

“IT’S NOT THE POLICE, IT’S NOT THE BULLETS, IT’S THE ATTITUDE.”



Invitation to a Die-In 2017 world premiere with Damian Norfleet and the Mount Holyoke Symphony Orchestra. (video still)

A CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTISTS OF “INVITATION TO A DIE-IN”

In 2016, following the latest string of racist murders of African American men across the country, Nigerian/African American composer [Nkeiru Okoye](#) (*Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed That Line to Freedom; Black Bottom*) was given a commission to write a new work for the Mount Holyoke Symphony Orchestra by its Music Director [Ng Tian Hui](#). Okoye had already been working with librettist **David Cote** (*The Scarlet Ibis, Three Way*) to create what would become ***Invitation to a Die-In***, a 12-minute monodrama for baritone. The harrowing work, dedicated to the memory of Trayvon Martin, was a far cry from the creative



by Okoye as a “sung story” in which the African American baritone tells the story from the perspective of the deceased, their families, police officers, and citizens on all sides of the murder of a man hunted down because of the color of his skin.

Invitation’s music combines a funeral march-like quality with rhythmic shifts that disorient the listener. References to the spiritual, “Witness,” weave in and out of the work, charging all to watch and be accountable for the events that would unfold. The melody’s tunefulness clash with the dissonant, ascending, six-note figure that starts *Invitation* and resurfaces throughout the work’s segments. At the stunning conclusion staccato attacks from the snare drum evoke gunshots that bring members of the orchestra to the ground one by one until there is no more music, because literally and symbolically there is no one left to keep the music alive.

“I’d never composed something so angry, painful, and disjointed,” Okoye wrote at the time. “What I had not anticipated was my growing horror at writing a character who was deceased, looks reflectively over the events that cause his murder, and then capturing that murder through music as he pleads for his life.”

The [work premiered](#) January 24, 2017 at Mount Holyoke



with the composer during the creation of the piece. A year later [the work was performed](#) by baritone **Robert McNichols Jr.**

and the University City Symphony Orchestra in St. Louis, led by music director Leon Burke III.

This month, following the worldwide protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, AOP General Director **Matt Gray** invited Okoye, Cote, Maestro Ng, and baritones Norfleet and McNichols to reconnect in a video call and reflect on the piece that has, to the sadness of everyone involved, only grown in relevance.

INVITATION TO A DIE-IN - Premiere performance





are coming together so quickly, and yet I am not surprised that this would be a conversation that you’d want to have right now. You created a very powerful work a few years ago that is unfortunately still very, very relevant. Nkeiru, can you give us just a brief overview for those who are not familiar to the piece: what is *Invitation to a Die-In*?

Nkeiru Okoye (composer): *Invitation to a Die-In* is a monodrama for baritone and orchestra, and it also has an orchestra participation in it, because the orchestra actually does a Die-In. I’m trying to think of how to describe it...I had this vision, it’s sort of like Haydn’s *Farewell Symphony*, where sometimes people walk off and there’s only that one soloist left playing. And I thought about that. And there was also *Dialogue of the Carmelites*, which is kind of the same thing, but they’re all dying by the guillotine and it’s all offstage. So the orchestra members, at some point, all end up doing this Die-In. It was very much a concept piece and it’s not squarely a piece for orchestra or a theatrical piece. It’s right there, kind of in the middle.

Gray: I was familiar with the idea of a Sit-In as a form of protest, where everyone drops to the ground and sits down in a place and they force their own removal by just centering their weight as a form of peaceful protest. But tell me about a Die-In.



sometimes you’ll see it with...I don’t know, how else do you describe a Die-In?

Damian Norfleet (baritone): I have an experience with a Die-In in college. You remember, there was – I hate to use the word ‘popular’ -- but when there was suicide awareness at my school they would tell everyone with a certain kind of marker, for example, everyone who’s a Scorpio, you know, lay down and die and everyone else has to experience what life is like if all of those people weren’t there. Or then, in protest ways it’s sometimes like, a marginalized group will literally lie down. So it’s the same kind of effect of a sit-in, but it’s like, if we weren’t here what would happen. So sometimes people will occupy a space, where they will just literally lie down and “play dead” in a space to visibly communicate this is what would happen if we weren’t here. So it’s a way of showing someone’s worth. The idea of ‘you don’t value something until it’s gone.’ So it plays into that kind of mentality, but it’s also the visual of seeing, you know, a lot of people dead. I remember when I was growing up it was a big way of illustrating suicide prevention and care.

Gray: Do we know how far this concept goes back, this idea?

Norfleet: I don’t. For me it goes back to the ‘90’s. *(laughs)* but I have a feeling it goes back before then.



