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FROM THE FIELD

hang By Leigh Buchanan Bienen

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hang has three unnamed characters One, Two and Three. Pictured here are Patrese D. McClain, Eleni Pappageorge and Annabel Armour. Photo: Michael Courier

This spring Remy Bumppo (<http://remybumppo.org>), the ensemble centered Chicago theater company with a penchant for complicated language and complex social issues mounted the U.S. premiere of UK playwright debbie tucker green's 'hang' in a run from March 21 to April 29. Note, the playwright prefers the lower case both for her own name and the play's title.

Originally premiering in 2015 at London's Royal Court Theater, *hang* is a play which makes you laugh, or gasp, again, at human frailty, at human foolishness, and at the social and political arrangements and institutions which make us despair, like the weather in April in Chicago. *hang* asks the audience to confront how people end up in a circumstance, a bad circumstance.

hang has three unnamed characters (simply One, Two and Three) and a set consisting of a small lit room with a door, a water cooler, and some chairs and a table. The only casting restriction is that the character Three be a black woman. Characters One and Two are not restricted by age or race, and Two may be male or female.

The lines will reverberate differently if the actors are seen differently by the audience. The place, the city, the country, the type of theatre and audience will also resonate. The audience, and, of course, the actors are very much involved in creating the circumstances the characters inhabit.

The award-winning author is British, black, and reclusive. Previous plays (*born bad, nut, truth and reconciliation*, and others) have been produced at the Royal National Theatre, the Young Vic, Soho Theatre, the Royal Court and elsewhere. She has also written for television and radio, and recently wrote and directed a film. America will come to know her work.

The script looks like poetry on the page, and has the intensity and economy of poetry. Like poetry, the play relies upon the spaces between the lines, and the silences to establish its meaning, and power. What is unsaid (or unread) is as important as the opposite. The play is a dream for a small, intensely-focused quartet of actors and director.

It is the brilliance of this play which quickly draws us in and asks us to figure out.... everything. The brilliance of the play asks, but does not answer. To ask: Who has authority, who makes the rules? Who gives permission to act, within the law and outside the law? The brilliance of the play asks us to contemplate, alongside the playwright, director and actors, things we don't like to contemplate, which doesn't mean the play will be unpleasant. There are many lines which provoke laughter. It couldn't be a play, after all, if it were all unpleasant. Who would come to see it? Who would present it?



Patrese D. McClain Photo: Michael Courier

With the title of *hang*, we might think, the play is ‘about’ capital punishment, drowning in all of the facts and details and shame that drape over that subject. The play is not ‘about’ capital punishment, fortunately. Instead, it is about who we are as humans, and how we treat one another, what we do to each other, about what we can change and what we cannot change, and when, and in the strange circumstances in which we find ourselves. And it is all the richer for being about those things.

Plays about capital punishment are often cryptic, boring, or self-important, like novels about capital punishment, with a few exceptions (the exceptions being novels such as Joyce Cary’s joyous *Mister Johnson*, and one so grim only young people can bear it, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*).

If this play were about capital punishment, for example, the play might need to inform us that in the United States there are at present 33 states which authorize capital punishment, defined as killing by the state as part of a system of punishment through formal, written law, that killing being by lethal injection.

Or, the playwright might feel obliged to tell us directly about the elaborate and purposely mind-numbing bureaucracies and procedures which surround the implementation of capital punishment in the United States, where punishment by death is ‘the rule of law’ in most states, and in many parts of the world.

Perhaps it is because capital punishment itself –the trial, the dramatic persona, the defendants the prosecutors, the agonizing, drawn-out and well-publicized appeals — are themselves very ‘theatrical,’ melodramatic, maudlin, that plays, that is good plays, tend to avoid this subject.

In this play one continuing mystery is who these people are, and what their relationships are, to each other and to people who don’t appear. Who is and has been doing what to whom, and why? And why are the characters un-named, anyway?

This play is interesting for what it doesn't say, and for the questions it doesn't answer or even pose.

It is interesting for making us ask questions of ourselves,

and in conversation. Plays can be the most political, the most current art form, because plays insist upon being NOW. Plays ask questions and don't provide answers. Plays, like poems, can go places out of reach to other forms of discourse.

