or in the doctor’s office? I would perform a comparative analysis to examine how grief affects both non-essential and essential workers.

August Wilson said, “confront the dark parts of yourself. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing” (“A Quote by August Wilson”). There is something profound about an artist’s willingness to participate in the unveiling of the dark parts of themselves. Suzan-Lori-Parks said that “it is through participation that we work out the demons” (Parks 583). Through the actor’s participation in interrogating the realities that inform their work, “Good Grief: An analysis of the



character development of Tonya in August Wilson's *King Hedley II* through the lens of "The Five Stages of Grief," proves that the actor can encounter grief while portraying a character that is grieving and offers ways for the actor to use their grief for the betterment of their creativity.

## NOTES

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- <sup>4</sup> Gonzalez, Argos. “A Mindful Way to Reflect: Rose, Thorn, and Bud.” *Mindful Schools*, 24 May 2018, [www.mindfulschools.org/inspiration/mindful-reflection/](http://www.mindfulschools.org/inspiration/mindful-reflection/).

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## APPENDIX A

### **A Process for the Actor to Disengage with Grief**

The following section includes a list of active journal exercises and reflections for the actor to disengage with the work. Any of these exercises may be performed individually or as a cast. These exercises could be beneficial to the actor who is encouraged to journal during the thesis process. Each stage of disengagement begins with a brief history of the stage followed by the exercise.

#### **Welcome beyond Denial**

The first stage of the Kubler-Ross's grief cycle is denial. Denial means to deny the reality that you are experiencing. Once the curtain closes for the final performance, the actor nor the character has anything to deny. Instead of denying the present reality, the actor may instead "welcome" his or her feelings in the process by asking themselves the following:

1. "What did you think of your portrayal of the character's truth?"
2. "Did any external circumstances influence the storytelling?" (These influences can range from audience responses, directors, other actors, and reviews).

#### **Joy beyond Anger**

The next phase of the grief cycle is anger, which is the feeling of rage towards the present circumstance. While disengaging with the five stages of grief, I offer that the actor makes room for joy. During this second phase of disengagement, the actor can participate in activities that feeds the mind, body and spirit. This activity does not have to



be completed in isolation, but it can be a group event. For example, the cast of *King Hedley II* visited a salt cave during a technical rehearsal. Thanks to our cast mate and technical director, Charles Nasby, we were able to find solace in an environment created for relaxation and release. One must be intentional about this phase of disengagement. This event allowed the cast time to bond and the individual time to disconnect from the external environment in which the actor and character exists.

The second phase of the disengagement is not limited to the end of the show run. Joy can take place during the rehearsal process. Kessler and Kubler Ross stated that “anger is a necessary stage of the healing process. Be willing to feel your anger, even though it might seem endless. The more you truly feel it, the more it will begin to dissipate and the more you will truly heal” (Kubler-Ross and Kessler 12). Like anger is necessary, joy is necessary. Joy is a reminder to have gratitude for the work that is storytelling. *Please list three potential activities for the rehearsal process or after the Show*

### **Confidence beyond Bargaining**

Bargaining is the next phase of the grief cycle. Bargaining “allows us to believe that we can restore order to the chaos that has taken over” (Kubler-Ross and Kessler 20). During the bargaining phase, the person that engages with grief begins to imagine their circumstances “if” they lived their lives differently. The person usually regrets their decision because of their circumstances. The spirit of regret causes a person to second guess their decision. In the third stage of disengagement, I offer that the actor practices confidence. He or she should practice having self-assurance as this could inform their decision making and artistry. The actor can find their own daily mantras to aid them in

their process of redeveloping their self-esteem. The cast of *King Hedley II* would recite my daily mantra before each performance. We would circle up before show to pray and recite, I can. I will. End of Story. You can. You will. End of Story. We can. We will. End of Story. *Please list three affirmations.*

### **Encouragement beyond Depression**

The next phase is depression. Kessler and Kubler-Ross stated:

Depression has elements that can be helpful in grief. It slows us down and allows us to take real stock of the loss. It makes us rebuild ourselves from the ground up. It clears the deck for growth. It takes us to a deeper place in our souls that we would not normally explore” (Kessler and Kubler-Ross 24).

If the actor does undergo depression after playing their character, I first offer that therapy is a resource to help unpack the root of the depression. Talking to someone during any process of transition is essential for the actor to maintain mental health. An opportunity to disengage during the phase of depression is personal encouragement. Document what went well during the rehearsal and performance process. Keeping record of these accomplishments offers a sense of reassurance that you are a talented being called to tell the story. UofL Theatre Arts professor Sidney Monroe Williams, introduced the exercise “rose, bud, thorn<sup>4</sup>” which helps the actor track their progress. During this activity, rose means to explain what went well in the rehearsal process, bud means to explain what is blooming in the rehearsal process, and thorn means to explain what still needs attention. Maybe you do not receive flowers at the end of the performance run, but

<sup>4</sup> For more information, see Gonzales.

you will have given yourself flowers by taking stock of your progress during the rehearsal and performance process.

