

'Ferguson' Play Could Change the Narrative on Police, Violence, and Race

One of the more interesting theatrical events of the year is set to happen on October 19th in New York City. That's when journalist and documentarian Phelim McAleer's play *Ferguson* will open at Urban Stages theater for a three-week run. The production is likely to force a wholesale re-evaluation of the events that took place in a Missouri town in August 2014 during which a white police officer shot a black man named Michael Brown.

Phelim is my writing partner on a different play which we are working on that's planned for presentation in San Francisco next year. But I know a good play, and, having read it, I can say that *Ferguson* is a remarkable piece of "investigative theater."

For those not familiar with the term, I must explain. Also called "documentary theater," investigative theater is the staging of work in which the audience is shown actors performing dialogue taken from actual testimony. Most often, this material is culled by interviewers who are sent out to speak with participants who took a part in controversial events. This technique has been used by left-wing theater groups in order to promote their ideas and beliefs.

Among the most well-known recent adopters of this method are two New York-based groups: the Tectonic Theater Company and The Civilians. The first of these theater companies went and interviewed one hundred people in a small Wyoming town for their play *Laramie*, a dramatization meant to persuade audiences that a young man in Wyoming named Matthew Shepard was killed because he was gay – a claim that has since [come into question](#). The Civilians have employed these techniques to lecture white upper-middle-class New Yorkers about the effects of gentrification.

McAleer sticks much closer to the facts in *Ferguson*, and his tale is a shocker, one which suggests that mainstream media coverage of what happened in Missouri was false and misleading. McAleer's source for his drama is the grand jury testimony in the case. This was subsequently released into the public record. McAleer has whittled this down into a relatively short, suspenseful drama. Although the testimony is presented word for word from the actual record, McAleer ends it with a twist: he asks the audience members in attendance to vote on whether or not to indict Officer Darren Wilson for his actions.

McAleer's play first gained notoriety last year when he arranged for its staged public reading in Los Angeles. Because the trial testimony, which comes from the actual eyewitness

accounts of what happens, refutes the claims of leftist groups like Black Lives Matter, supporters of the group within his cast walked out. That led to prominent coverage in *The Los Angeles Times* and elsewhere. But favorable reviews for the presentation followed when the reading did take place.

McAleer is a controversialist. A native of Ireland, he has worked alongside his wife Ann McElhinney in producing much talked-about conservative documentaries on such subjects as fracking and the crimes of abortion doctor [Kermit Gosnell](#).

Now he is bringing his show about the events in Ferguson to New York, the nation's media capital. Broadway vet Jerry Dixon is the director. It will be interesting to see whether the media tries to ignore the production, one which McAleer says he wants eventually to bring to Broadway.

Will the truth of what really happened get out? We will all found out in a matter of weeks.

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