

A Critical Autobiography: Examining the Impact of a Theatre-Making Process on a Theatre Practitioner's Identity Development

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article was to self-reflect on my process of writing, acting, and conversing with audiences about my full-length play, The Contract, and to examine how this experience affected my personal attitude towards being gay. I am a playwright, actor and educator, with over twenty years of professional and educational theatre experience. I describe myself as Black, Christian and gay. Moreover, I wrote a play that explores the struggles of being both gay and Christian in the Black Church. Using critical autobiography as a research methodology, along with Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed as a theoretical framework, I explored the following question: While engaged in the theatre-making process for my play, The Contract, how was my identity as a gay man affected? As a result, I found the theatre to be a sacred space, where I could combat personal fear and internalized homophobia. Furthermore, the theatre-making process was

instrumental in helping me come to terms with my sexuality, come out to others, and explain the dichotomy of being both gay and Christian.

INTRODUCTION

In February 2012, in Tallahassee, Florida, I was interviewed by a television reporter on the campus of Florida A&M University (FAMU). I agreed to this interview to promote my play, *The Contract*, which was being performed there in a black box theatre. The reporter, a middle-aged Black man, asked me my reasons for writing and presenting the play. Rather assuredly, I responded, “I wanted to ‘come out.’ I wanted to be able to have a venue to help explain to people the complexities of being gay and also being in love with God.” Seven years later, watching a YouTube clip of that interview, I recognize that that level of awareness about my initial impetus for writing my play was not always consciously present throughout the theatre-making process. My level of conviction and confidence in outing myself on public television had come from a long journey. Being public and open about my sexuality, especially to a southern Christian audience, was not something—prior to developing *The Contract*—that I was prone to do. Something within me had changed, and for that reason, I wanted to know why.

The purpose of this article is to self-reflect on my process of writing, acting, and conversing with audiences about my full-length play, *The Contract*, and to examine how this experience affected my personal attitude towards being gay. I am a playwright, actor and educator, with over twenty years of professional and educational theatre experience. I describe myself as Black, Christian and gay. Moreover, I wrote a play that explores the struggles of being both gay and Christian in the Black Church. Using critical autobiography as a research methodology, along with Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a theoretical framework, in this article, I shall examine the following question: While engaged in the theatre-making process for my play, *The Contract*, how was my identity as a gay man affected?

LITERATURE REVIEW

For decades, theatre has been strategically used as a means to fight

oppression (Boal, 1985; Bowles & Nadon, 2013), bring awareness to LGBT issues (Halverson, 2005; Paul, 2006), and reduce homophobia (Mulvey & Mandell, 2007). For example, in Susan V. Iverson and Christin Seher's (2014) study, "Using Theatre to Change Attitudes Toward Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students," they investigated theatre's influence on a college campus, using pre- and post-show surveys to measure the impact a performance had on college students' attitudes towards LGBT issues. They found significant positive change in students' attitudes and the potential for inspired action. In Brad Vincent's (2005) study, he used questionnaires and interviews with college-aged gay men to learn about their experiences in elementary, middle and high school, and from his participants' narratives, Vincent crafted a performance script that he used as an educational tool to help school teachers, counselors, and administrators better understand how school policies, curriculum, and instruction affect homosexual students. Multiple researchers (Elsbree & Wong, 2007; Mulvey & Mandell, 2007; Pincus, 2001) have used Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, an interview/verbatim theatre play that describes a town's reaction to the 1998 murder of gay University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepherd, as a tool to discourage homophobia, embrace dialogue, and create awareness and acceptance of the LGBT community.

Theatre has been used to encourage audiences to imagine "how the world could be different and what our lives could be like if we acted in different ways" (Edmiston, 2000). To this day, contemporary playwrights, such as Geoffrey Nauffts (*Next Fall*), Cheryl West (*Before It Hits Home*), and Chris Urch (*The Rolling Stone*), continue to challenge the status quo with storytelling that breaks stereotypical narratives and digs deep to unearth hidden humanities. As Boal (1985) states, "Theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution" (p. 122).

