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Where We Stand, written by Donnetta Lavinia Grays, directed
by Dwandra Nickole Lampkin, Summit Theatre
Performance, May 22, 2021.

Reviewed by Ben Tebbe

On a warm evening in May, on the campus of Marian University in Indianapolis, a lone actor hummed her way from the grassy audience area to the nearly empty stage of the Allen Whitehill Clowes Amphitheatre. On her way, she subtly encouraged the diverse gathering of 50 or so souls to join her in rhythmic clapping to keep time as her hum transformed into a song reminiscent of a spiritual.

She was inviting us along. Our act of clapping together in unison creating a community. And the story she was ready to tell was all about community.

Where We Stand is a new play by Donnetta Lavinia Grays and from May 21 to 23, 2021, was presented as a staged reading by *Summit Performance* Indianapolis. The play weaves poetry, song, and theatre together in a unique experience. A solo performer, named simply “Man,” attends to us as an “everyman” or perhaps a better description would be as a griot in the great tradition of African storytellers. As Man begins, he is pleading for forgiveness—pleading for his very life—grateful that we are “holding our stones” until his story can be told. What unfolds is moving and relatable. A story of someone on the outside who wants in. Of someone who is bombarded with messages to make his life “better.” Out of the blue he is presented with a bargain from a “golden” stranger with a quick fix to turn him and his town from a “used to be” into a “still could be.” But it all will come at a cost.

Man, in this staged reading is played with full, powerful delivery by Manon Voice. Though Ms. Voice is not a traditional actor, she is a talented artist, poet, and spoken-word performer. Throughout

the story she embodies several other townspeople. And while her physical performance vocabulary may have been a bit limited, her robust vocal instrument facilitated clear definition of each new character being introduced. As a staged reading, Voice kept her script with her, but she displayed complete command of the tale belying the fact that she and director Dwandra Nickole Lampkin rehearsed only a week. The ease and comfort with which they fostered community throughout the play was manifest.

Where We Stand, though in many ways a straightforward narrative about a downtrodden Man being swayed to a quick fix, is profound because of its medium. Theatre has always created community when an audience joins performers in a space to share a story. But in this case, we as audience are also forced to *become* the community of the story. In the end, we must decide the fate of Man. Choose *forgiveness* or *accountability*. *Compassion* or *punishment*. One of the striking things about this piece is that the playwright has insisted the performer be Black. As a white man, I felt the weight of passing judgement on this character. Additionally, it occurred to me that we as the community in the story were complicit in the town's downfall. For me, all blame could not be placed on Man. On this particular Saturday evening, the majority of our community chose forgiveness. And Man was grateful.

At times, it feels a bit like Grays is trying to fit too many big themes in her piece and the ending is rather abrupt following the vote. But overall, the rhythm she creates with the piece is captivating. The play calls up notes of religion and freedom and mercy. And she captures the truth of humanity that what we all want is community, friendship. And maybe even more so after a year of pandemic life and protests demanding equity for Black bodies. Gratitude, mercy, and compassion certainly go a long way to cultivate community.

Summit Performance, in a lovely touch, enlisted Danicia Monét Malone to moderate a post-show discussion which was a beautiful extension of our community experience rounding out a beautiful late-spring evening. As a professional, women-focused theatre company Summit has produced several

staged readings over its few-year history with more planned in the future. Through this outlet they can present newer plays or harder-to-fully-produce plays. But they have the formula down, and with Summit one can expect enough “stage” and minimal “reading” for a full experience. An experience with a community.

Ben Tebbe is an assistant professor and director of the Marian University, Indianapolis, theatre program.