David Cote (librettist): As I recall, in January of 2015 when Nkeiru contacted me about the project, the term “Die-In,” I wasn’t familiar with it in the 90’s but it was definitely in the news. People were having Die-In protests over Ferguson and Eric Garner and others, so when she said that, I was like, oh yeah, of course. It made sense.

Okoye: I was just getting to be familiar with it in that context. You know, people were staging Die-Ins around this slew of deaths of black men by the police and it was such a visceral image for me, I just thought to combine it with orchestra.

Gray: At what point in that creation did you come up with that idea? Were you already thinking of a piece musically, or was it this structure that you began with?

Okoye: I had the concept in mind first and it was triggered by the news of one of these violent deaths, but it actually started before them. I had had this incident and it changed my life. I just was a different person after this thing. And it was racial and it was violent. People think of racial violence and





shooting or whatever, and that to them is racism. I think of that as racism with a capital R. Like right now, there’s that woman who was caught on film threatening this man that she’d call the police, right? And, so you think of that, and they’re making her this racist with a capital R. For me, I was set upon by a group of doctors who were so distracted by my skin color that they couldn’t tell that I really had a medical problem. And what they did, in some ways redefined me. It certainly made me see myself differently. I was always, I suppose, in a bubble. For one thing, I’m not a black man. But the other is that I’ve got my doctorate, I’m far removed from where you think a lot of this violence is happening. And so, when this happened to me, and these doctors set upon me, I felt violated and also awakened in a very different type of way. So as I’m recovering from all of these events, I’m hearing about these black men being murdered by the police, and people are doing these Die-Ins and they’re protesting and I’m thinking: “you all have it all wrong, you know, you’re protesting this racism with a big R. What about the small instances of racism, the...”

Gray: ...the more insidious...

Okoye: Yes, we call them micro-aggressions? Right. What about the attitudes that lead to this ability to take someone’s life just because of their skin color. And that’s the real killer. It’s



thinking about an opera, I read about the summer of 2013. The country was still at arms about Trayvon Martin. This poor kid, he was just walking around and what’s the penalty for being a black man walking around? That’s how this idea formed. That’s how it began.

Gray: So once you set off on creating this piece, what was most important for you to achieve? What guided you to the end of it?

Okoye: I wasn’t necessarily looking for anything specific. This is more of a personal piece that is played out for everybody, and it’s shocking. I think I was just intuitively looking at: “This is a shocking thing.” And also, let’s talk about this. This is a piece that after you see it, that you have a reaction to it. So it’s something that we need to talk about.

Gray: You were intent on creating a work that was not comfortable for the audience.

Okoye: Yeah, you can’t watch it comfortably. Because as you’re watching this piece, you’re sucked into it, because you see these people and they’re around you. The music is written so that the music is stalking you. So even as you are watching from your distance, even if you’re not in the orchestra, even if you’re not singing it. The music is stalking you, so it makes you uncomfortable.



“THE MUSIC IS WRITTEN SO THAT THE MUSIC IS STALKING YOU.”

Gray: How did you select David as your librettist? When did you bring him on, and what was the partnership in shaping the words for this piece?

Okoye: Well, David for me was the obvious choice because I was still very, very angry about all of this stuff. It was very difficult for me to put it together. And David, being white, being male, and he’s just such a compassionate human being, you know? He’s a wonderful, wonderful writer and we’d had a collaboration called *We’ve Got Our Eye on You*. We got to know each other and we started talking about these different things and I had this idea and I just thought, “he’s perfect for this.”

Gray: Did you ever think that because he’s white that there



in the industry, or anyone else discovered it, that you might receive criticism for that choice?

Okoye: I don’t know that I thought about it necessarily that way. I thought that David was best qualified to write this and some of it is the distance that he’s going to be able to have, that objectivity. And we talked about these issues. But if it’s a theatrical piece, you want a theatrical writer. A lot of times, producers want to put together these super teams. It looks good. So, you have a black writer and another black writer and *obviously* this is going to work, but if the black writer doesn’t know how to do theater, then what happens?

Cote: I’m sure in our earliest conversations, besides the feeling of “oh yeah, I would love to work on this because it’s big, it’s social, because it’s a challenge, a huge challenge.” I was like, “I know playwrights of color. I can set you up with somebody!” And you were like, “No, it’s okay.” And I was like, “Okay.” I think I gave her right of refusal? Or I gave someone a right of refusal.



David Cote

Okoye: *(laughing)*



it’s not specifically biographical or documentary in that way. The abstraction of it, for me at least, allowed it to be intensely subjective with the POV of someone who’s being stalked in the street. I just tried to connect to feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, feelings that you’re being stalked by a monster. Just trying to hit some kind of archetype, some words that could fit that feeling.