As a theatre artist and educator, I am encouraged by scholars' interests in understanding theatre's impact on audiences' attitudes towards LGBT issues; however, I find a scarcity in scholar-practitioner research that investigates how theatre and the theatre-making process impacts theatre creators. Scholar practitioners Erica Halverson (2005) and Michelle Freire (2007) have both examined the impact of theatre on the identity development of young artists, who were engaged in

writing, crafting, and performing theatre about LGBT issues; however, the research focus was directed towards the students and not themselves. Presently, there is a lack of self-reflective scholarship that examines how playwrights, actors, designers, and directors, particularly of the LGBT community, perceive their own identity development after engaging in theatre-making processes that explores LGBT issues. For that purpose, I have employed critical autobiography, as a research design, to explore my research question.

CRITICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Critical autobiography is an emerging research methodology, grounded in narrative inquiry and critical theory, that allows researchers to make meaning out of human experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988; DuPreeze, 2008; Walker, 2017). With the primary focus of deconstructing one's identity development, critical autobiographical research engages the artist-researcher-teacher in "candid, personal examinations of key moments that teach the self about life" (Walker, 2017, p. 1902). In Anthony Walker's (2013) study, "Living a life of privilege," he used critical autobiography as a research design to unpack his development as a white male educator and to make sense of his racial identity. Using critical autobiography as a reflective means of inquiry, artists-researchers-teachers investigate how various social statuses have made themselves present throughout life and explore how one's knowledge of identity development can be used as an avenue to move beyond them (Walker, 2017, p. 1902).

In this article, I rely on Walker's guide, "Critical Autobiography as Research," to examine how my identity as a gay man has been affected by my involvement in the creation, performance, and discussion of my play, *The Contract*. I acknowledge some readers will find critical autobiographical research riddled with ethical dilemmas, as with qualitative research designs in general; still, there are particular concerns associated with this form of inquiry that bear need for discussion due to the researcher's close connection to the narrative. Walker (2017) discusses three such dilemmas—subjectivity, trustworthiness, and source. He states, "Narrative research itself is not ethically neutral" (p. 1903); instead, critical autobiography is designed to "empower individuals" with the potential to "transform the learning,

values, and identities of individuals, institutions, and greater society” (p. 1905). That said, I concede that playing the role of both researcher and participant distorts any line of perceived objectivity; however, objectivity is not the goal. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest, “the contribution of a narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field” (p. 42).

Autobiographers acknowledge their writings to be both biased and influenced, which is why they should be explanatory in nature (Godfrey, 2003). Walker (2017) admits that “critics of narrative inquiry question the trustworthiness of narrative as a research methodology due to stories not always seeming to reflect reality” (p. 1904). One’s memory and interpretation can differ from person-to-person because narratives reflect the values and norms present in the storyteller’s life (McAdams, 2001). Clements (1999) notes,

Autobiography is ‘first hand’ in a way that biography cannot be; it is after all the work of the subject reflecting the agenda set by the autobiographer for his/her own purpose. Autobiography is problematic in that the subject may find it difficult to be objective about him/herself and, in viewing ourselves from the perspective of the present, it may be difficult to create oneself as one was in the past. (p. 24)

Still, various techniques can be employed to enhance trustworthiness, including member checking (Guba, 1981), searching for disconfirming evidence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), triangulation (Guba, 1981), and thick description (Geertz, 1973; Guba, 1981). For this inquiry, I used multiple data sources, including journals, video-taped performances, recorded television interviews posted on YouTube, and multiple drafts of my play. I member-checked portions of my narrative with two key witnesses to the events. (With their permission, I use their real first names.) I also took Conway’s (1990) words into great consideration when he warned that we often manipulate memory to enhance our own self-image (p. 103), thus, pushing me to craft a narrative that I feel best describes more than a mere positive perspective of my life’s events but rather an aligned content and context for critical examination.

