



AMERICAN SON

**EDUCATOR'S
STUDY GUIDE**

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ABOUT

About Drayton Entertainment

An award-winning, not-for-profit charitable organization, Drayton Entertainment produces the finest in live theatre at seven venues in southwestern Ontario. Each theatre maintains its distinct identity, but at the same time, combines the strengths and energy of all to provide an entertainment experience that is unparalleled.

The stage for success was first set in 1991, with the launch of the Drayton Festival Theatre. Under the leadership of founding and current Artistic Director, Alex Mustakas, the theatre was an immediate success. Since then, Drayton Entertainment has added the St. Jacobs Schoolhouse Theatre, King's Wharf Theatre (in Penetanguishene), Huron Country Playhouse

(with two stages in Grand Bend), St. Jacobs Country Playhouse, and the Hamilton Family Theatre Cambridge.

Drayton Entertainment's distinctive business model provides protection from the inherent fragility of the theatre industry, while providing an outlet for growth and prosperity. This has positive implications for artists and audiences – all of whom enjoy enhanced opportunities both on and off the stage.

By successfully balancing the competing demands of quality productions, fiscal responsibility, and community integrity, Drayton Entertainment has emerged as a true innovator and leader for arts and culture in Canada.

About the Show

American Son is a contemporary work written by playwright Christopher Demos-Brown. The show premiered in 2016 at the Berkshires' Barrington Stage Company and later opened on Broadway in the Fall of 2018. In 2019, it was made into a Netflix film featuring Kerry Washington and Steven Pasquale in the lead roles. Notable for its examination of policing in North America, the show invites audience members to examine the

ways racial prejudice and implicit biases impact the lives of everyday people.

Winner of the prestigious Laurents Hatcher Award and a New York Times Critics' Pick, *American Son* is an explosive new drama that examines a nation's racial divide through the eyes of parents whose worst fear hangs in the balance.

[It's] about race and gender and the treatment of marginalized groups. It's about the American family.

Demos-Brown in an interview on Broadway.com

Synopsis

An estranged interracial couple desperately look for information about their missing teenage son after he is detained by local police following a traffic stop incident. Taking over the course of a single night at a police station, the worried parents' disparate histories and backgrounds collide while two officers pursue details of the missing youth. Maternal, marital, and societal tensions escalate as all four become engulfed in a battle of bias, judgement, and racial prejudice that will never be as simple as black or white.

The Playwright

Christopher Demos-Brown is a Miami Trial Lawyer and professional playwright who has written multiple award-winning scripts throughout the past decade. Born in Philadelphia, Demos-Brown moved to Miami at a young age and spent the rest of his childhood in Florida. He began studying at the University of Dartmouth in the mid-1980s, where he took an interest in the performing arts and began acting in stage productions. He spent some time pursuing a career in acting, before enrolling in the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and the University of Geneva, which he graduated from in 1992.

After beginning work as a Miami Trial Lawyer and marrying his wife Stephanie Demos-Brown (née Demos), Demos-Brown continued to work in the theatre industry as a playwright. The couple opened a professional theatre company named Zoetic Stage alongside their two long-

time friends, Michael McKeever and Stuart Meltzer, in 2010. Demos-Brown is currently the company's Literary Manager.

Demos-Brown was inspired to write the events of *American Son* by the book *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, a prolific author known for his work examining the concept of race in America, and by "several incidents involving African-American children being victimized by our system in various ways."

American Son is Demos-Brown's 8th completed work and first show to make a Broadway debut. Other notable works include *When the Sun Shone Brighter* (2009), *American Hero* (formerly *Fear Up Harsh*) (2013), *Stripped* (2015), and *Wrongful Death & Other Circus Acts* (2018).



PHOTO BY: FEMKE TEWARI

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

American Son exists in a much wider context of racism in the United States and Canada. The current world situation has evolved from a longstanding history of prejudice that continues to impact Black and Indigenous people of colour in the present day. Below is a brief overview of the historical context relevant to the events depicted in *American Son*, which serves as an introduction to the topics discussed in the show.