Nkeiru's setting of the text is so virtuosic in terms of switching styles, and also simply relentless in its drive and precision. Since the perspective of the piece switches from victim to cop to jurors to protesters very quickly and even violently, she really pulls it all together with a rich, flowing but wildly varied score. You can hear variations on the spiritual, but also dissonance and an almost demented, carnival-like vibe. It makes for a compact but epic drama in under 15 minutes.

Gray: How long did it take for you and Nkeiru to finish a libretto?

Cote: First drafts were in January 2015.

Okoye: I thought it was pretty quick, and we didn’t do many edits with your libretto?

Cote: We went back and forth, there were some edits. I think it



or entered in five or six scenes and a courtroom...

Okoye: Oh yes, that’s right...

Ng Tian Hui (music director, Mount Holyoke

Orchestra): Nkeiru, you also mentioned that the text was originally thought of from different perspectives, that of the policeman, that of the person on the street, that of the father after, trying to capture that this could all be the same person [who experiences all of these different perspectives]. That was something that you shared with me in the early part of this.

Okoye: Yeah. I didn’t know what to expect when David took on this text and I love what he did with it. And I love that he was able to bring these different perspectives into and to me that shows the skill and the craft and that’s really what you’re looking for, you know? I didn’t want it to just be one-sided, it needed to involve everybody, and I think he just captured that so well.

Cote: Thank you. I think if it had been in detail about any one of those single cases, and if it had been more biographical, I think I probably wouldn’t have been the right person to write it. Because it had this kind of roving perspective and anger, you know? So we had the room to have the perspective of, you know, I’m being followed to the larger perspective of “People



has been... it has range, you know.

Okoye: Yeah.

Ng: That’s one of the reasons that I find this work so moving. I’ve attended so many things that are so-called monologues, and it’s descriptive, or it’s incredibly poetic, or it’s very preachy, and all three of them have their problems. This work really allows the audience to just kind of immerse themselves in the grim, stark reality of what these people feel. And you come to your own conclusions, and that is much more powerful than those other strategies.

Gray: Tian, at what point did you and the orchestra come in? Did your group commission the work?

Ng: Yeah we did, in fact I went back to my first email ever to Nkeiru, and it was July of 2016! So it’s kind of interesting for me to hear the background timeline that happened before that point. The email was in response to the AOP project with Nkeiru [*Tubman*], so this is very amazing that this is now coming full circle in this conversation, because of the *Harriet Tubman* production... I had just fallen in love with it. Somebody came in and auditioned with one



Maestro Ng Tian Hui



What is this music??? It's amazing! And so that was the

permanent bookmark for two years in my head until I got around to talking to Nkeiru about this.

This is in the context of Mt. Holyoke. Some years ago I had decided that it was not okay that an orchestra in a women's college was only incidentally performing work by women. I wanted to make sure that we had it in the season, as a fixture, so we created this thing called the Mary Lyon concerts. The year before we had done the work of [African American composer] Mary D. Watkins — an opera called *Dark River* and it was something that the orchestra did not expect to be so profoundly changed and transformed by. [During] the scene of Fannie Lou Haymer being beat up in the police station, the whole orchestra and I were all playing from memory because we were just all crying and we were crying with the audience. And by doing what we did, we broke the “tofu curtain,” -- what we call it in the Five-College Area -- and for the first time ever, we had two-thirds black audience with us. And it was a full house. 2200 seats were sold. It really, really was a transformative experience.

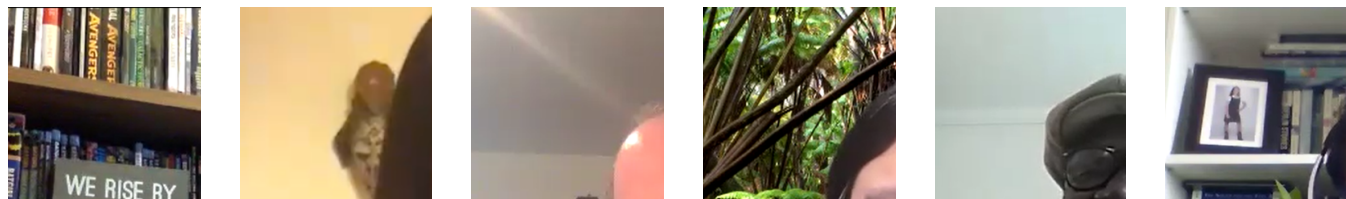
The following year I thought we absolutely had to do something new. So when I talked to Nkeiru about that we performed the



...and it just fit absolutely everything that we were hoping for. Because as an orchestra conductor, I’ve been really kind of concerned by the ways in which the repertoire seems to not engage directly with a lot of contemporary issues. And you know, it’s okay to do a Black History Month, once a year and program the one work by William Grant Still or some other historic thing, but in general, it’s not hearing the voices of the present.