Writing about one's life is not only, as Leggo (1997) suggests, recording, reporting, and repeating the lived story as known and written by the subject; instead, autobiography is also recoding, restorying, and restoring the lived story as unknown and unwritten by the subject. To do this, I turned to Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as a theoretical framework, to help me craft the narrative and make sense of my lived experience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Freire is widely known as the father of Popular Education. Born in Recife, Brazil in 1921, Freire witnessed the poverty, oppression, and dehumanization of Brazil's peasant class and began a quest to awaken their critical consciousness through literacy. As a critical pedagogue, he worked with the Brazilian poor, using teaching methods that encouraged critical inquiry and critical reflection. His work was seen as both dangerous and subversive by wealthy landowners and the Brazilian military, so much so that once the Brazilian military overthrew the government and seized power in 1964, Freire was jailed for his insurgent teaching (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 70).

Freire (1970) argues that education is power and it can be used for freedom or domination. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he awakens the reader's mind to the dehumanizing effects of oppression. He asserts that one of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge men's consciousness (p. 36). The power of oppression is so strong that it numbs one's natural ability to pose questions and challenge the status quo of the dominant culture. Kincheloe (2004) declares that the oppressed become so inundated by the ideologies of their oppressors that they come to see the world and themselves through the oppressor's eyes (p. 72). Marginalized people who have been continuously called *indigenous*, *savage*, *inferior*, or *barbaric* by the oppressor actually begin to believe in these labels and may often refer to themselves as such, reinforcing the oppressor's dominance.

Freire (1970) contends that oppressors use education as a tool to maintain their dominance within a society. Curriculum and teaching styles are framed in ways that validate the privileged while also

certifying the inferiority of students marginalized by social and economic factors (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 71). The oppressor thwarts any attempts to have students, especially those in marginalized areas, awaken their critical consciousness (or what Freire refers to as *conscientização*) to see reality as changeable. Therefore, the oppressor's educational preference for the masses is the banking concept. Freire coined the term *banking* to describe an educational process, which transforms students into mere depositories and teachers into depositors of information.

In this banking style, students simply receive, memorize, and regurgitate information back to the teacher, preferably the same manner in which it was deposited. Students are expected to refrain from asking challenging questions and simply embrace the curriculum of the all-knowing-teacher as empirical truth. Freire (1970) warns that students who accept this passive role imposed upon them are more likely to simply adapt to the world as is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them (p. 58). This results in a submersion of students' consciousness and they feel a sense of hopelessness to change their oppressive situation. Using Freirean theories to ground my narrative and draw meaning from my experience, I will now share my story.

GAY AND GOD

I was three years old when I became keenly aware of my sexuality. Growing up in Moss Point, Mississippi and being raised in the Black Church, I struggled with being both gay and Christian, and I even went so far as to suppress and denounce my sexuality for the sake of my spirituality. From a young age, I involved myself heavily within my church, hoping that church would cure me of my sexual nature. I attended church almost every day—Monday choir rehearsal, Tuesday bible study, Wednesday prayer meeting, Thursday youth church, and Sunday worship service. When I heard preachers and church leaders speak about homosexuality as an abomination to God, I joined with other congregants in expressing my agreement to the rhetoric by saying *Amen*. I did what Freire (1970) warned against—taking a passive role, adapting to the world as is, and accepting the fragmented view of reality, which was being deposited into me (p. 58). In so doing,

I maintained my status in the church. I served as an usher, led devotion, and sang in the choir. I worshipped God openly and was not made to feel ostracized because at that time, I, too, condemned homosexual behavior. However, when I reached college and began to engage in self-examination and self-reflection outside the church, I began to see church differently, particularly my role within the institution.

After high school, I left Mississippi and moved to Florida to attend college. Upon arrival, I immediately found a new church home and met my first boyfriend. I struggled immensely with the relationship. I felt it was wrong, so I ended it and devoted myself to church as I had done in my early years. This pattern continued for four years: I would meet a new boyfriend, feel convicted about it, and quickly end it. The internalized homophobia I experienced led to feelings of deep shame, confusion, and distrust. Then, I went to graduate school.

