

CALL-AND-RESPONSE
A TEN-MINUTE PLAY
BY MARCUS SCOTT

Play Title: *Call-And-Response*

Short Synopsis: Peter Bowers made a phone call whereupon Morgan Whitaker, attending his sister's sweet sixteen birthday party was viciously gunned down by a S.W.A.T. team. Earlier that day, Peter was uninvited to the celebration by Jada, the birthday girl. In a local supermarket, Peter is accompanied by college student Tracee House and S.W.A.T. captain John Rivera, the man responsible for using tactical leadership to ensure lethal force against the victim. Throughout the conversation the three discuss the events as they happened and the impending consequences of the actions of both call and responder. *Call-And-Response* explores race relations in America, white male privilege, dog-whistle politics, swatting and police brutality.

Playwright's Note:

This is a FAST and ENERGETIC and URGENT play with pockets of SILENCE.

Actors are encouraged to find rhythm in the language that works naturally for them.

[...] denotes a pause, often a moment charged with energy. Can be a silence, or an action moment depending on the character.

Dialogue with a dash at the end represents rapid interruption. A slash within a line indicates overlapping speech. Lack of punctuation is intentional, and an indicator that the words be read in a rush, or as a run on sentence. Lack of capital letters may indicate a character isn't feeling very confident.

Supporting information may be projected.

Ex: scene titles and at the director's discretion, some stage directions

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

A great of of this play was conceived and written in confines of New Dramatists, a beacon that has assisted many playwrights, musical theatre writers and storytellers.

CALL-AND-RESPONSE

CHARACTERS

1 Women / 2 Men

PETER BOWERS (16 / White / Male)

Entitled, privileged, mildly insufferable, kind of intense; has difficulty finding the balance between arrogance and cocky, sensible and likable.

TRACEE HOUSE (19 / Black / Woman)

Don't bullshit a bullshitter, perceptive, objective, rough around the edges, soulful, feminist.

CPT. JOHN RIVERA (36 / Latino / Male)

Keen observational skills, efficient, usually blue steel but now he's virtually broken husk of a man.

(Nighttime. A supermarket check-out line. It's very, very quiet. Peter, a seventeen-year-old teenager fiddles anxiously, avoiding eye contact as he situates the paper and plastic bags. Capt. Rivera, standing at the other end of the conveyor belt, stares virtually without emotion. Standing behind the register, Tracee, a young college student, eyes both parties. Finally:)

PETER BOWERS

(Nervously:) Can we help you?

(Capt. Rivera continues staring, his eyes never leaving Peter, but Tracee interjects, you know, just in case:)

TRACEE HOUSE

Sir, this is a place of business. We are the merchants; you are the customer. If you do not need any assistance, I am going to have to ask you to step out of line so we can help the next person.

(Capt. Rivera and Peter awkwardly look around. It is a ghost town.)

TRACEE HOUSE

Sir. *(Beat.)* My apologies, maybe I'm using the wrong pronouns or something?

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

(Muffled:) Frosting.

TRACEE HOUSE

We didn't catch that. Speak up, please?

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

Frosting.

TRACEE HOUSE

Instant or organic? *(Beat.)* Instant is in aisle seven in the center. Organic is in aisle nine at the end.

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

I'll be right back.

(Capt. Rivera exits.)

PETER

Fucking hell. That creepy bastard scares the shit of me. Did you see the way he was staring at me?

TRACEE

I peeped that, all right. You fuck someone's daughter or something?

PETER

Unfortunately, I haven't had the pleasure. I'm what many would call a "late bloomer."

TRACEE

Chin up. Maybe you'll have a "glow up" in college.

PETER

From your lips to God's ears. (*Beat.*) Tracee, you think I can head out a little early?

TRACEE

And leave me to mop the aisles and count the register all by myself? Do I look like *The Help*?

PETER

That guy that went to get frosting? He really fucking gave me the creeps. You saw how he was staring at me.

TRACEE

Peter, this may sound regressive as fuck, but maybe you should "man up"? Just because you're a lil' creeped out doesn't give you permission to bail on your responsibilities. That's not how the world works. (*Beat.*) When he comes back, bag and tag. I'll handle customer service. He's just a little socially awkward, nothing to worry about.

PETER

Whatever you say, Tracee.