Racism in Policing

Inappropriate and violent police action against marginalized groups has had a longstanding history in North America.

One of the earliest forms of policing in the United States were “Slave Patrollers” in the 18th century. They were given permission by the state to suppress rebellions from enslaved people using violence and intimidation. After the abolition of slavery in 1865 in the United States, these were replaced with formal policing

services trained using the information gained from slave patrols. The 13th Amendment was ratified the same year slavery was outlawed, making slavery legal in the case of incarceration. This encouraged police forces to target Black people and incarcerate them in order to rebuild the Southern economy.

Jim Crow laws in the 20th century made it so that police continued to actively and violently oppress Black people under the law. During



the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, police became enforcers of the status quo, pushing back against protests to end segregation in the United States. The Jim Crow era officially ended at the end of the 1960s with the outlawing of segregation, however this was not the end of racism in police institutions.

Black people have continued to be disproportionately affected by police brutality into the present day. Multiple instances of police unjustly killing Black people have inspired protests and riots for the past 50 years. In 1992, Rodney King was beaten by Los Angeles police officers. The officers were later acquitted from the charges of assault with a deadly weapon and excessive use of force. In 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, was shot by a White police officer. Despite Michael's death, the officer was not indicted on criminal charges. These are only a few examples of a scenario that has been relived by Black Americans up to the present day.

In 2020, a shocking video was released of a man named George Floyd being murdered by Minneapolis police officers. The video shows multiple officers restraining him, with an officer kneeling on the neck of George Floyd for nine and a half minutes despite him telling the officer that he could not breathe. The Minneapolis police department originally reported George Floyd's death as the result of a medical incident occurring during police interaction. Following the public release of the video, protests and riots broke out across the United States against police brutality and the racism present in police services. The officer who knelt on George Floyd's neck was eventually sentenced to 22 years and a half years in prison.

Policing in Canada has a similar history of initially being a tool to oppress marginalized groups. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) emerged out of the North-West Mounted Police, a parliamentary police force created to control Indigenous people living on the land now known as Canada and force them into reserves set up by the government. The RCMP has continued to be accused of discrimination and violence against Indigenous people into the present day.

Black and Indigenous people continue to be vastly overrepresented in police-involved deaths in Canada. In 2018, the Ontario Human Rights Commission report found that Black people were disproportionately more likely to be charged, arrested, struck, shot, or killed by the Toronto Police Service in comparison to other groups of people. The report directly attributes this to systemic racism and racial bias from the Toronto Police Service.

Police officers have an incredibly difficult job that often involves high-stakes scenarios and split-second decision making. However, policing in North America is an institution founded upon violence and discrimination towards Black and Indigenous people of colour, something that continues to make an impact in the present day.



The War on Drugs

The “War on Drugs” is a title used to refer to the United States’ campaign against drug use that began with President Richard Nixon in the 1970s. Many have pointed to Nixon’s war on drugs as a way for the government to disproportionately target marginalized groups by aligning them with drug use in the eyes of the public. Nixon’s domestic policy chief, John Ehrlichman, gave an interview in 1994 where he was quoted as saying:

“We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those

communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did.”

In the 1980’s, President Ronald Reagan reinforced many of Nixon’s drug policies, reinvigorating the campaign. It was during Reagan’s presidency that incarcerations for non-violent drug crimes skyrocketed. Many of the policies Reagan enacted were found to unfairly target Black Americans as they were arrested on suspicion of drug use at much higher rates than White people were.

We knew ... by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and the blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities.

John Ehrlichman, Nixon’s Domestic Policy Chief



Key Terms

Some key terms to apply when discussing American Son.

Systemic Racism

The term “systemic racism” is based on the idea that current societal institutions continue to perpetuate racism in the present day because they are built upon on historically racist systems. Some systems that are affected by systemic racism include the education system, the health care system, the economic system, the criminal justice system, and more. Today, many use the term to discuss how racism is embedded in society to the point where it is inescapable. Systemic racism is not the fault of individual people, but rather something that people may unknowingly participate in simply by abiding by everyday rules and norms they have become accustomed to.

