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COUNT:

Stories from America's Death Row

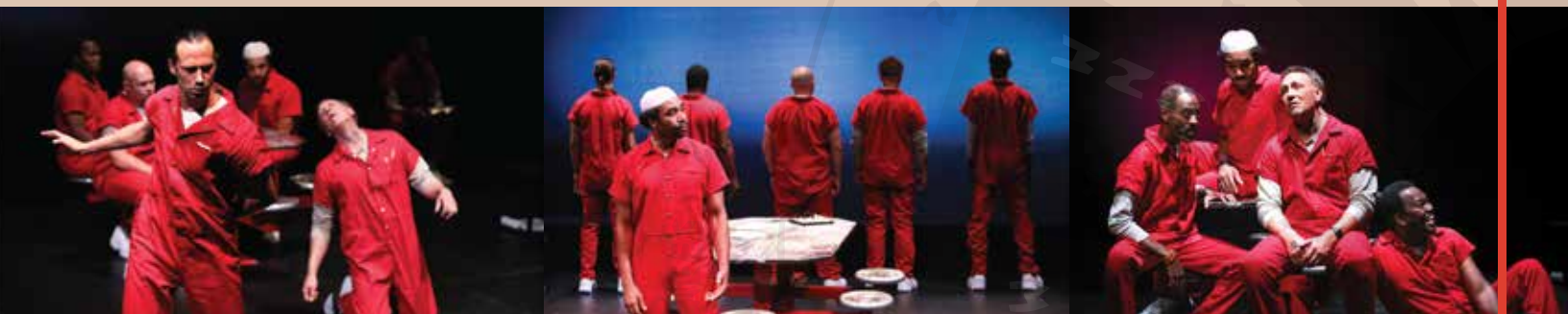
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COUNT: STORIES FROM AMERICA'S DEATH ROW

For the past 5 years, Hidden Voices has collaborated with men on death rows across the country to create the project **SERVING LIFE: ReVisioning Justice**. One outcome of this collaboration is the 90-minute, 6-character play **COUNT: Stories from America's Death Row**; "During a single day on death row, six men unpack their personal inheritances of violence, racism, mental illness, and surprising love. As we join their lively, difficult, and ultimately affirming search for a life well-lived, we begin to wonder who is disposable, who counts, and what justice means when the blindfold is our own."

2 min. trailer: <https://vimeo.com/261762234/d72f1bfb57>

When **COUNT** premiered at PlayMakers Repertory in Chapel Hill, NC. Every performance sold out, breaking box office records and testifying to a profound communal desire to understand the lives our society/culture has chosen to obscure.



Here are a few responses from audience members:

"Count is remarkable documentary theater. This powerful and disturbing play needs to be taken on the road, most especially to General Assemblies, as well as schools, churches, and civic organizations including all Chambers of Commerce across the country."

"I want to emphasize how important the play is. Count's premier should be just the beginning of its expansive life. The play gives voice and flesh to utterly discarded people in our society. It is a picture that needs to be seen by many. I asked a friend at the play on Sunday night about his reaction. He told me that the play was like a compression of 12 years of his experiences as a prison chaplain."

"A powerful window into a world few of us can ever know. How heartbreaking it is that such suffering could be avoided if every human had the benefit of a healthy childhood and the presumption of success. The reminder that "now is all there is" and the presence with which those on death row must live should be an inspiration to us all."

"Thank you for letting us into these lives. This has definitely changed my view of death row and the prison system. I have a 9 year old son (of color) and can easily see how he could become victimized. This was truly eye-opening, and I hope each of these stories inspires others for change. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I will look for ways to be more involved."

We know art can transform people and cultures; we know we have the opportunity, in the foreseeable future, to eliminate not only executions but the inhumanity of our vast carceral state. One powerful pathway is sharing these stories with the target audiences these men asked us to reach: those with "a voice and a vote."

Hidden Voices hopes to bring these stories to communities across the country by connecting with production companies, justice organizations, and university faculty and students who share a mission to generate community conversation and a desire to invigorate the civic will toward re-visioning justice.

MORE RESPONSES TO COUNT

FROM THE PRESS:

"There is irony in the playwright's choice to set the play on New Year's Eve — these men have no "new year" ahead of them, and they are unable to participate in the celebration that is shared across our culture."

