

# Candidate 5 evidence

## Masculinity: Theatre as an exploratory medium

Masculinity is a fickle concept; it has changed over the years and is still being debated on. Recently, prominent examples of people espousing “toxic masculinity” have become more mainstream. Toxic masculinity is generally defined by ideas like treating women as property, being homophobic, and trying to hide “feminine” traits, like crying when you’re sad.<sup>1</sup> In the theatre landscape, many plays have explored what masculinity means, how it can be damaging and how we can change it. How does theatre portray the complex emotions intermingled with masculinity? Does it have to be naturalistic, or can we explore beyond the boundaries of traditional emotional expression? Will it become a tool to break down structures we’ve created to limit ourselves, build up new ones and help us explore what it means to be masculine?

Black Watch, as the director John Tiffany says, is “a collage, so that it’s not a kind of traditionally-structured new play.”<sup>2</sup> Tiffany set out to create an intuitive understanding of the play as physical theatre, using movement to encapsulate its themes of the isolation, fear and vulnerability that the soldiers of the Black Watch felt in 2004 during their deployment in Operation TELIC in the Iraq War. Alongside this, it is Verbatim Theatre, most scenes use the

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Harris. ‘Toxic Masculinity: An Exploration of Traditional Masculine Norms in Relation to Mental Health Outcomes and Help-Seeking Behaviors in College-Aged Males.’. (Senior Theses, University of South Carolina, 2021 pt. 1.a.)

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Kaufman. “Black Watch’s’ experiment in war poetry is a play in athleticism.” Washington Post.

September 28, 2012

<https://shorturl.at/bdevD>

exact words soldiers at pubs in Fife told Gregory Burke, scriptwriter, when he interviewed them for the play. The intermingling of these two elements allows for a vivid representation of the Black Watch's experiences, which was Tiffany's hope from the beginning: "I'm so glad we were able to honour those lads. It is very deep in my soul as something which I feel honoured to have been able to tell their story."<sup>3</sup>

Near the start, the soldiers are sheltering from bombings, and they're huddled on the floor in fear while jokingly comparing it to Perth Road and laughing to combat the fear of death. Then suddenly a soldier breaks out into song and they all join in singing "The Gallant Forty Twa", based on traditional Scottish folk songs. Simultaneously, they go through the motions of readying their rifles and getting into position to shoot, then lowering their guns in a flowing, dance like motion. Movement is used to tell a story, but in combination with song, providing an immediate contrast to the macho conversation. The fact that singing is accepted as a masculine activity, but generally only in military or sports settings such as marching cadences or sports chants is an interesting phenomenon to consider when it comes to how we define masculinity. Although it's used to set the scene, literally, it still has a strong impact as the men find joy in an atypical masculine activity which is conveyed well by the cast. What Tiffany set out to achieve may have been influenced more by non-western types of theatre in creating these moving sequences: "You go into the traditions of Indian,

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<sup>3</sup> The Newsroom. "Black Watch director admits he feared it was going to 'ruin' theatre company." The Scotsman. September 26, 2016.

<https://shorturl.at/afMT6>

African, Japanese and Chinese theatre, and it's live. It's about not being a naturalistic television play or film...I don't know why we've decided on being naturalistic and static."<sup>4</sup>

Instead of going for a naturalistic outlook on these soldier's experiences, I think Tiffany attempts to exaggerate them, he theatricalises the singing normally used to build up camaraderie with the soldiers in the army. With these more light-hearted, upbeat sing song sections, Tiffany shows that the soldiers needed to have some outlet for their emotions regardless of how repressed they are, and the marching cadences served that purpose perfectly.

Halfway through the play is Blueys scene, a completely physical, mimed section, where the characters receive letters, presumably from loved ones and family. Underscored by a solemn piano melody, the men read the letters, showing their thoughts and emotions physically, through gestures: drawing hearts in the air, clasping their hands, placing them on their chests, shooting finger guns and writing on their hands. Eye movements are also utilised instead of vocalisation. This creates a "collage" of the men's recollections of home and peace as their solitary pleasure amidst a war zone. Compared to the more macho, bombastic attitudes of the men in the other scenes, here their compassion and love they have for the people waiting for them at home is shown. Because of the actor's physical representation of these emotions, it accurately portrays how some men, in my experience, will choose to show their emotions besides anger, through subtle movements and gestures, rather than vocal affections. Tiffany's overall vision was to give the play an intuitive meaning through movement because "It's instant, it's straight in there."<sup>5</sup> The actors and Tiffany

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<sup>4</sup> Kaufman. "Experiment in War Poetry"

<sup>5</sup> Kaufman. "Experiment in War Poetry"

believably pull off this subtle portrayal of the soldier's longing for home. This gives us important insight into the lives of the Black Watch and their outlooks on masculinity: outwardly boisterous, crude and violent in their banter about sex, women and comments on the war. Inwardly, however, caring and appreciative of their family, friends and partners. This scene shows that masculinity is more complex than just being positive or negative, some men can also have conflicting feelings about their masculinity and how they express it toward their comrades as opposed to their friends and family.