*Dear Journal,*

*(Pre-show) Tonight is it! It's opening night, and I couldn't be more excited. I am ready to enter the world of Wilson and not simply put on a performance but change lives. It's time.*

*(Post-show) As an artist or even as a person, I want to be told how great I am (all the time) but the reality is that there is room for growth, and I must grow.*

*Feedback from director- High tones become unclear, stay in the low tones and allow this feedback to inform your warmup. I must remember that this is a process and that I must trust this process. It's a journey. Honestly, I want to arrive to a place and believe that I have done it all, but truth be told as people we are learning every day and so are our characters.*

*Rose-Scene with King was beautiful*

*Bud-Tonya and I are blooming together*

*Thorn--I missed my lines because I was nervous*

*Tonya is a confident woman. It's intimidating, but that's my judgment. I don't want to let my judgment steal*

*my character's story. Tonya is teaching me to own who I am. She has strong opinions and she fights for who and what she wants. I'm going to fight. Kala, I am proud of you. You stayed present for your partners. You*

*have a role. The shoe fits. Try it on. List your rose, bud, and thorn for tonight's rehearsal or performance.*

### **Release beyond Acceptance**

The last phase of the grief cycle is acceptance. Acceptance is the phase where the actor comes to terms with the circumstances of the production. She or he accepts her progress and allows her character to live onstage. Respective to acceptance, I offer that during the final phase of disengagement, the actor releases the character and experience. To release, the actor composes a letter to the character, thanking the character for the lessons learned and making room for more lessons to come. If you are a spiritual person, prayer is also a great form of release. The release can also take other forms. During this production process, my release occurred by way of physical activity. I decided to participate in the strike of *King Hedley II*. I helped paint portions of the set, and I helped break down the set. These activities helped me to physically release the pieces of the process that I harbored for the duration of the production. *Please list the ways that you can become involved in the production process:*

1. Date of Strike:
2. List one date where actors will paint or build the set:

Kessler and Kubler-Ross said, "Healing looks like remembering, recollecting, and reorganizing" (Kubler-Ross and Kessler 25). As actors, it is important that we remember, recollect, and reorganize ourselves after a production. It is essential that we reflect and honor our performances, in doing so, we allow room for growth in our artistry. Whether or not an actor follows the cycle of disengagement, he or she should have a process to

disengage with the character. The disengagement cycle is simply the beginning of releasing the character. The phases are as follows: welcome, joy, confidence, encouragement, and release.

## CURRICULUM VITA

NAME: Kala Ross

ADDRESS: 75 Lakeview Lane  
Stockbridge, GA 30281

DOB: Decatur, Georgia - October 24, 1995

### EDUCATION

& TRAINING: Master of Fine Arts in Performance (expected 2020)  
University of Louisville, Magna Cum Laude

Thesis: GOOD GRIEF: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER  
DEVELOPMENT OF TONYA IN AUGUST WILSON'S KING  
HEDLEY II THROUGH THE LENS OF "THE FIVE STAGES  
OF GRIEF"

Graduate Certificate in African American Theatre

B.S., Communications concentration Theatre (2017)  
Tennessee State University, Magna Cum Laude

### ACADEMIC TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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**Theatre Arts Professor**  
(present)

**University of Louisville**

*Course: TA 322 Acting the Black Experience (2019-*

- Help students develop a foundation in acting through Afrocentric principles
- Develop an understanding of black, African American and diasporic cultures in America

*Course: TA 305 Acting as Communication (2018-19)*

- Discover and develop a general awareness of the self, partners/classmates, rhythm, and space
- Ability to understand and adapt the relationship of the self to various settings and occasions
- Learn the basics of theatre, performance, and public speaking and their relationship to communication

**Teaching Assistant**

**University of Louisville**

*Course: TA 207 Enjoyment of Theatre (2017-18)*

- Reinforced lessons from group lectures
- Introduced the foundation of theatre

**PROFESSIONAL PROFILE**

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**Director**  
(present)

**Salama Urban Ministries, Nashville TN (2017-**

*Lion King Jr. (2019), Once on This Island Jr. (2018), Annie Jr. (2017)*

- Served as the director of summer productions
- Cast over 25 students ranging from kindergarten to twelfth grade.
- Staged a full production over the course of six weeks.
- Collaborated with artists to create the set, lighting, and costume design

**Music Instructor**  
(present)

**Salama Urban Ministries, Nashville TN (2018-**

- teach songwriting and song structure
- host recording sessions for students
- help students create song for summer production

**Voice and Music Teacher**

**Salama Urban Ministries, Nashville TN (2018)**

- Facilitated class sessions to help students learn how to use their voices on stage.
- Facilitated workshops on stage presence.

**Box Office Assistant**  
(present)

**University of Louisville, Louisville, KY (2017-**

- ticket sales and marketing for productions

**LEADERSHIP**

---

MLK Day Student Coordinator  
Graduate Student Representative

**University of Louisville**  
**University of Louisville**

Thomas E. Poag Players Guild

**Tennessee State University**  
President

Student Government Association

**Tennessee State University**  
Sophomore Class Representative  
Representative at Large (Alumni Relations)  
Speaker of the House

## **AWARDS**

**Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Irene Ryan National Acting Scholarship Winner (April 2019)**

**Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Best Regional Partner (September 2019)**

**University of Louisville Theatre Awards Outstanding Graduate in Theatre Arts (2020)  
Outstanding Actress in a Drama (2018)**

## **PERFORMANCE PROFILE**

### **REGIONAL THEATRE**

*A Christmas Carol* Belle/Mrs. Fred Actors Theatre of Louisville Dir. Drew Fracher

### **THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES**

*Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly* Mrs. Bridge UofL Rep. Company Dir. Sidney Monroe

*Myths* Angelea UofL Rep. Company Dir. Andrew Harris

### **THEATRE**

*The Greenbook* Jacqueline Bunbury Theatre Dir. David Chack

*The Wiz* Dorothy Circle Players Theatre Company Dir. Tim Larson

*Dreamgirls* Michelle Circle Players Theatre Company Dir. Josh Waldrep

### **UNIVERSITY THEATRE**

*King Hedley II* Tonya University of Louisville Dir. Baron Kelly

*Taming of the Shrew* Kate University of Louisville Dir. Ari Calvano

*Fabulation* Undine University of Louisville Dir. J. Thompson

*Our Country's Good* Duckling University of Louisville Dir. Baron Kelly

*For Colored Girls* Lady in Red Tennessee State Univ. Dir. Lawrence James