So in that early part of the process, I said to Nkeiru: It would be great if this was something that could also be attempted by youth orchestras and community orchestras. In other words, anyone who can play a Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Dvorak kind of work can do this. And I really see this as a work that can be widely performed. I love the way in which it sits between the theater and the concert hall, because it could be done either way, and I think really powerfully. This was precisely one of the things I saw as crucial for college orchestras to be doing, because I think it’s very hard to persuade the BSO [Boston Symphony Orchestra], with not having seen a proof of concept, to do this, you know? I can only imagine the union concerns: as it is, they can’t move the music stands, so what happens when you have them lying down on stage?

(laughter)



Ng: The ways things are structured in our country prevents the larger institutions from doing this kind of work. We have to commission and we have to try it. And people need to see that it works, and people need to see its impact. Then maybe we’ll have the chance that it’s widely performed elsewhere.

Okoye: I did something that was reflective of their community. It was so neat to have this. But that tends to be the exception rather than the norm. It is usually a lot of posturing and to get a piece done you have to wonder how much posturing you are going to do. Of course, the organizations want to show off how “diverse” they are... “Meet our black female composer! Come meet her!”and it goes on all day long. It is exhausting and is kind of fun, but you are scrutinized all day long and it’s a lot of pressure.

Gray: At these organizations, meeting with the commissioners and the marketing departments, etc., usually how many people of color are there in those rooms?



Community Outreach staff will be a person of color. Most often I am the only one. I have learned how to have these conversations with the organizations and find out what is it that they want. Do they want something conservative? You want to keep the customer satisfied.

Ng: I was thinking about the old adage about getting a job and how people of color have to be twice as good and females have to be three times as good... so *you* have to be *six* times as good! And Nkeiru is going into these organizations and saying, “I can do anything!”

Okoye: I want to mention two things about the beginning of the piece 1) how easy it was to deal with Tian. 2) and in creating the piece I knew I was creating the piece for Damian.

Gray: At what point did Damian come into the process?

Norfleet: Nkeiru and I have a comfortable relationship and working together goes way back to when I auditioned for John Tubman for her and from the start it was an unconventional situation. I didn’t sing the auditions arias that the others did.

Okoye: Wait, wait, it goes way beyond that. Damian was the wrong type! But it worked. That was it! That’s my John Tubman.



are approaching a piece about the 1800's, when you have no attachment because you are wearing a powdered wig or whatever. You can focus on your craft and being in tune and on your register placement because you have this distance. You don't have this responsibility of getting it right. Of course you want to get it right and you want the piece to succeed and have a second performance. So many pieces have died after that one glorious performance.



Damian Norfleet

[But] reading this particular piece – it was exhausting to read it. Upon first reading I imagined the aftermath of that first performance, I leapt to the end of that performance and what I would say to the first person who approached me. I immediately am thinking this is a different kind of piece because you are educating a whole population of people and in addition you are representing a population of people who are alive and well and sitting in the room with you and who are going to have a feeling about it – and if you don't get it right, there is a different kind of pressure, a task, a blessing. And it is personal about getting it right.



...and my responsibility in an approach is any role, it is the creators. And by the time a work gets into my hands, there have been many choices made, and at each step the parameters have closed in so that by the time it gets to us, the “vessels,” you have your own thoughts and you have to fuse it all. As an actor you are responsible for conveying an emotion and an idea, and you have your technique as a performer to support it.

In this piece, I had a constant push and pull because I had to decide if this sound I was using, which maybe wasn’t the prettiest, was the right one and you want it to be right for the space. But you want to get the most effective sound. And then your ego comes into play, because you know that the premiere is going to get recorded. And out of context, someone hearing that recording may not understand. In the piece there is a man being shot, a man being hunted, a man being frustrated, there a man dying and screaming and crying and there can’t be a perfectly formant sound for these, at any given point....

Ng: ...and in rehearsals, Damian had to sing incredibly high, with the result that it is a shriek.

Norfleet: Right. It is this push and pull and it is a constant gamble. It is a blessing to create something and do the premiere. The curse is you are guaranteed that the next



person for this piece and I know I have to make this sound, and

the sound is anguish and pain. But then you worry about the next baritone that hears the recording...

Robert McNichols Jr. (baritone): I said to myself, “He didn’t sing that, he screamed that.” I am like, “But that is what she wrote, though.” In rehearsal we had Nkeiru on the line and the maestro was asking her the question, “What do you want here?” And she was like, “Yeah, that’s what it is.” And I was like, “*This* is what it is if you are asking for that.”

[Lots of laughter]

You make the sound that is necessary in a way that is the healthiest possible, and also taking into consideration what Damian was saying that you are trying to communicate the graveness and the essence of the moment. But it is true what Damian was saying, when I was listening to that recording I was like “Whoa, let me clear my throat and get a drink of water...” But what he did in the recording is absolutely what is needed, what is called for.