Hangings have always been public entertainments. It is hanging which symbolizes state executions, both legal and extra legal (lynchings). Hanging is a favorite method for suicide. Hanging captures the imagination.

The image of a person hanging is visceral, immediately calling up in the body the feeling of choking, of slow strangulation, of gasping for breath. Yet, ironically, the litigation surrounding methods of execution finds that *hanging* may be the most humane form of state killing. In comparison to lethal injection, or electrocution, or the firing squad, where contrary to the myth of westerns, people don't die right away.

My own initiation as a scholar and researcher on capital punishment began in Nigeria in 1972. Very public executions occurred regularly in Lagos, the capital, with the condemned waiting to be shot while standing in the ocean (to make clean up easier, and to have the bodies eaten by sharks) while the press, such as it was, recorded the last words of repentance, or not, all being printed the next day along with pictures of the grimaces or grins of those executed. The crowds, the live audience watching, was very much a part of it all.

Best were the defiantly wicked, their statements of no repentance shouted to the crowd, along with their curses. We, the audience, were most enthralled by them. Fortunately, there were no cell phones or tweets or other facilitators for these ceremonies.

Public execution took place when the military government had just excised large parts of the constitution, and those executed had been sentenced under the authority of a 'special' tribunal (from which there was no appeal) made up of a superior court judge, a military officer, and a police officer. Again, who had the authority, who was in charge of the proceedings, of the death sentence, was a prominent part.

It might have been Dickens' London, or the burning of Joan of Arc. Meanwhile, the remnants of the British colonial legal order (still in force for some things) mandated fierce secrecy about all aspects of capital punishment, when it was ordered, and that was infrequently ordered. That the sentence has been pronounced, and that it had been carried out, was not publicly announced. The British method was hanging.

Eleni Pappageorge, Annabel Armour and Patrese D. McClain. Photo: Michael Courier



The most shocking revelation, perhaps, of the recently displayed postcards of lynchings in this century is the large and enthusiastic crowds, watching, cheering, and for some, mutilating the body as it hung above. An orgy of brutality, carried on by 'ordinary' citizens who went to work the next day, and perhaps acted as if nothing had happened, some of them putting their robes back in the closet to be ready for the next celebration. The element of secrecy always part of the process, the anonymity, but also the public witnesses, the public assent. And who was printing and sending those postcards, and who was receiving them?

The last public execution by the state in the United States was in the early part of the last century; public executions, almost all hangings, were regularly featured in the American town square well into the twentieth century. Extra legal executions continue to this day, in America and elsewhere.

There is an old and primitive taboo, prejudice, superstition whatever diction you choose, that forbids a person from knowing the date and time of her or his own death. That is part of what makes executions and their trappings part entertainment, part magic ritual, part retribution, and all voodoo. All of that is part of what this play is about.



Leigh B. Bienen is a Senior Lecturer at Northwestern Pritzker School of Law. She holds degrees from Cornell University (BA, Honors), the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop (MA), and the Rutgers-Newark School of Law (JD 1975). She has written numerous books and articles on the law, and has published fiction and nonfiction over the years. Her publications include: [Murder and its Consequences](#) (Northwestern University Press 2011), [Florence Kelley and the Children: Factory Inspector in 1890's Chicago](#) (Open Books 2014), [Crimes of the Century](#) (with Gilbert Geis) (Northeastern University Press 1998), [The Left-Handed Marriage](#) (Fiction) (Ontario Review Books 2001). Many of her articles on criminal law and capital punishment are found in professional journals, including Northwestern Law's [The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology](#). In addition, she has maintained a lifelong commitment to writing about the theatre and literary arts.

The American Premier of 'hang' by debbie tucker green at [Remy Bumppo Theatre Company](#) (<http://remybumpo.org>), Nick Sandys, Producing Artistic Director

Cast: Annabel Armour, Patrese D. McClain, Eleni Pappageorge

Production

Direction by Keira Fromm

Stage Management by Mara Filler

Scenic Design by Linda Buchanan

Costume Design by Christine Pascual

Lighting Design by Chris Binder

Sound Design and Original Music by Christopher Kriz Properties

Design by Amanda Herrmann

Dramaturgy by Danielle Taylor

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