TRACEE

What I want to know is why do customers always run in 10 minutes before closing time. Like, “Sir, you had all day!” What if this was a game of basketball? What if this was the NBA?! What if LeBron or Kobe or Jordan or Shaquille was off the bench most of the game but hadn’t scored a point? Wouldn’t it make you upset if you were watching the game and you know basketball games are dumb long and LeBron or Jordan or whoever finally decides to try and score a shot? Like, “Why did you wait until the buzzer to take a shot from the three-point line?!” In a nutshell, that’s all of our customers and I’m sick of it. Sick of it! (*Beat.*) Do me a favor, put the sign in the door. We’re officially closed. After this guy checks out, lock the door behind him and start sweeping. Understood?

PETER

Finally!

[Peter puts the sign on the door. Closed sign swings in the doorway.]

PETER

By the way, Tracee, that was, like, your third basketball metaphor this shift.

TRACEE

Sorry, I’ve been waiting to hear back from Coach about the starting line. The championship game is in a few days and you know how hard I’ve been working my first year of undergrad. If selected, I’ll be one of the few freshmen to play starting line—

(Capt. Rivera appears with a cart full of items; he slowly puts them on conveyor belt.)

TRACEE

Good evening, sir. Did you find everything okay?

(His silence speaks a billion decibels.)

TRACEE

Do you have a savings reward card? (*Beat.*) You know, we have a deal? Buy one get one—

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

Actually, there is something you can help me with. In the section where you sell your newspapers and magazines, there used to be a station for children’s books. What happened to it?

TRACEE

We're under new management. In the process, we did some downsizing. Children's Lit was the first to go. But if you want, there's the Paper Crane Book Store, they have a wide selection of—

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

My nephew, he's turning six and he's in that stage where he's learning right from wrong, learning how to tell the truth and learning how to lie. Rather than picking up the same ol'... you know, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Gingerbread Man* or *Pinocchio*, I figured I'd get him a real fairytale with real morals. Know what all those stories have in common?

TRACEE

Depending on the version, I'm guessing... wolves?

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

Bingo! So, I figured why not purchase a copy of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*. Give the little shit something to really be scared of. What makes the wolf so terrifying is not it's cunning, but it's moral ambiguity, or rather, its audacity for lacking any moral integrity. You have to teach children while they're young or they become the wolf. Isn't that right, Mr. Bowers?

PETER

(*Alarmed:*) I beg your pardon...how do you know my name? My last name. How do you know it?

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

[*Reading her name tag:*] Tracee, are you all right? Do you need a break, maybe some coffee?

TRACEE HOUSE

I-I'm fine.

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

Pardon me, where are my manners? John Rivera. Captain John Rivera.

PETER

Tracee, maybe you should take—

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

We ran the call log. According to our department and the store video footage obtained this afternoon, you made the call from a burner phone that you purchased at 3:16 p.m. from Peck's Quick Stop Supply Shop about a quarter mile from your high school in Astoria. Now, we don't know exactly what happened between the time frame, but NYC SWAT Team Security was phoned a little over an hour later at 4:37 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. Can you tell us the events leading up to the call? *(After a moment:)* Peter, where are you, buddy? Can you tell us the events leading up to the call?

TRACEE

Sir, uh, Capt. Rivera, was it? This is a place of business. Any questions, you have for Peter can be done at your precinct or whatever. But you can't just come in here asking sensitive questions. Now I'm going to check you out and after I'm going to ask you to leave. You're disturbing our customers.

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

It's closing time, it's a Tuesday, a school night and we're the only people in this establishment. After all, why would anyone disturb us with the closed sign hanging at the exit?

TRACEE

You're unauthorized to speak to a seventeen-year-old teenage boy alone and without a warrant.

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

(Flashing a warrant:) Unauthorized? And by the State of New York, I am fully in my right as an officer of the law to do so.

TRACEE

What about his right to an attorney?

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

This will only take a minute, but if that's too much for you, I can always come back here or at your place of residence with a team of my finest men and women with hard proof that you committed an act of perjury during our interrogation.

PETER

Listen, I'm not the one who shot a kid in cold blood...

TRACEE

Wait, hold on. What?

(Capt. Rivera slams his hand against the table, a large crack can be heard. The sound rattles the room. A moment.)

PETER

It was a joke. All I did was make a phone call.

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

A phone call that resulted in the death of an African American 17-year-old and the near-fatal injury of his father, 51-year-old Andre Howard, now in critical condition at Mount Sinai Queens.

PETER

Nobody was so supposed to be die over it.