Gray: Robert, how did you become connected to the project?

McNichols Jr.: I first became



with Nkeiru Okoye when I was
doing my dissertation



for University of Kansas and I
did a chapter on her *Harriet Tubman*, and sang an aria from the
opera - “Brown-skinned Gal.”

While I was chatting with her about my dissertation,
we realized that we both knew Leon Burke, and I wanted to get
back in touch with him. And then a few years later, this work
came along, and Maestro Burke asked me to come and do
the piece. I was overjoyed because I was thrilled with
Nkeiru’s *Harriet Tubman* and got to know that piece and then
with everything that was going on in the world I was ecstatic
because I was wanting opportunities and to find some way to
express myself and delving into the message and the various real
life scenarios that it was referencing. It felt great to stand up and
as an artist express these sorts of frustrations and fears. When
he says, “I going to stand here...” and on the flip side, when they
shot him...the ability to express these as an artist. It is sometimes
going to get violent vocally, but it was a pleasure.

Gray: Had [the events in Ferguson](#) happened? How close was
that geographically and time wise?

McNichols Jr.: Michael Brown in Ferguson had happened



revamped Police Dept. - all of it was news and was happening and we were seeing it. University City, the concert location, is about 30 minutes away from Ferguson. Media sometimes represents that Ferguson is removed from St. Louis, but it is St. Louis, maybe like saying a suburb or a borough in NYC. A 30 min train ride away. Ferguson is close to where I went to High School, and University City is relatively close to where we were performing. I was born and raised in St. Louis. Where I started my undergrad [University of Missouri–St. Louis] is virtually in Ferguson, but then I did my studies at University of Kansas.

“I WAS GREETED BY BILLBOARDS THAT
READ “IF YOU’RE BLACK, TURN
AROUND.” ”

Norfleet: I was born in Germany. I was a military brat. I was in grade school with literally someone from every country in NATO and then my family moved to Texas. I remember my first



day of class. We went to recess and the other black kid in class came up to me and asked, “Why didn’t you sit next to me?” I didn’t take it as anything more than, “This is the way we do things here.” The other kid was sitting in the back and it was learned behavior. I went to school in East Texas and I had to drive through Vidor, TX, to get there from San Antonio, and in Vidor, I was greeted by billboards that read “If you’re black, turn around.” While I was studying at East Texas, there was an incident of a young black man being chained [and] drug around behind a car. That was like a few minutes away from my campus.

Gray: It is an interesting experience to hear about because you were an American but hadn't discovered America yet.

Norfleet: Mm-mm. Not until I was like 13, maybe 12, 12-13, around that time, it was a very eye-opening experience because I’ve never *not* been an American. Even when I wasn’t in America, you’re even more of an American, as far as the label goes, when you’re not in America. That’s the biggest qualifier they give you, “Oh, which one? Oh, The American one.” That is the biggest label that you can have. So for me to have grown up with “that is my label” and then all of a sudden my mom’s like “we’re moving to Texas”, and all of a sudden, I learned in the first day of school that is not my biggest label, my biggest label was not “American.” I was assigned a new label, which



Gray: Did your parents do anything to help you through the culture shock of becoming an American...an American in Texas?

[laughter]

Norfleet: I would say yes. I wasn’t directly aware of it. My mother more focused on having the best academic experience. I’m sure she specifically was making sure this was present and this was not present. I really kind of lived this...not ignorance, not ignorance – my mother was still a New Yorker. I was never not aware of what was happening. But my mother made a very, very, very concerted effort.

Gray: She was insulating you.

Norfleet: Insulating to the Nth degree from painful things, but I was aware of all the information. She just made sure I got it in a way that wasn’t like someone pointing at me and you know, ridicule, ridicule, ridicule; instead, it came to me as “look at this situation, this is what’s wrong with this, and you don’t have to deal with them, and if you ever encounter them, blah blah blah” but I didn’t have to sit there and watch a bunch of Stanley Kubrick-style punishments coming at me. Now I had that luxury. I understand that kids don’t have that luxury.

Gray: Robert, what kind of luxuries, or lack thereof, did you have?



McNichols Jr.: You know,
growing up in St. Louis,

the Normandy school district at that point, or the neighborhoods that we all lived in, were black neighborhoods, and so it was a suburban, economically low-middle. We rode our bikes around the neighborhood, the police were friendly, we were kids and we got in trouble like kids got in trouble. I

didn't have any issues, racial things, until I got into high school and at that point, I'm bigger now, I'm obviously not a kid, and I could see the demeanor of police change towards me, as well as the demeanor in certain areas of town that you would go to, they would change. This is before I had learned about what in St. Louis is called the "Delmar Divide." Delmar Boulevard is a road in St. Louis that runs East and West through part of the county and part of the city. And economically, one side of it you're good, and economically on the other side you are *not*. There were areas you would go to and if you were seen in this area you were going to get pulled over, or you were gonna get asked what was going on...and there was a sudden change. Nothing



Robert McNichols Jr.



earlier it’s the little things that you can’t quite put your finger

on, but if you were a different person, you wouldn’t have had to.