In the University of Florida's MFA acting program, I began to develop a greater awareness of self, and through my theatre training, I began to critically reflect on my life and question my experiences. I became engaged in what Freire (1970) calls "acts of cognition, not transferal of information" (p. 67) because though I still attended church regularly, I stopped affirming sermons that bashed homosexuals as abominations to God. I did not protest openly, but I also did not clap and say *Amen*. Furthermore, I developed a new romantic relationship with one of my male classmates and I was feeling a lot less guilt about it.

Then, one day after class, two of my peers, Marci and Felecia, who are both African American and self-identify as Christians, invited me to attend church with them the following Sunday. They attended a different church from me—one that was considered more progressive—and they promised I would enjoy it. After they raved about the pastor and the service, I happily accepted their invitation and met them at church that Sunday.

For the first ninety minutes, I enjoyed the service immensely. The choir sounded phenomenal. The people were warm and inviting. There were moments of laughter and fellowship. The pastor's sermon was uplifting and inspiring. I felt like a welcomed guest.

After the sermon, towards the benediction, the pastor began to tell a story. He recounted a time he visited a church in New York City.

He was invited to a Unitarian church. Upon his arrival, he began to notice there were openly gay and lesbian members in the congregation, and this Unitarian church seemed to approve of their presence. However, the pastor told us this story as a warning. He cautioned that we should be careful of where we worship because not all churches are the same. He condemned the Unitarian church's acceptance of the homosexual and said, "Be not confused, God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." The organist bellowed a tune and the congregation erupted in laughter and applause.

I was sitting between Marci and Felecia, who I believe were both aware, at least suspicious, that I was gay. I was seething in anger. Though they did not respond like the other congregants, based on their stoic behavior, I was convinced they agreed with the pastor's statement. I could feel the tension between us.

Feeling embarrassed and completely ostracized, I made a conscious decision that I would not subject myself to that type of experience ever again. Freire (1970) demands that the duty of the oppressed is to liberate themselves. He says that oppressors cannot find the "strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both" (p. 28). Once the service ended, Marci, Felecia, and I got in our cars, drove our separate ways, and said nothing about what had transpired. However, later that evening, I prayed and promised God that in lieu of attending church, I would wake each morning and spend the first half-hour of my day in private meditation. I opted for private worship and decided to sever my relationship with the Black Church.

In hindsight, I suppose I could have spoken to the pastor or church leaders about my concerns or even to Marci and Felecia; however, I was afraid that my inquiries (which dealt with sexuality and interpretations of the bible) would have resulted in me being shamed or scorned and feeling more ostracized. The Black Church is not structured in such a way where critical questioning is applauded (Mattis et al, 2004; Miller, 2007). Robin Gillespie (2009) states,

There seems to be an unspoken but real rule in the Black Church that discourages and even forbids critical questioning of topics, concepts, or ideologies that control the basic manner in which

people perform life. Parishioners understand this tacit denial of a person's right to question actions of [their] church leaders because critical questioning could be viewed as disobedient, defiant, and disrespectful from both the perspective of the questioner and the person viewed as the authority. (p. 29-30)

Knowing that I had my doubts and confusion about being gay and Christian and understanding that at the time, if asked to defend my position, I simply could not, I chose to hold my tongue, safeguard my questions and dissatisfaction, leave the institution, and pursue my own spiritual path. When I left the Black Church, I walked away with a barrage of lingering questions and unresolved conflict. Needing a viable, healthy method in which to dialogue about my spirituality and sexuality, I turned to theatre and wrote a play—*The Contract*.

THE CONTRACT, A PLAY

My personal knowledge of playwriting stems from twenty years of experience as a theatre practitioner. I have taken graduate courses in playwriting; read Aristotle's *Poetics*, Downs and Wright's *Playwriting: From Formula to Form*, and McLaughlin's *The Playwright's Process*; and written four full-length plays, which have had several readings and productions. My second play, *The Contract*, was the winner of the Kennedy Center's Lorraine Hansberry National Playwriting award.

