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A Special Reading of “Whittier,” New Docudrama by Tylie Shider, Inaugural Playwright in ArtYard Artist Residency Program

Transcript

Christopher Benincasa:

This is Chris Benincasa for the Jersey Arts podcast. This Saturday, you are invited to join Art Yard in Frenchtown for a reading of Whittier, a new docudrama by Tylie Shider. Whittier is a neighborhood in Minneapolis close to where the murder of George Floyd took place. Shider's new play follows residents of Whittier grappling with that tragedy, as well as the stresses of life during the lockdown of 2020. A playwright, poet and journalist, Tylie Shider is also the inaugural playwright in Art Yard's artist residency program, curated by Deonte Griffin-Quick. We recently spoke with Shider and Quick about Whittier, also joined by director, Andrew Binger.

Tylie Shider:

I'm Tylie, and I am the playwright. At present, I am a core writer at the Playwright Center in Minneapolis, where I started to write and develop this piece called Whittier. And of course, right now I am the playwright in residence at Art Yard in Frenchtown, New Jersey. And I'm glad to be back in New Jersey because it's my home base.

Andrew Binger:

Yeah, I definitely want to echo my gratitude to Chris and Art Pride. Honored to be here. My name is Andrew Binger. I am an actor and director for stage. I have a theater company in the city of Newark that I lead called Gendor Theater Company where we work with black and brown storytelling. And I'm happy to be directing this iteration of Whittier for Art Yard. And yeah, I'm always just really interested in exploring new stories from black and brown writers and developing new works.

Deonté Griffin-Quick:

Deonte Griffin-Quick, I am an actor, an arts administrator. In my full-time capacity, I'm the Director of Programs and Services for New Jersey Theater Alliance. But I'm showing up to this work and this project as the guest theater curator for Art Yard. So really excited to be working with Tylie and Andrew on this

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project. It's the first piece of theater that we are producing at Art Yard in their brand new building, so we're really excited to be working with Tylie on developing his play.

Christopher Benincasa:

Tylie, I feel like we've got to start with you. Please tell us about how this project got started and what it's been like getting to this present moment with it.

Tylie Shider:

Yeah, well it's a piece that I started in 2020 during quarantine. And what happened was I was a Jerome fellow at the Playwright Center that year. And of course we all were quarantined, so the theater was no longer developing any work in person. And so basically what I did with this piece was I actually transferred my developmental funds and I started a documentary called Sign of the Times. And my goal there was just to compatize the protest art in my neighborhood, which is Whittier, Minneapolis. But while doing that, because I'm a journalist, I started to ask my neighbors questions about the reasons behind their signs. And those small talks led to interviews. Those interviews led to the film. And I had one particular interview with a neighbor named Sarah, and some of her stories were very compelling to me as a journalist but also as a playwright. And I started to think about adapting some of the conversations that I was having in my neighborhood into a play. And that led me to Whittier.

Christopher Benincasa:

Andrew, as a director, what was your approach to presenting this material?

Andrew Binger:

One of the things I love about theater is just how quickly you can respond to what's happening in our lives. Unlike a movie where it's going to take a little bit of time for it to be written and many, many more months before it's even in production, the beauty of theater is that you can really respond to what's happening kind of almost instantaneously, and you can really capture it and put it on its feet really quickly, too. And I think what's really beautiful in reading it is that the piece, it feels like a snapshot. And I know they Tylie uses the word portraits in the script, but it really does feel like portraits. And what's cool about the imagery or the idea of portraits is it's capturing something simply as it is, and it's kind of open to people to determine what it really means and what it means to them.

Andrew Binger:

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And I think what I'm excited about is the exploration of each character for the actors, but more is when the audience gets a chance to see this, what exactly are they going to resonate with? Because the cool thing about theater is we present different perspectives, and undoubtedly someone is going to find themselves and going to feel attached to some particular way of viewing what's happening and what the play is talking about based on what they personally feel. And I think the richness is that it opens up conversations because the characters see things differently, some of them very differently than others. And that's kind of where we are currently in our existence as a "society". There are people who see things drastically different from one another, and that leads to a lot of conflict. But perhaps there's an opportunity for us to have conversation that maybe leads to some sort of solution or maybe at least a meeting of the minds.

Christopher Benincasa:

Deonte, could you talk about your role as guest curator and how this project came together at Art Yard?

Deonté Griffin-Quick:

Last year, Art Yard reached out to me because they were in the process of building their new theater and they really had a desire to produce theater in that space and creating a place for theater artists to incubate their new work. So when they invited me, I knew that it was a place where I wanted to be a part of. I wanted to be a part of the evolution and the growth and the development of whatever that programming was going to be. So, like you said, it really is a unique opportunity for myself as a producer and curator, that I can kind of program new work and help incubate new work and support artists who I believe in and believe should have the space and opportunity and access to resources to do the work that they want to do. So in thinking about just who to reach out to and what artists were in my network that I knew were working on things, Tylie came to mind. And as soon as I presented him and just gave a little bit about their background, Art Yard was really excited about the opportunity to work with him.

Deonté Griffin-Quick:

So in my role, I kind of facilitated that meeting where we all kind of sat around the table to say, "What could we do together?" And I think Tylie was pretty clear about what he wanted to present with this opportunity as well. So for me, it was just a perfect collaboration that I was excited to be a part of just to see how I can make introductions and build relationships, because that's all about what I do in my work. So really excited to get the opportunity for other artists to do their work, and also to give back to Art Yard and to the Art Yard community and present some really dynamic theater work as well.