There was a lot of that; that went on my entire young adulthood up until the point when I left St. Louis to go elsewhere to continue to study, and so at that point I’m mostly removed from it because I’m studying classical music. I am always the anomaly, but I’ve always been the anomaly, I was studying classical music since I was in the 6th to 7th grade so it was nothing new to me there. And I expected that, going into classical music, to be the only person, or one of very few people of color to be in the space, which was okay, especially because I was fortunate to be excelling in the genre and getting the performing opportunities.

It wasn’t until social media, that’s when things changed. When social media came on the scene and we began to see...and these are things that my parents would have talked to me about, things I was introduced to distantly, studying history and different documentaries I may have done— not in the classroom, but on my own— and my family talked about these things...the protests and the violent things that would happen, back in the 60s, “oh, but we’ve moved on, and things are better now, and



when social media came and we see that the same sort of things are still going on...and even though, yes, as a community of black people we've been allowed to do, not allowed, but we've pressed our way and persevered our way into doing a lot more, but a lot of the *same* things are going on. I think that was more of a rude awakening for me, and my *adult* years have been much more eye-opening than even the minor things that happened in childhood and young adulthood. As an adult, seeing all of these things through social media now has really been eye-opening, and alarming, and frustrating, and all of the above... all of the emotions that they can stir, they do. And at this point now, it's "What can I do today?"

Gray: It sounds like you appreciate social media for bringing an awareness and a unity, at least, in being able to elucidate a lot of corners of life that may have been intentionally or unintentionally hidden from you.

McNichols Jr.: Yeah, I can say I have appreciated that, but it's also a two-edged sword. Yes, we're now seeing all of this which is mobilizing us to be active, but it's also being weaponized to cause a lot of destruction, and then because of social media, you have mainstream media talking about these issues, which is fantastic also, but on the flip side of that, they're also showing some ugly



conversation.

Gray: Because you have to assume that it’s mobilizing on the other side as well, it’s mobilizing other tribes and tribalism. But going back to the piece... It’s interesting and important to hear about your process as artists, to what degree you feel comfortable in bringing your own experiences into a work, especially a work like this.

Okoye: As this piece was getting closer and closer into reality...you know, the premiere is set, Tian and I had spoken, Damian and I had spoken. And Damian was doing his kind of director type of thing, *[laughter]* he was like “This sits kind of *high* in the voice...you know, this F here, if this it were an E, it would be easier...” and I said, “Yes, that’s why I made it an F!” *[laughter]* So we’re trying different types of things with his voice, and I remember we got to “The badge, the gun, the choke, the black, the blue, the shot...” and he said, “This makes me run out of breath!” and I said, “Yes, that’s the point!”

And it got to the point of finishing this piece, and I realized that in order to “finish” this piece, I needed to kill Damian. And it put me into this crisis; it wasn’t this hypothetical person, it wasn’t this character. I, as the writer, was going to have to write this violence, and it wasn’t violence just



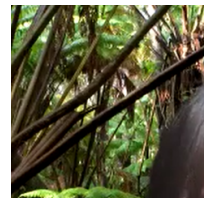
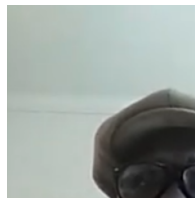
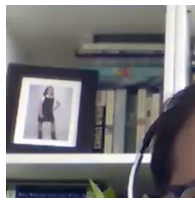
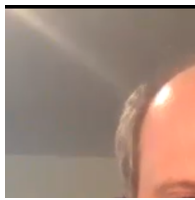
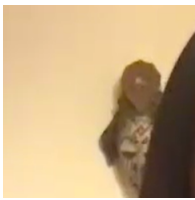
...and I remember, because I remember, my friend, this is Damian who has been a creative partner; this is Damian who has been alive through John Tubman, through some workshopping activities with We’ve Got Our Eye On You. This is Damian, this is my friend, this is my brother...and I had to kill him in order to get this piece done. And I remember going through this whole thing and I finally called him...do you remember that? [laughs]

Norfleet: I do.