The Contract is a full-length play that follows the plight of Bishop Daryl Jackson, a high-profile southern African American mega-church preacher, who is at the height of his success with multiple parishes, book deals and a sizeable fortune. Yet, he holds a secret that would endanger his Christian empire and ruin his reputation—he has sexual affairs with men. In order to ensure total discretion, save marriage and ministry, his wife, Deborah, takes control and draws up financial agreements between Daryl and his lovers. The contractual arrangement seems to work, until Daryl falls in love with one of his suitors, Paul—a brilliant and sensitive graduate student, who challenges Daryl's ideas of faith, identity, and sexuality. Wanting to live in truth and share a life with Paul, Daryl takes the ultimate risk and comes out to his congregation, causing a major scandal.

In 2010, when I was a Ph.D. candidate at New York University, I

completed my first draft of *The Contract* and self-produced a workshop production of the play at the Kraine Theatre in New York City's East Village. The purpose was to collaborate with professional actors and a director to present a staging of the play for an invited audience of theatre artists, who offered feedback about the play's plot, themes, characters, and structure. The play was submitted to the Kennedy Center's American College Theatre Festival, where I won the Lorraine Hansberry National Playwriting Award. As part of this award, I worked with a dramaturg, revised the play, and presented it as a reading at a regional theatre in Washington, D.C. Then, in January/February 2012, I worked with Florida A&M University's Essential Theatre to mount a revised production of the play in Tallahassee, Florida. I performed in this production and played the lead character, Daryl. For brevity's sake, I will discuss three major moments throughout this theatre-making process that I believe affected my identity development: (1) drafting the play's major dramatic question, (2) acting in the play while playing opposite my classmate Marci, and (3) engaging in a post-show discussion with audience members.

THE THEATRE-MAKING PROCESS

My first notable moment was during the writing of the play, when I formulated the play's major dramatic question. For playwrights, the major dramatic question is the play's spine that playwrights use to frame and build each scene. In Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, I argue that her play's major dramatic question is *how do you know when a boy becomes a man?* In her play, we follow Walter Lee Younger and his mother, watching their journey as they both struggle to define manhood and jockey for the position of being head of the house. In my case, as I attempted to identify the major dramatic question for *The Contract*, I wanted first to explore the notion of *what happens when a revered Christian man comes out of the closet as gay?* However, I struggled with that storyline because I had no life experience in that regard from which my imagination could draw. Personally, I had only revealed my sexual orientation to people outside the church. Also, in 2010, there were no examples in the media of prominent gay Christians coming out of the closet, especially not Black ones, so any storyline I could imagine would have had to be based

solely on fantasy. Not wanting to go that route, I decided to explore the notion of *what factors influence a person of Christian faith to remain hidden in the closet?* In this regard, I had direct knowledge in which to offer my imaginary characters, and by choosing this question, I had a means by which I could examine my life with a level of distance.

According to Philip Taylor (1996), “Distance enables a possible new perspective on a familiar event, a rethinking of an ingrained belief” (p. 44). Creative distance affords the opportunity to explore a familiar topic in a new way. Taylor writes, “[It] makes the familiar strange, it decentres the principal investigator from the lived event and provides a valuable opportunity to hear other voices, see new faces, while building a comprehensive understanding of the one event” (p. 44).

Distance may have provided some level of creative detachment; nonetheless, I was still emotionally attached to the work. One of the more difficult scenes for me to write that went to the heart of my conflicting Christian beliefs was in the second act, Scene Twelve, of the play. By this scene, Bishop Daryl Jackson has fallen in love with Paul and wants to live with him on a more permanent basis. However, Paul has reservations because Daryl wants to keep the relationship discreet, whereas Paul wants Daryl to accept his sexuality and come out to his congregation. Paul says,

PAUL. Black churches in the South are filled with gays. They're in the choirs, the usher boards, the pews and pulpits. It's no secret. If it wasn't for gays and women, there would be no church.

DARYL. I'm one man, Paul. I can't change two thousand years of church doctrine. You're asking too much of me.

For Daryl, this is an impossible request—to come out the closet and continue preaching in a southern Black church. When Paul presses Daryl to explain his reasoning, Daryl erupts,

DARYL. You think I'm afraid? You think I care about what those people might say or think about me? It goes much deeper than that.

PAUL. Then, what is it? What is the big deal?