As the play continues, the men are watching the US Air force bomb a suspected enemy base near Fallujah. They stand and sit on raised metal platforms and towers on the stage: imposing, sleek and functional but not comfortable, showcasing the rough living conditions they're living in. There are booming sounds of the belligerent bombs assailing the ground as the men watch on. One is taking photos of the bombings, as he mocks the US troops for being "cowboys", another sits there, staring silently with his dog tag unceremoniously placed between his lips, portending his PTSD the audience finds out about later. A plane sound effect is heard flying over the stage and some of the men whistle as it passes, starting an argument, as one of them vigorously stands up, shouting that "Now this isn't fuckin' fightin' is it? This is just plain old fashioned bullyin' like." This scene highlights some of the more traditionally masculine traits the soldiers show: e.g., enjoying violence and killing as spectacle. It provides the audience with further insight into the situation the Black Watch were in, showing how they reacted to the war as men, some clearly seeing the bullying of the bombings and others ignoring it, whether to protect their mental health, or because of a perverse enjoyment of it. Tiffany states, that in creating this play in 2006, he knew most people thought the invasion of Iraq was wrong, so: "What I wanted to do was tell a story

that hadn't been told, and we found that through the soldier's own experience."<sup>6</sup> So he did just that, giving us a very insightful look into how soldiers view and portray masculinity and of course how they view war.

Tiffany's *Black Watch* emphasises its character's emotions primarily through subtle movements, gestures and sometimes dance like passages. Similarly, Ivo Van Hove's gripping rendition of *A View from the Bridge* utilises a mostly naturalistic style to portray the men's emotions. This allows the struggle between Eddie's subdued lust for his niece and familial love for her to become very apparent. The play grapples with how far Eddie, a docker in New York, is willing to go to stop his niece from dating anyone, fuelled by the perverse desire he has for her. He hides this behind rough masculinity and claims it's an uncle's love. Contrasting with *Black Watch*'s emotional movement, Van Hove instead interprets the text and energises it, while mostly using a naturalistic style: "I think if [...] Miller lived today [...] [he] would want something innovative. [...] I want to push through the limits, make the ultimate production."<sup>7</sup> The play is set in the round, in a square, one doorway in the back wall and a bench fencing off the stage. The audience sits near the action, providing an extra layer of intimacy to the actors; allowing Van Hove's naturalism to shine, since every moment is emphasised and experienced as if the audience were there.

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<sup>6</sup> Gemma Wilson. "Black Watch' Director John Tiffany." *CityArts Magazine*. April 19, 2013.

<https://shorturl.at/bgmlL>

<sup>7</sup> 6. Andrew Dickson. "My aim is the ultimate production': Ivo van Hove on directing Arthur Miller." *The Guardian*. April 2, 2014

<https://shorturl.at/bizX0>

Halfway through, there's almost absolute silence, except a drum, constantly beating every 4 seconds. The cast sit around the stage. Catherine on the bench encircling it; Rodolpho sitting under her, emphasising their romance. Marco sits back against the wall, hands clasped round his knees, staring into the distance. Eddie sits hunched on the bench opposite Catherine, while Beatrice sits on the bench near Marco. The separation between the actors creates a tangible air of tension, compounded by them leaving ten second pauses between each line. Eventually Eddie starts "teaching" Rodolpho how to box, acting playful, like he just wants to spar. Eddie (Mark Strong) creates this feint perfectly. His tone of voice educational, his smile innocent, but holding himself up tall, like a boxer, and then, hits Rodolpho square in the gut. He diminishes it and says, "Did I hurt you kid?" He puts up a boisterous and strong masculine veneer, hiding the sinister, deceitful, momentary revenge he seeks. Strong portrays Eddie's moral greyness superbly, fulfilling Van Hove's ideas of morality: "Often his [Miller's] plays are *ethical*, you know? Good against evil [...] I am not so interested in good and evil."<sup>8</sup>

Immediately following, Rodolpho backs away and Marco (Emun Elliott) challenges Eddie to lift a chair. By the bottom of a leg. The proxemics are similar, except Rodolpho stands apart from Catherine, staring at the chair, attempting to hide his hurt. Elliott portrays Marco mischievously, mirroring Eddie's boxing state. Grinning while taunting Eddie, he knows it won't be easy to lift. Eddie struggles with the chair vigorously, emphasised by Strong's exhausted facial expression, and subsequent falling before stopping himself. Marco approaches, nonchalantly says "Here," examines the chair momentarily, then curls his