<http://triangleartsandentertainment.org/2017/08/lynden-harris-count-is-an-engaging-new-play-set-on-a-maximum-security-prisons-death-row/>

FROM A FAMILY MEMBER:

"What you all did last night was amazing. It wasn't so much about getting the public to stand either for or against the death penalty; it was more about educating others on the fact that every man and woman sitting on death row is a person that deserves to be valued. Regardless of what they did to get there, they are human and we must show compassion. All lives matter and my brother was one of those. Although everything that happened in April is still brutally raw, what you depicted last night through that beautiful piece of art captured exactly what my brother went through for over 20 years. He was a person with a caring heart that . . . left this earth a different person than the man he was when he entered that prison . . . yet his voice was never heard. So, thank you again for what you all did last night it was truly a blessing to me and my family."

MORE FROM THE AUDIENCE:

"This is a stunning show. I was in tears--but there's humor too: profoundly human. I hope the show travels...more people need to see this work."

"This production of Count goes beyond mere theater into the realm of real social change. Thank you for producing such an outstanding and important show."

"This was an amazing production. It was valuable to me to know that it was built from a project directly with prisoners. What a powerful combination of art and activism."

"Excellent play! I very much admire you taking on an important but difficult topic that touches one the most important issues in our society."

"I just wanted to tell you what an amazing performance it was. The stories were heart-breaking in their reality, and my friend and I both walked away in awe. I wanted to send an email telling you how the performance impacted me. Thank you again for giving us all a look into the daily lives of men our law system (and ourselves) have condemned."

"The play was an amazing production. Congratulations to the author, director, actors for giving us a dramatic experience that will stay with us for a long time. I hope you get to perform this play in many venues. It is worthy!"

ABOUT THE SCRIPT

"We are all broken by something." --Bryan Stevenson

"Death Row ain't no place for nobody. It's pain, loneliness, and heartache. But what I never thought would exist is, there was brothers on Death Row that was good peoples who wanted to help us. So I been loved by a family here, too." --Death Row Exoneree (Interviewed the night before his exoneration)

SYNOPSIS

During a single day on death row, six men unpack their personal inheritances of violence, racism, mental illness, poverty, and surprising love. Based on years of conversation and writing with men sentenced to death or sentenced as children to life without parole, COUNT invites us into a stark fluorescent otherworld where the condemned struggle to revision what it means to live fully in the face of scheduled death. As we join their lively, difficult, and ultimately affirming search for a life well-lived, we begin to wonder who is disposable, who counts, and what justice means when the blindfold is our own.

CAST OF CHARACTERS: The characters are fictional. All the stories they tell are true.

BROWNSVILLE: mid-40s. African American. Not religious. Home: Grew up in Brownsville area of NYC. Brownsville is fit, edgy, smart, intense. Spends his free time playing and studying chess.

KANSAS CITY: 26. Biracial, Latino/Black. Catholic-Baptist upbringing. Home: Grew up in the projects in Kansas City, MO. Kansas City is small, artistic. Spends his free time sketching.

LONG BEACH: Late 50s-60s. African American. Buddhist. Home: Military, moved often, landed in California. Long Beach is trim, neat, self-educated, introvert. Spends his free time listening to NPR and reading, but his eyesight is failing.

MAINE: Mid-late 30s. White. Lapsed Catholic. Home: Small town. Working class neighborhood in Maine. Maine struggles with multiple mental illnesses and has been incarcerated since early teens. Spends his free time working out and studying legal documents.

RICHMOND: 40. Biracial, Black/White. Muslim. Home: Grew up in the projects in Richmond, VA. A big man, Richmond spends his free time writing poetry, freestyling, and practicing basketball, moving and dunking as punctuation to his speech.

WHITEHOUSE: Early 30s. Tri-racial Black, White, American Indian. Home: Grew up in rural and small-town trailer parks in the South. Loves country music and rap, spends his free time studying his Native heritage and creating dream catchers, mainly for gifts.

SETTING

Death Row. Lighting defines the cells. Within each rectangle of light, six evenly-spaced open cubes designate beds. Under each cube/bed, loose papers, pens, photos, toilet paper, towels, washcloths, combs, are scattered, stacked, or neatly stored. A central metal table with fixed stools serves as common room, chow hall, etc.

CONTEXT FOR COUNT: Stories from America's Death Row

Since 2013, Hidden Voices has collaborated with men on death rows across the country to envision a multi-arts project able to generate the civic will to revision justice. By challenging our assumptions about guilt and innocence and by providing a vehicle for the public to connect with the actual lives hidden within an impenetrable system, we reinvigorate some fundamental questions.

- Who is innocent?
- Who is harmed?
- How do we heal centuries of oppression?
- What needs to change for our criminal justice system to reflect a community dedicated to equity and inclusion?