DARYL. Hell! That's the big deal. Big fiery burning place of

everlasting punishment seething in torment of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Fire and Brimstone. You ever heard of it? That's the big deal.

In this passage, Daryl exposes his most closely guarded and unspoken fear—the retribution of hell. Quinn, Dickson-Gomez and Kelly (2016) affirm this sentiment in their study of thirty Black male youths, who attest to the notion of homosexuality as sin and universally promoted by Black Church pastors, whose “convictions were rooted in scriptures, which pastors readily cited and interpreted to support their beliefs” (p. 529). For homosexuals, raised in the Black Church, these teachings can have lasting impacts. In the play, Daryl speaks to this experience.

DARYL. For the last thirty years of my life, I have felt the flames of that fire, searing against my back, reminding me day after day after day of where I might be headed. Alright? And even though I believe that God is a forgiving, compassionate, and understanding God, and that He loves me unconditionally, there's still a major part of me that thinks . . . (*Daryl breathes*).

For me, exposing this fear within the play felt two-fold. On one hand, I felt embarrassed because I knew there was a part of me that believed in the existence of hell and that I might be destined for it, but on the other hand, I also felt like I was shining a light in a dark place and ultimately finding that there was nothing of substance lurking in the shadows. This led me, in the play, to ask a deeper question, *what is the meaning of unconditional love?*

PAUL. Daryl, when we first met, you told me the only definitive thing you knew was that God loves you, regardless of who you sleep with.

DARYL. I lied. Sometimes I struggle with it. Most times I struggle with it. The lines are blurred and I'm still trying to figure it out, which is why I can't come out. Because if I came out, then in essence, I'd be saying to the world that what we're doing is right. I can't do that.

PAUL. Because you think it's wrong.

DARYL. Because I don't know.

But I did know. In writing that scene, I had come to terms with a satisfied knowledge that regardless of what the scriptures say about homosexuality, I believed in a greater universal truth—that God loves me unconditionally.

The play was offering me a mechanism by which I could have an internal dialogue about the issues and factors that impeded me from living an open, authentic life. At that time, opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and critical questioning within the Black Church did not always exist (Cone, 1978; Gillespie, 2009; Mattis et al, 2004; Miller, 2007), for as Freire (1970) proclaims, “Dialogue further requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in the power to make and remake, to create and recreate, faith in their vocation to be fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all)” (p. 88).

After writing the play, the time had come for me to share my work in a public forum. Now, I could rehearse the play with other artists and present it to audiences, particularly those who identify as Black, Christian, and southern, and engage in a critical dialogue. After the fanfare of winning the Kennedy Center award, I was asked by my former undergraduate college, FAMU, to present the play in their Theatre Unbound: Writing for Life series. The play was to be produced on campus and I was asked to play the lead. At the time, one of the theatre faculty members working at FAMU was Marci—my classmate from graduate school who invited me to visit the church that helped to set much of this experience in motion. Marci, a rather talented actress, was also asked to perform in the play as Deborah—Daryl’s wife. The irony of this situation had not slipped by me. Although Marci and I had known each other for years, went to graduate school together, and performed opposite in other plays, up until this point, we had never conversed about my sexuality. I had known Marci to be a Christian, who interpreted the bible more literally, so I steered clear of gay-related conversations to maintain an amicable relationship. However, on the first day of rehearsal after a table read of the play, I felt compelled to have a private conversation with her and give full-disclosure about my sexuality.

When I officially told Marci I was gay, she asked, “What took you so long?” Her question was simple, but for me, the answer was far more complex. Kincheloe (2004) reinforces Freire’s sentiment when he

declares that the oppressed become “so inundated by the ideologies of the oppressor that they come to see the world and themselves through the oppressor’s eyes” (p. 72). For years, I had been living a double life because I struggled with the teachings and ideologies that had been deposited into me within the Black Church, and even though I left the institution, I carried within me what Boal and Epstein (1990) characterize as the cop in the head—internalized oppression—or what Freire (1970) calls the effects of a submerged consciousness that had been absorbed into an oppressive reality. In effect, I became my own oppressor, silencing my voice and limiting myself from living a fully actualized life. Prior to writing my play, I didn’t have the words to express the dichotomy of being both gay and Christian because I had serious doubts that the two could exist harmoniously within one body. However, now, the play offered me two things: a mechanism in which I could question and unpack my internalized homophobia and a means whereby to tell others, via storytelling, the factors that impeded me, in the past, from fully embracing my authentic self and coming out.