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Christopher Benincasa:

Frenchtown is a unique location out in the country on the Delaware River. Has it been fun working on a theater project in an environment like that?

Deonté Griffin-Quick:

Well, it's beautiful and it's amazing space. I tell people when they come, they will want to either create art or see more art. So I'm really excited about also letting other people know about Art Yard, because it's really like a hidden gem in Frenchtown. I'm born and raised in New Jersey had never heard of Frenchtown, so it was really refreshing to be able to go to this place on the other side of the state away from my neighborhood and go to a place that really felt like it was designed for people like me to come and retreat from the busyness of life and have space to create art and just simply be. It slows things down a little bit for you, and I'm sure Andrew and Tylie can speak a little bit more about that, especially in being in residents there for these two weeks that we're developing this work. So I really am looking forward to more people learning about Art Yard and being able to take advantage of their space and all of the great programming they're doing.

Andrew Binger:

It's an adjustment, kind of like Deonte said, all three of us having that connection to Jersey and me being born and raised across east to where we are and never having the opportunity to come to Frenchtown. And coming here for the first time, it's like, wow.

Christopher Benincasa:

Tylie, I read an interview in which you talk about the poet Ameri Baraka and the black arts movement. Baraka is a major figure in New Jersey history as well as art history. Could you talk a little bit about your connection to him?

Tylie Shider:

We're both from New Jersey. We both have beards. I'll say that's the connection right there. We both write plays. But more importantly than that, I was teaching a course called Intro to Black Theater this semester. And before that I was teaching a course called Theater in sociology, 1960 to 1975. So I've been thinking about this period for two semesters now consecutively. So I think the big takeaway from me about all of the works that came out of that period, whether it was about civil rights for blacks or for women, is that the work mirrored the protest in the streets. And so I wrote Whittier before I started

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teaching those particular courses. And I realized while teaching those courses that's what was happening with this particular piece, that the work that I was creating was mirroring what was happening in my neighborhood, particularly, but also across the country and across the world.

Tylie Shider:

So that's the connection I make to the black arts movement. And I think when you look at the history of African American theater, you will see those particular periods from the Harlem Renaissance to the era of Realism Naturalism with Lorraine Hansbury, which of course the black arts movement follows. But then I think that there's the contemporary period that starts in the mid-seventies and the eighties. And I think if you think about when the black lives matter movement started after Trayvon Martin, if you look at some of the theater that was being created after the black lives matter movement came into being, you kind of notice a new wave, a second black arts movement is happening now in black theater, I think.

Christopher Benincasa:

Deonte, your role in this project is curator, but you're also a working actor and many other things. What has this collaboration been like for you?

Deonté Griffin-Quick:

Yeah, I mean it's especially important and very personal to me. I recount the past few years that I've been working professionally in professional New Jersey theater, and I can tell you, there's not many black men doing the work. There's a very small handful, a very small community of us who are creating theater in New Jersey. And I can probably count them on all 10 of my fingers. But I'm really excited because I feel like this collaboration is something that we don't see enough of, having me, Andrew and Tylie coming together to say, "Okay, how do we have a meeting of the minds to produce the work, to tell these stories?" It's not really happening too much, unfortunately. I'm grateful for the folks like Ricardo Khan and Marshall Jones and Rodney Gilbert and Darrell Willis and a lot of great people who are doing the work. But it's rare that you see people coming, folks like us, men like us coming together to produce theater and tell these stories in a way that is meaningful for us.

Deonté Griffin-Quick:

You might get some folks to come into the work at different levels and different entry points, but for all of us to say, "Okay, let's sit around the table and figure this out and how do we want to tell this story and why do we want to tell it?" I think it's really important and hopefully is a catalyst for more collaboration to happen in this state as well.

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Christopher Benincasa:

Tylie, Saturday's event sounds great. What else should your audience know about this play?

Tylie Shider:

I think that it is an American story. It's about an American current event. And I think more importantly, my aesthetic is that I'm not interested in really writing about the current event as much as I am interested about writing about how it affects people around it. I'm really interested in the periphery of a movement rather than what's already been covered in media. So when you come to see this play, you're coming in to see the ways in which a community comes together in the wake of this particular current event, which of course was a tragedy. But my focus is to pretty much zoom in on the community of neighbors in Whittier, which was about 10 blocks away from the incident, the Floyd incident.

Christopher Benincasa:

Tylie Shider, Deonte Griffin-Quick, and Andrew Binger, thank you all so much for doing the podcast.

Tylie Shider:

Thank you.

Deonté Griffin-Quick:

Thank you.

Andrew Binger:

Of course. Thank you so much.

Christopher Benincasa:

This special reading of Tylie Shider's docudrama Whittier takes place this Saturday at Art Yard in Frenchtown. There will also be an artist talk and Q and A session. This event is free of charge. You can register to attend at artyard.org. If you like this episode, be sure to review, subscribe and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast, links relevant to the story, and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found at jerseyarts.com. The Jersey Arts podcast is presented by Art Pride New Jersey, advancing a state of creativity since 1986. This show is created in partnership with the New Jersey State Council on the Arts with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts. This episode was hosted

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and produced by Chris Benincasa. Our executive producers are Jim Atkinson and C Stroud. I'm Chris Benincasa for the Jersey Arts podcast. Thanks for listening.

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