Okoye: [laughs] ...and I had to ask his permission. I was like, “Damian I can’t finish this piece”. And I was nearly in tears about this. And Damian gave me his permission. And I remember thinking “Okay, this is okay, but how long can I listen to this man plead for his life? Like literally, in this amount of time, how long can this last? The piece was supposed to be this *specific* amount of time. And we had gotten through all of this material, and David had done his job, he’d written this, and he’d written this glorious text, and it was now *my* responsibility to execute it. But how long, in terms of timeline? How long could I tolerate this, you know? And as I’m thinking about this concept it was one thing. But to actually do this violence...and it was a certain number of gunshots corresponding to the number of times that Eric Garner said, “I can’t breathe.” It’s a rimshot from a snare drum, and it’s



of the scene with the score, the directions are already, “Slump over as if dead.” And it’s one thing to say that, it’s another thing to put it in print, but it was an entirely different thing to realize that this evil was going to happen to this very, very beloved person in my life.



Gray: Did you ever worry about that violence entering into, for lack of a better word, a pornographic state of watching a black man have violence against him?

Okoye: It never occurred to me. I think that’s a risk with any type of piece that has graphic “anything” in it, but because the violence wasn’t just specific to this black man who’s performing, it’s the *entire* ensemble. It was the goriest thing that I had ever seen. Tian’s players asked me, “This says, ‘Slump over as if dead.’ How do you want us to interpret that?” And it never occurred to me that people were actually going to slump over as if dead, or that they would be willing to do that. I think Tian, you were talking about the rules, you know, you’re not even allowed to move music stands. But these *kids*, they were willing, they were saying, “Let’s do this, let’s really do this die-in.” They were so committed to it.



most powerful things about this. Because, in a way, precisely *because* we have historic underrepresentation of African Americans in the orchestra world, having the orchestra on-stage and having them then do the very visceral thing of enacting a Die-in is so powerful because, suddenly, people have the chance to see what their community, which does not necessarily look as black and brown as others, looks like when it suffers this. It brings to home – this is what it looks like to everybody else. This is what it looks like when your beloved orchestra could be subject to something like this and I think that’s precisely one of the reasons that it’s very powerful. As I said, it’s also politically fraught and it’s a very, very big statement for any organization to put this on. And it’s hard to try it without knowing what the audience’s response is going to be and that’s why I feel very fortunate to be in a situation where I *could* actually help to try this out. You can now say, especially with the performance in St. Louis, that we’ve had several performances of this and the audience has reacted in the following way. Now, please dare to try it in your own organization.

“IT’S LIKE LIVING IN A NIGHTMARE. AND
THE NIGHTMARE OF COURSE IS



AMERICA. BEING BLACK IN AMERICA.

Cote: Yeah. That sense of the utter isolation of the singer, of the baritone, whether or not the orchestra is mostly white which, as you say, is often the case, that isolation is really key to the piece, I think. Nkeiru and I discussed this at first and I was like, “I think I’m going to go to Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* just for inspiration”. That is a book-length poem that was released in 2014 and it got a lot of attention because it’s brilliant and terrifying, and it catalogs everything from micro-aggressions at work, to the murder of James Craig Anderson in Mississippi, dragged behind a truck, and fucked-up racial stuff around Serena Williams on the tennis court, like fellow player Caroline Wozniacki stuffing her dress to make her butt look big. So, it covers a whole range of racial incidents. And the perspective of *Citizen*, although it’s written in the second person, is the I. You get up, you go the refrigerator, you open it. It’s like living in a nightmare. And the nightmare, of course, is America. Being black in America. So, I went to Rankine’s poem to just try to look at the tone of it. I just wanted to say that because, for me, that was very important so that we could try to evoke this sense of evil and horror and nightmarishness that the singer’s going through.

Norfleet: The thing that was so amazing about the experience



different, but B) these players were all looking for a way to say something they wanted to say. And the way they attacked this piece was amazing. The reaction of the audience members after we finally got off the ground from having died, and the eerie silence that happened at the end of it every single time, was this weird magical thing. And it wasn't just the black people in the audience going "yeah". It wasn't just that. It was like everyone in the room recognized what happened. And it was beautiful. I can't even tell you the kinds of conversations I had with just these random people who just wanted to speak out.

**“EVERYONE WAS CRYING. AND IT WASN'T
SADNESS.”**

This isn't something that is just evoking reactions to police brutality and deaths of African Americans. People were becoming in touch with their humanity and their feelings. I'm used to, after a performance, people want you to sign something, right? But after the performance of this piece, people wanted to come up and give me a hug. And just connect as a



people afterwards were like, “what is the name of your person? The name of the character?”. I was asked that so many times. I had never been asked that before. “Who was that person?”. This is a different level of investment. Every day when I got off the stage and dusted myself clean, made my tuxedo more presentable again because I’ve just been lying on a dusty stage, it was waking up and looking out into the audience of people crying. Everyone was crying. And it wasn’t sadness. You know that moment when you realize something and it’s so beautiful and clear but poignant? That was what happened to the room. Everyone had this weird moment of unity. Now, I don’t know if it’s because we performed it in a rather progressive area but it happened. And it happened consistently.