WHY FOCUS ON DEATH ROW?

Death row is a microcosm of our over-incarcerated nation. Almost all residents are low-wealth. They are disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities. Most endured multiple adverse childhood experiences, from violence to physical and sexual abuse to impoverished conditions and high crime neighborhoods. Psychological disorders, including depression, bipolar disorder, and trauma-related disorders, are rampant, and mental illness is itself a risk factor for landing in jail.

To add to this perspective, hundreds have been convicted who were actually innocent of the crime.

Often, we imagine those on death row are the "worst of the worst." Yet, only 1% of murders in the US have resulted in a death sentence. Are those living on death row really the "worst," or are they simply those with the "worst" contributing factors: The least competent lawyers, the lowest income levels, the most aggressive DA's, and the darkest skin color?



CONTEXT FOR COUNT: Stories from America's Death Row

A SNAPSHOT OF OUR NATIONAL STATE OF INCARCERATION

The US incarcerates more of its population than any other country in the world. We now hold 25% of the world's prisoners. The US also spends about 70 billion dollars on corrections every year.

EFFECT ON FAMILIES: More than 10 million children have parents who have been in prison or jail. Half these children are younger than 10. Almost 3 million children have a parent who is currently incarcerated. The effects of this massive prison population stretch to the very foundations of our society.

POVERTY/WEALTH: The American prison system is filled with some of the poorest people in this country, people who lack both a quality education and access to good jobs. Indeed, boys born into households in the bottom 10% of earners are 20 times more likely to be in prison on a given day than children born into the top 10%. As far as the relationship between wealth and the death penalty, the former warden of California's San Quentin Prison has said bluntly that capital punishment is "a privilege of the poor."

MENTAL ILLNESS: Department of Justice statistics state that 64 percent of local jail inmates, 56 percent of state prisoners, and 45 percent of federal prisoners suffer from serious mental illnesses. Many more suffer from other mental issues. The US prison system is now the largest mental health treatment facility in the country.

EQUITY: Across the country, African Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at a rate that is 5.1 times the rate for whites. In Iowa, Minnesota, New Jersey, Vermont, and Wisconsin, the disparity is greater than 10 to 1. Additionally, people convicted of murdering a white person are far more likely to receive a death sentence than those convicted of killing a person of color.

A SNAPSHOT OF SOLUTIONS

RE-VISION THE PRISON SYSTEM: In Sweden, the Correctional Officers fill both security and rehabilitative roles. Officers are assigned to specific prisoners and actively monitor and assist with planning and progress toward their life after release. In "open prisons," prisoners and staff eat together, do not wear uniforms, and prisoners are able to commute to jobs and visit family while electronically monitored. As the director general of prisons explains, "It has to be a goal to get them back out into society in better shape than they were when they came in." (The Guardian, Jan. 15, 2015)

IMPLEMENT RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND RESTORATIVE PRACTICES: There are numerous restorative initiatives taking place throughout the criminal justice process, from pre-arrest to post-sentencing, including juvenile diversion programs, victim-offender dialogue, conflict resolution among prisoners, preparation for release, and community re-entry.

SUGGESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

We have included a list of community-engaged conversations that have proved successful following a performance or as a special event in concert with the production.

Focus: Civil Litigation, Civil Rights, and Racial Discrimination

Focus: Mitigation; Public and Capital Defenders

Focus: Education and School Reform; School to Prison Pipeline

Focus: Faith and Incarceration (with faith leaders from various spiritual traditions who work in carceral settings)

Focus: Artistic Process, Inspiration, and this Production

Focus: Restorative Justice

Here is a simple example of a facilitated conversation with Restorative Justice practitioners:

The facilitator may ask Question #1 and then offer their own short, personal response as a model for the audience. This process helps prevent the common lag time before the first audience member responds. This step should only be necessary for the Question #1.

1. Which story or stories most resonates with you? What touches you about that particular story?

2. Is there an issue or theme you notice that seems critical to our understanding of incarceration/the death penalty?

3. In Restorative Justice, the first question we ask is: "Who was harmed?" In the context of these stories, how would you answer that question?

4. In Restorative Justice, another fundamental question is: "What needs to be done to repair the harm?" When you consider these stories, how might you answer the question? On a personal level or a national or community scale, what actions might repair that harm?

5. In Restorative Justice, a third question is "Who is responsible for repairing the harm?" Can you imagine a step you might take to repair a harm named tonight?