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<sup>8</sup> Dickson. "My aim: ultimate production!"

fingers round the leg, flexing them like a weightlifter. He struggles, slowly lifting it, maintaining eye contact on the chair until it's over Eddie's head, then snaps his vision to him with a menacing glare, making to hit him with the chair. Then, lifting it above him, he releases his thumb and the music, quiet before, crescendos into a sharp attack, enunciating Marco's superiority over Eddie. Elliott holds this stance, statue-like, for a minute. This is Marco's revenge for Rodolpho, he's subtly insulting Eddie, because the act is physical, but the only damage he's caused him is mental. He has established that if Eddie "jokes" with Rodolpho again, he won't hesitate to fight, or kill, foreshadowing Eddie's murder. This provides the first insight into Marco's vengeful side, he acted respectful and cheerful before, but now, when his family is hurt, his morality is revealed. Nothing will stop him if he feels vengeance is justified, making his smiley veneer darken with anger. This scene encapsulates Van Hove's attraction to the writing: "One moment you sympathise with the person you hate, then in the next scene you hate somebody you love. [...] I love this ambiguity."<sup>9</sup> It also highlights a contradictory element of masculinity: that some men are willing to go to any lengths for revenge. Even if the intent was pure, to protect family, this feeling becomes more sinister and develops into bitter vengeance. Leading to one conclusion: murder.

Finally, Van Hove creates the most striking ending stage picture, as the play diverges into full symbolism. Marco confronts Eddie, running toward him, but instead of stabbing him, raining down from above stage is a sea's worth of blood, drenching the actors. Eddie struggles weakly, is cradled in Beatrice's arms, then lies still. This is striking because it is vividly different from everything else in the production, Van Hove fully leans into the horror of

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<sup>9</sup> Dickson. "My aim: ultimate production'."

Eddie's death; presenting it in a gut-wrenching way, living up to his ideals: "When I do a play, I want to do it in the most extreme way possible."<sup>6</sup> Eddie's death is a highly dangerous example of what may happen when you hide your own feelings and bottle them up, letting them stagnate and turn sinister. Marco is Eddie's metaphorical and physical consequence for secretly harbouring desire for Catherine, since his motivation to snitch was to prevent Rodolpho taking her from him. It's a cautionary tale about not keeping your feelings to yourself, especially if they could cause harm to others, and instead trying to work them out constructively.

Van Hove presents a tragedy that exposes Eddie and the raw truth of his character. It gives us a sharp perspective of how, no matter how strong and defensive men may portray themselves as, bottling everything up will only lead to disaster.

As opposed to the naturalistic sub-textual explorations of masculinity that *A View from the Bridge* presents, Ryan Calais Cameron's "For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Hue Gets Too Heavy" utilises more straightforward, but sometimes clunky narratives questioning the male experience and masculinity directly by exploring black men's life experiences within the loose backdrop of group therapy. Premiered on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2021 at the New Diorama Theatre, the play is a synthesis of varying elements influenced by Ntozake Shange's "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf" and her unique theatre form: the choreopoem, incorporating acting, dance, music and poetry. Shange describes its relation to traditional theatre as: "everyone's efforts are directed toward the exploration and integrity of the text." The difference in her collaborations: "The

text grows.”<sup>10</sup> This innovative format engenders opportunity for the actors to share and discuss their emotions; allowing them to explore their characters in interesting and different ways, whether through krumping, rap or monologue, providing ample room for exploring their masculinity. It also gives the actors control over the production, as they work alongside the director as collaborators, devising and improving the play with their own ideas.

In the first scene, the actors play out childhood memories, sucking on their thumbs and wailing and bawling like babies. They then play kiss chase, a variant of tig which boys will usually grow out of playing, due to conditioning of systematic, traditional masculine values discouraging men from showing playful/platonic affection to their friends. I believe it’s instilled from a young age in men, from father figures or more recently, from manosphere “influencers” who espouse the tenets of toxic masculinity to be positive. One of Cameron’s visions is “Every mental health issue, topic or discussion needs to be met with a certain level of nuance.”<sup>11</sup> This scene effectively explores how as men grow up, they also tend to grow out of typically feminine traits, like being compassionate and caring towards others and themselves. It also works as a team building exercise for the characters, letting them explore their masculinity and their relation to it in a safe space, which I think is key to developing

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<sup>10</sup> Brian Seibert. “For Colored Girls’ Is a Choreopoem. What’s a Choreopoem?” The New York Times. October 9, 2019.

<https://shorturl.at/bhsCX>

<sup>11</sup> Alt Africa. “Interview Ryan Calais Cameron: For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Hue Gets Too Heavy.” Alt Africa. September 29, 2021.

<https://rb.gv/nfp1b>

emotional maturity and learning to handle your emotions healthily. Not just for men, but for everyone.