Uncle Tom

The phrase “Uncle Tom” is used during American Son. It is a phrase used to refer to a Black man who is subservient to White people and has turned a blind eye to his race in order to gain money or status. It traces its origin to the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, an anti-slavery novel written by Harriet Beecher Stowe that was published in 1852. Many historians credit the novel for helping to lay the foundations for the American Civil War.

Generational Trauma

Generational trauma, or transgenerational trauma, refers to trauma that is passed down through multiple people as opposed to remaining with an individual. It occurs as a result of a history of unresolved trauma that forms a pattern of maladaptive coping strategies and distrustful views of life that continue to be passed along from caregiver to child. Anyone can be a victim of generational trauma, however its effects have often been studied with regards to groups of people that underwent significant forms of abuse, torture, oppression, etc. This includes the continuing effects of enslavement and systemic racism that impact Black people.

KEY THEMES

Intersectional Sexism and Racism

Racism is one of the most prominent themes throughout *American Son*, however, Kendra is in a unique situation throughout the show as she is both Black and a woman. During Kendra's interactions with the police, she is routinely dismissed by the officers and made to feel as though her concerns about Jamal are unfounded. Many of the seemingly passive comments from those around her serve to question her intelligence and diminish her authority in the situation. She is described as being "out of control" and "ghetto" for expressing concerns about her son, phrases commonly lobbed against women and Black people.

Scott's experience as a White man is very different than Kendra's throughout the play. He is treated with respect and is revered by Officer Larkin for his position as an FBI agent. Scott also is shown to demonstrate toxic masculinity and a lack of understanding for his ex-wife's perspective throughout the show, leading him to contribute to the casual racism and sexism she experiences.

Generational Trauma

In *American Son*, Kendra demonstrates how her trauma has manifested in the way she has raised Jamal. She describes how she has spend much of Jamal's life plagued by anxiety over the danger he is in as a Black person. Jamal was deliberately raised in ways that diminish his connection to Black stereotypes, such as Kendra encouraging him to only speak "proper" English and placing him in prestigious private schools that had very few Black students. Kendra routinely expresses her fears relating to racism and discrimination experienced by her ancestors and connects it to her methods when raising her son.

Status of Black Characters

American Son features multiple Black characters in different positions of power throughout the play. Kendra is both a worried mother at the mercy of police and a professor with a PhD in psychology. Both Lieutenant Stokes and the officer at the scene of investigation with Jamal are Black as well, participating in the system of policing that Kendra has expressed hesitancy towards for their racism. Their statuses are placed in contrast with each other throughout the show to reflect the nuances and larger forces at play in each of their situations and provide motivation for the way they view and interact with each other.

Police-Community Relations

American Son heavily revolves around a larger discussion surrounding police-community relations. Throughout the show, multiple opinions are expressed regarding the police and their standing in civilian communities. The three characters who are working officers all see the police as an institution that protects and serves communities, rather than one that is inherently racist. One officer even expresses that they see Black neighbourhoods as being dangerous for them due to anti-cop sentiments.

However, Kendra and Jamal are shown to have an opposite perspective. Throughout the show, it is made clear that their experiences involving police have made them very adverse to their presence. Kendra routinely expresses her fear of the racism police show and what it can mean for the safety of Black people to have their rights continuously ignored by people in positions of power. Jamal is indicated to have been deeply affected seeing the repeated violence perpetuated by police throughout his life, which led to him publically expressing being anti-cop.

Breathe

Part of the de-escalation process used by police is to tell people to “breathe.” This is a poignant example of irony, as this sentiment is in contrast to the many times police have exercised force against civilians to the point where they could not breathe. Two years prior to the initial performances of *American Son*, a man named Eric Gardner was killed after officers belonging to the New York Police Department used an illegal chokehold to restrain him. These situations are echoed in *American Son* with the final line of the play being “I can’t breathe” as part of Jamal’s parent’s response to the situation.