There are reasons we do this. We want to touch people, we want to educate people, we want to move people. But we are also performers. We also provide a service. People pay us money to provide a service and we have responsibility that way. It’s not always us getting to do what we want because we have to provide the service to the people who are buying these tickets. We have a responsibility to them. It is so fulfilling to stand erect again after your bow and look out into the audience of people who have been sated. People who are absolutely satisfied with what they paid their money for. They got to hear great music. They got to be moved emotionally. They got to learn something. They got to commune with people around them. I can’t think of



concurrently at the same time, and it happened in silence.

Gray: I can imagine not wanting to clap! Usually the clapping is a positive expression, and while there’s this need for catharsis to allow it to end, you also don’t want to burst that bubble.

Norfleet: Yes! It was that. It was also suspension. It was this lingering moment. Most times performances are like, “we had a fifteen-minute ovation and it stopped the show”, and that’s the sign of a great performance. This one, it was the measure of the silence.

Gray: Who wants to be the first one to clap at a funeral?

[group laughter]

Gray: I don’t think there’s any doubt that this piece could be considered a form of protest, but is that how you thought about it throughout?

Okoye: It is protest. It’s non-violent protest. But it was explosive, it was a reaction not just to what was going on in terms of “here’s another black man who has been murdered”. It wasn’t that. It was also my own sense of violation... and I keep going back to the word ‘shock’. So, it was all of that. My protest, as a composer, as a musician, my thing is always, how do I



...I want to convey, absolutely, it's a protest. What's my view on it? It definitely touched on the outrage. It's a weird piece. You feel that violation. I talk about the stalking, Damien talked about how you have to use this ugly part of your voice. It calls for screaming. The orchestra is also talking, which doesn't happen. So, it sort of breaks all of these different rules. I don't know that I would call it protest but it's definitely a statement. Take that statement whichever way you will.

Gray: We're in the middle of some of the biggest national protests than we've seen in about 50 years. Where does the work that you do as an artist, and specifically a work like this, fit into the dialogue?

McNichols Jr.: I think it represents it pretty accurately. It's right now. Some of the other works I've been doing, they're contemporary but they still look back, which is great. They reference the Frederick Douglass' and even your Malcolm X's, they're referencing those historical figures. But this speaks to right now. Today. 2020. Which, I think is very effective. And, to Nkeiru's credit, also the musicianship that is exemplified in her composition. When you look at just the composition of this, and some of the musical elements that are taking place. Yes, it is communicating with some off-the-wall concepts, but even on an artistic level when you're saying symphonic, orchestral, operatic musicians are going to be performing this, it communicates in a



CONVERSATION TO AN INTERVIEW

“TO SAY THIS IS
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NOW.”

Norfleet: You know how I think it functions? I’ve given this a lot of thought because it’s very relevant right now. Right now we always hear reports, “A person was killed by THE police.” It’s distant. It’s factual. What this piece does is, it humanizes the victims of these crimes. It makes Trayvon Martin a real person. It makes George a real person. It makes Mr. Green a real person.

Nkeiru’s music is brilliant, and it sets the mood brilliantly, but I have to second what Nkeiru said by choosing a person with the theatrical skill of David and... it’s not an art song. You know what I



operatic scene. This is an actual real moment of life, and I think that’s why the audience reacted to it strongly, because everyone can react to someone being scared. Instead of David saying this guy got scared, David wrote a person being scared. You know what I mean? Instead of a little vamping session between each scene, Nkeiru wrote music to emotionally put you where it was. There’s things in the background, huge booms... it’s shocking, it’s jolting. They just created this scene, they created the exact same thing you watch when you watch vest camera footage from a policeman’s camera, or someone catching the thing on their phone. That’s what we got from this piece.

To say this is relevant is an understatement because I feel like I've been living in this character since 2017 to right now, it’s going on outside right now.

Gray: I thank you all for coming together today to have this conversation. I think everyone is feeling to some extent a degree of powerlessness no matter where you are or what’s happening. And I think as artists sometimes we are filled with doubt about the ability of our work to affect change. I appreciate each of you as artists who are taking risks, creating works that do affect change in ways that aren’t going to be as obvious because it is changing hearts. And you change the heart first in order to change the mind.



hasn’t really been mentioned in all this has been American Opera Projects. Because I wasn’t an opera writer before *Harriet Tubman* and I wasn’t able to do *Harriet Tubman* without AOP, which is now THE American Opera Project. (laughs) But because someone was willing to take a chance.

Cote: Thanks for being a home.

Gray: Yes, absolutely. And we hope, like the organizations that programmed this work *Invitation to a Die-In*, to show that risks can be taken and in hindsight they weren’t that much of a risk.



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