The set, designed by Anna Reid, features plastic chairs reminiscent of primary school, with their rainbow of colours. One reviewer stated that “the set resembles something from a CBeebies show, clashing in spirit with the sober, searching nature of the script.”<sup>12</sup> This stark juxtaposition of script and set stands as an obstacle to appreciating the profundity of the text. However, it also highlights the journey the men in the play attempt to go on. In broad, stereotypical terms, men’s fashion tends to be muted and dull, whereas women’s tends to be bright and colourful. Turning this expectation on its head meshes well with the men’s aims to explore their masculinity and what it means. In doing so, though, Reid inadvertently perpetuates the stereotypes that Cameron tries to explore and change. They break down stereotypes concerning men, but conversely reinforce those concerning women. However, even in this dissertation it’s impossible to talk about expectations for masculinity without defining it, requiring broad generalisations of many different groups of people. Therefore, the aim is to look at how we can break free of these expectations, explore differing and varying versions of masculinity, even forgoing the concept itself to delve into the character and psyche of every individual person and how they make their own decisions and view the world.

Titularly, a concern of Cameron’s is suicide, especially among black men. Cameron says his intended message was “For young men, Black men, to understand that they have a voice,

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<sup>12</sup> Arifa Akbar. “For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Hue Gets Too Heavy review.” The Guardian. October 18, 2021.

<https://rb.gv/qseix>

that we need to talk, that talking about how you feel can actually save lives.”<sup>13</sup> Shown throughout the play as the characters interact and argue with each other during group therapy, exploring traumas and issues to do with racism and masculinity. They come into conflict with each other as the setting dictates, since therapy is purpose built for discussing issues and working out problems. Often however, men are scared, unwilling or appalled by the idea of therapy. I would suggest a few causes for this are social pressure: i.e., a need to adhere to masculine “norms” and trained emotion barring: meaning some men are taught as boys that they need to suppress their “negative” emotions like sadness and grief to be stronger for others and themselves. These ideas present more as considerations for factors influencing suicide among black men rather than direct causes for it due to the therapy backdrop Cameron created.

For *Black Boys...* has also received criticism for some elements. One reviewer says: “After a frankly rather portentous and pretentious opening, which features a slo-mo ballet and some awkward declaratory writing, the show settles down nicely.”<sup>14</sup> I believe they’re referencing that during the play, a voice occasionally asks questions like: “What are your experiences of fatherhood?” And “Have you ever thought about ending your life?”<sup>15</sup> This causes the movement to flow oddly as the events change, since it feels more forced than natural. Contrasting with Tiffany’s *Black Watch*, where the movement was subtle, naturalistic and

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<sup>13</sup> Alt Africa. “Interview Ryan Calais Cameron.”

<sup>14</sup> Aleks Sierz ““FOR BLACK BOYS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE WHEN THE HUE GETS TOO HEAVY” AT ROYAL COURT.” *The Theatre Times*. April 26, 2022.

<https://rb.gv/vbb30>

<sup>15</sup> Akbar. “Black Boys Review.”

implied the soldier's emotions, Cameron's clunky narrative devices cause the inter-scene movement to be disappointing in fluidity and execution. For *Black Boys...* is a journey, and it takes the audience across the spectrum: from gang fighting to intellectual discussion, pervading through it is the need for expression, the need to have an outlet for feelings you may fear to share. It's a simple idea, but for some men it's unthinkable to share what you feel, so this piece provides a voice for those who may be lost in the sea of doubt and depression that can come from holding back your emotions.<sup>16</sup> In that sense, *For Black Boys...* has immense societal and cultural value, as it's pushing boundaries not many plays have explored before, especially relating to masculinity and how black men interact with it.

In conclusion, theatre as an art form is a perfect vehicle for us to explore what masculinity means to us, to others and in general. It can help expose us to new ideas like internal conflict and the devastating consequences that can happen to a man who bottles up all his feelings and emotions.<sup>17</sup> Theatre can also present the rawest form of pure, traditional masculinity you can imagine: the warrior protecting his young, driving out invaders, then taking "what's rightfully his" from his family; then shattering that and breaking it down to use it to look at ourselves critically, to examine what the sad consequences of having set expectations for men can be. However, many different interpretations of masculinity exist, even from the few plays I've discussed here, and there are a countless number of ways we can continue exploring men's emotions on stage. The most important thing practitioners can do now is continue questioning these ideals we set as a society, rebuilding them,

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<sup>16</sup> Compare. 'Emotional Regulation and Depression: A Potential Mediator between Heart and Mind.' *Cardiovasc Psychiatry Neurol.* June 22, 2014. DOI: 10.1155/2014/324374.

<sup>17</sup> Compare. 'Emotional Regulation and Depression.'

breaking them down again and moving forward as men and as people from what we have been to what we can become.

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