After a three-week rehearsal process, Marci and I performed the play in a black box theatre on FAMU’s campus. An undergraduate student played the role of Paul. After a Sunday matinee, we had a post-show talk back discussion with the audience. In the play, I purposely left the question of whether or not homosexuality is a sin open to interpretation. The main character simply says, “I don’t know.” This opening also left room for a dialectic conversation amongst the audience. In the talk back, I saw Black, Christian, southern audience members debate the bible, define unconditional love, and embrace the humanity of homosexuals in Black churches. I also found myself for the first time, presenting my truth in an authentic way, to a wider audience.

DISCUSSION

Robert L. Miller, Jr., Director and Associate Professor in the School of Social Welfare at University of Albany-SUNY, states that the active presence of homosexuals in Black churches is a “widely known but largely unaddressed truth” (2007, p. 52). Gay men regularly attend Black churches, even while being subjected to homophobic rhetoric (Andrews, 2017; Quinn et al, 2016). Scholars David M. Barnes and Ilan H. Meyer (2012) argue that over time, continuous exposure to non-

affirming religious settings could lead to higher internalized homophobia, more depressive symptoms, and less psychological well-being. Researchers have linked internalized homophobia to a litany of negative outcomes, including suicidal thoughts, sexual risk-taking, intimacy problems, anxiety, and lower self-esteem (Fields et al, 2016; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Herek et al, 2009; Rowen & Malcolm, 2002; Williamson, 2000).

In spite of the research and the fact that gay marriage has become legal within the United States, many Black churches have maintained their long-standing negative positions on homosexuality. In their qualitative study, based on 21 semi-structured interviews with Black Church pastors, Quinn et al (2016) states that “although pastors espoused messages of love and acceptance, they overwhelmingly believed homosexuality was a sin and had difficulty accepting” young Black same-gender loving men. Horace Griffin, an Episcopalian minister and scholar, claims that gay men who attend such churches often internalize religious homophobia, accepting the belief that they are “inherently sinful because they are sexually attracted to the same sex” (2000, p. 149). With these convictions, gay men in Black churches find it difficult to discuss their sexuality within the institution for fear of rejection (Fields et al, 2016).

Mattis et al (2004) argues that critical dialogue is lacking within the Black Church and desperately needed if the institution is to maintain its relevance in a changing society. They also argue that there is a lack of opportunity for congregational members to voice their concerns and critiques of the Black Church. Congregants who openly engage in critical inquiry and challenge the status quo are often frowned upon by church leaders, who view their critical reflection, critical thinking, and critical questioning as disobedient, defiant and disrespectful (Mattis et al, 2004; Miller, 2007; Gillespie, 2009; Webb, 2016).

If homosexuals, who attend Black churches, cannot find space or capacity within the institution to engage in critical inquiry, then spaces outside the church must be made available to foster dialogue. For me, theatre was my sacred space to combat personal fear and internalized homophobia. The theatre-making process was instrumental in helping me come to terms with my sexuality, come out to others, and explain the dichotomy of being both gay and Christian.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to answer a particular question about the impact a theatre-making process had on my identity development as a gay man. While I concede that my journey of combatting internalized homophobia has been affected by numerous contributing factors throughout my life, I do believe the creation, performance and discussion of my play, *The Contract*, with audiences was a major factor in helping me to critically reflect, question, and examine the teachings and ideologies that helped shape my identity. Whereas, this study is self-reflective and limited, only focusing on my life's events, I do find that theatre, which has been shown to be effective in changing audiences' attitudes towards LGBT issues (Iverson and Seher, 2014), can also be useful, as Halverson (2005) agrees, to assist artists and practitioners in examining their identity development. Thus, I hope other artists-researchers-teachers will explore this type of self-reflective research and share their stories.

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