This type of force continues to be a significant issue into the present day. The phrase “I can’t breathe” became a prominent part of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 after it was said by George Floyd during the nine and a half minutes he was restricted by police before his death and has continued to be used at protests against police brutality and excessive use of force.

POST-SHOW ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Immediate Reflection

1. What word would you use to describe how you feel after watching *American Son*?
2. Is there a group of people in your community who would benefit from watching *American Son*?

Further Reflection

1. Did this story challenge previously held assumptions that you had about race, policing, or police-community relations?
2. Do you think *American Son* is a good/accurate representation of racism in the criminal justice system? Why or why not?
3. *American Son* is written by Christopher Demos-Brown, a White playwright. Does knowing this impact your perception of the show?
4. How did systemic racism contribute to the events of *American Son*? What are some ways systemic racism can be seen in your own society?

Character Analysis

1. How do Kendra and Scott respond to the police throughout the story? Does their response ever change? Why/why not?
2. Were Kendra and Scott treated equally by the police throughout the play? How was their treatment the same/different?
3. We never see Jamal, but in many ways he is the story's most important character. What do we know about him? How do the various characters describe him, and to what aspects of Jamal do they attach meaning?
4. What is the hierarchy of power between the characters and where do those power differences come from? Do these dynamics ever shift? If so, how and why?

Social Justice

1. Do you think everyone is treated equally by the police? Do you think that everyone is treated fairly by the police? Is there a difference?
2. What steps could be taken to improve police-community relations?
3. What role should police play in contributing to public safety?
4. What does a safe community look like?

GET INVOLVED

There are many ways to get involved and contribute to ending systemic racism and police violence.

Open Discussion

Invite open and honest discussions about race and policing with friends and family. Making sure the people in your life are aware of systemic issues helps create a culture of acknowledgement and accountability for all. Here are some tips for effectively hosting uncomfortable conversations while sharing a meal with others: opportunityagenda.org/explore/insights/how-navigate-holiday-conversations

Organizations to Support

Support organizations that work towards equitable and accountable policing and support Black communities. These include:

Dream Defenders: dreamdefenders.org
Color of Change: colorofchange.org
Latino Justice: latinojustice.org/en
Movement for Black Lives: m4bl.org
Center for Constitutional Rights: ccrjustice.org
Black Lives Matter Canada: blacklivesmatter.ca
Black Legal Action Centre: blacklegalactioncentre.ca
Nia Centre for the Arts: niacentre.org
Black Youth Helpline: blackyouth.ca

Further Reading and Articles Consulted

“What 100 Years of History Tells Us About Racism in Policing,” from the American Civil Liberties Union: aclu.org/news/criminal-law-reform/what-100-years-of-history-tells-us-about-racism-in-policing

“How You Start is How You Finish? The Slave Patrol and Jim Crow Origins of Policing,” by Connie Hassett-Walker: americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/civil-rights-reimagining-policing/how-you-start-is-how-you-finish

“How George Floyd Died, and What Happened Next,” from the New York Times: nytimes.com/article/george-floyd.html

“Violence at Fairy Creek is Part of a Reckoning Over Police Brutality in Canada,” by Jerome Turner and Ora Cogan: teenvogue.com/story/police-violence-fairy-creek

“A Disparate Impact: Second interim report on the inquiry into racial profiling and racial discrimination of Black persons by the Toronto Police Service,” from the Ontario Human Rights Commission: ohrc.on.ca/sites/default/files/A%20Disparate%20Impact%20Second%20interim%20report%20on%20the%20TPS%20inquiry%20executive%20summary.pdf#overlay-context=en/disparate-impact-second-interim-report-inquiry-racial-profiling-and-racial-discrimination-black

“A History of the Drug War,” from the Drug Policy Alliance: drugpolicy.org/issues/brief-history-drug-war

“Legalize it All: How to win the war on drugs,” by Dan Baum: harpers.org/archive/2016/04/legalize-it-all

“The Legacy of Trauma,” by Tori DeAngelis: apa.org/monitor/2019/02/legacy-trauma