TRACEE

Who died, Peter?

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

It's all over the news. You mean, your co-worker doesn't know?

TRACEE

Peter, what is this man talking about?

PETER

Please. Not here, not now.

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

Alright, stay here. I'll be back with my team.

PETER

No!

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

Then, what do you want me to do? I can't sit on this sensitive information, Peter.

PETER

Then, what do you want from me?

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

To be honest. For once in your life.

PETER

She wouldn't listen to me. For days she refused to talk to me. I just wanted her to talk to me. We had been dating since freshman year and just like that, she doesn't call, she doesn't text...I-I... and with her birthday just a few days away I figured I'd get her something nice. Worked my fingers to the bone, worked overtime, saved up for months to get her a necklace with her name on it; super expensive, we're talking 24 karat gold.

TRACEE

Who?

PETER

Joelle.

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

Joelle Howard.

TRACEE

The sister of DaQuan Howard, the basketball star? The one that just got a full ride to Duke? When? Where? What happened?

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

Boy, you're really living under a rock, aren't you? Over the weekend, Saturday night, Sunday morning, two or three nights ago. Matter of fact, it happened within the Howard residence, did it not?

PETER

So I hear...

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

Why? What was going through your head when you—?

PETER

We linked up earlier. At the mall. She was buying a dress for her birthday party that night. She just turned sixteen and we had been talking for a while about me taking her virginity. But over the last week, she kept her distance from me. She... So, I followed her into a boutique, while her mom went to check something out at the register.

PETER (cont.)

She was waiting in line to try on some clothes. I cornered her. I mean, this wasn't like her, she wouldn't talk to me. Guess she's on her period because, just like that, I was uninvited to her birthday party. I tried to convince her to take it back, I even tried to give her birthday gift and she tossed it back at me—it totally hit my face—, and she told me to leave her alone.

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

And so she broke your little heart and you repaid her by dialing up the SWAT team, posing as a concerned citizen and fabricated a tall tale about Boko Haram and *crack*. She breaks up with you and so, to get even, you brought a nuke to a knife fight? Am I hearing that right?

PETER

You guys were just supposed to bust in and scare them, not—

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

What did you think would happen?!

(A moment.)

TRACEE

Pete, a prank would be shitting in a paper bag, lighting it on fire and leaving it on her doorstep. A prank would be breaking into her locker and filling it with pudding. You purposely involved armed forces because she turned you down? You are so sad.

PETER

I'm not a murderer. I am not a fucking murderer! You're both tryna turn this against me. You're trying to make this something bigger than it is. I was nice to her and she—

TRACEE

Boko Haram?! You're telling me a word like *Boko Haram* doesn't bring up any racial connotations?

(Looking into his cellular device, Cpt. Rivera begins to read:)

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

The poster boy for white privilege.

PETER

So, now I'm guilty of being white? What the fuck! It was a prank call. Nothing more. I didn't shoot up the place. I didn't go in guns blazing. I am not a patsy. I will not be your fucking scapegoat. I may have made the call, but you killed him, you turned the whole thing into a shoot 'em up. That was your call, you fucking child murderer!

(Before Tracee can even respond, Cpt. Rivera has lost all control, throwing frosting in the face of Peter.)

TRACEE

I'm going to have to ask you to leave now. *(Pause.)* Please.

CPT. JOHN RIVERA

Yeah, I'll do that. *(Beat.)* This place is a fucking pig sty. *(To Peter:)* See you around.

(Capt. Rivera exits. A Moment.)

PETER

Tracee/

TRACEE

After today, I think it's best you put in a two-week notice.

PETER

That's not fair, just let me / explain.

TRACEE

You're exactly like the Boy Who Cried Wolf, only... *(Beat.)* Speaking of wolves, you ever play *What Time Is It, Mr. Wolf?* Point of the game is to get as close to Mr. Wolf by shouting out different times before he turns around and responds, "It's dinner time!" You're on the menu, so you have to make it back to safety before he gets you. *(Beat.)* That game... it's essentially about not being able to bite off more than you can chew. After all, you got this gluttonous creature of the night that'll devour anything in its way depending on whatever time of day he chooses on his terms. It's a completely unfair game when you think about it because the rules are based on the will of the wolf alone. You're a lot like that wolf, Peter, used to getting your way, never taking no for an answer, howling at the moon waiting to get your fill. For real.

(End of Play.)