

FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

For eight years, I worked at New York City's official agency for investigating police misconduct. I began as an investigator, looking into allegations as minor as casual rudeness and as serious as death in custody. Later I conducted outreach, speaking at precincts, schools, community boards, housing projects, churches, and juvenile detention centers about civilian-police relations. Eventually I served as the director of communications and intergovernmental affairs, managing press issues, sitting on panels alongside city council members, and addressing the entire graduating class of the police academy. All the while I continued writing plays, and while I never wrote a play without thinking about the people and the lessons I learned at work, I resisted writing specifically about police abuse. As much as I had learned, the subject seemed too much in flux to capture – no matter what I wrote or thought about the NYPD, the opposite, I knew, was also probably true.

When I first sat down to write about my experience, I ended up with half a play mainly about political bickering and clever one-liners delivered by government staffers. I had become entranced with the status struggles between city agencies and the peculiar jargon of government work (the use of “out-years” instead of “future” remains a personal favorite), and had neglected to include anything about what all these people were actually working on. A colleague in a writers group read what I had written and told me that we needed to hear another voice – we needed to hear from an outsider. That night I sat down and wrote the opening monologue of *The Rant*.

I wrote the first draft of the play in eight weeks. The result was raw and scattered but I was much happier with it. I had learned in my job that every police encounter is racially charged in some degree – even the most innocuous, and even those in which the officer and the civilian are the same race. I felt that by giving full voice to each of the four characters, and by making the play more overtly about race, I had written something that was truer to my experience and to the world. The same person who told me to include the outsider's voice blanched when she saw what I had ended up with, warning me to be “very, very, careful” with the result. I hope I succeeded in ignoring that advice.

Three days after I completed the first ragged draft, a reporter called me at the break of dawn to ask what I knew about an unarmed man who had been shot by the police a few hours before as he left his bachelor party. I have answered more times than I can remember that the Sean Bell shooting was not the source material for this play. However, there were a dozen or more other shootings, and many more cases of ordinary human cruelty, from which I have borrowed details or drawn inspiration. Most of these events were not major news stories, appearing somewhere in the thick middle pages of a newspaper if they were covered at all. I will never forget the true and deep human suffering that surrounds every police shooting, and hope that I have not trivialized these tragedies by using them as the basis for a play.

The NYPD Rant is an actual message board, run by a former NYPD officer to allow cops to vent anger, express approval, or debate with each other about the city, the police department, crime, politics, and baseball. While the posters are all anonymous, the webmaster confirms that they are NYPD officers before giving them a username. When I worked at the CCRB, I read the site daily – oftentimes it was the best place to get advance information on new policies and programs, or the truly unvarnished view of current events from the line officer perspective.

Sometimes that view was more unvarnished than people would like. The day that Michael Oliver was indicted for shooting Sean Bell, there was a “Letter to the People of New York” posted on the Rant.

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It began:

“Ladies and Gentlemen,

The N.Y.P.D. is officially closed for business. Arm yourselves with whatever weapons you deem morally acceptable. Fend for yourselves. This was the parting shot. We are done.” The letter went on to say that New York was “a city of politically correct, elitist, cop hating liberals,” and told its residents to “set up barbed wire and trained dogs around your residences. Build a moat. Learn how to protect yourselves. We will no longer be jailed in order to quell racial riots or anti-police sentiment.” The writer said he would no longer race to calls, because if something went wrong, then “Some young, do gooder, John Lennon listening, Green Peace card carrying, pot smoking, bird watching, tree hugging, sandal wearing, anti-government amateur protester A.D.A. will be thrilled to prosecute me and use me as a feather in his cap.” He concluded by saying he would show up at any dispute only after it was over “when neither I nor my pension is in danger.”

The letter received hundreds of responses, every one of them positive. I marveled both at the anger in the letter, the vitriol towards a city that, after all, was responding to the fact that officers had fired fifty bullets into a carful of unarmed men. But I also marveled at the writer’s humor, his wry imagery (so many New Yorkers have, of course, built moats of some sort or another around their brownstones and highrises), and his greater understanding of the carnival and pageantry of New York than most allegedly sophisticated residents. As I read the letter again, I could not help thinking that the cop who wrote it was somehow channeling Tom Wolfe, reminding us that despite the graffiti-free subway cars and the sex-free Times Square and the murder-free city, New York can still be a sprawling, uncontrollable, wonderful stew of hate, hope, and humor. I hope to have captured some hint of that city in my play.

- Andrew Case