

Inside & OUT

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AFTER *Ashley*

By Gina Gionfriddo
Directed by Anthony Powell
The Ricketson Theatre
APRIL 6 – JUNE 3

Illustration by Scott McKowen

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Synopsis

“ASHLEY (to Justin): — — *Because you’re great. You’re amazing. You survived me. But that’s you and you’re extraordinary.* — —”
—After Ashley

Poor Justin is dealing with puberty, mononucleosis and his hippie mother’s frank sex talks. Ashley Hammond (the mom) is looking for guidance somewhere; in her loneliness and neediness she turns to her teen aged son. She can’t seem to cope with anything in her life, including Justin’s Advil dosage. When she is raped and murdered, Justin hysterically calls 911 and stays in the house until help arrives. Fast forward three years and now it is Justin who can’t cope with his grief and his new-found celebrity as the “911 kid.” But, most of all, he is angered by his father’s fame as the author of a false memoir about his dead mother as well as a host of a cable TV show. With blistering humor, the play raises questions about the media’s exploitation of tragedy and our own obsession with victims and violence.

“*The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness.*”
Daniel J. Boorstein,
The Image, (1962)

The Playwright

Gina Gionfriddo is a graduate of Brown University’s MFA playwriting program. She studied with Paula Vogel, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and won the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for her play *U.S. Drag*. She also was awarded the Helen Merrill Award for Emerging Playwrights. Her plays have been produced and developed by many theatres including the O’Neill Center in Connecticut and the Humana Festival for New American Plays.

What Makes a Celebrity?

“JUSTIN: My mother was murdered. I don’t know what the aftermath of that is supposed to be—a book and a TV show and a rap song and a girl in my room. It’s like we’ve lost the truth of it.—”
After Ashley

Justin has become a celebrity, whether he likes it or not. He fits into a specific category as Chris Rojek explains in his book *Celebrity*. The author contends that status comes in three forms: ascribed, achieved and attributed. Ascribed celebrity is about lineage, the lucky few who have a noted line of biological descent include people like Caroline Kennedy or Prince William. They can do admirable work for volunteer causes, but their “celebrity” is predetermined. In contrast, achieved celebrity comes from the accomplishments of the individual. For example, Meryl Streep, Russell Crowe, Phillip Seymour Hoffman and Reese Witherspoon are screen actors of talent; while sports figures such as Tiger Woods, Pete Sampras, Tom Brady and Venus and Serena Williams are recognized for their athletic skills. Finally, attributed celebrity is the result of mass media sensationalism. When ordinary people win the lottery, witness crimes, or participate in reality TV shows, they are elevated “into public consciousness and become note-worthy.” 1. Likewise, figures in public scandals are vaulted into the limelight, especially when they become involved with public figures. Thus, Paula Jones, Linda Tripp and Monica Lewinsky have been etched into the public consciousness.

Another group of people who can be included in the attributed celebrity category are the female victims of heinous crimes and their families. In a transcript of “Reliable Sources”, a CNN show that turns a critical lens on the media, the July 6, 2003 broadcast focused on the obsession of cable news with the Laci Peterson case and other female victims such as Jon Benet Ramsey, Chandra Levy and Elizabeth Smart. The program featured the host, Howard Kurtz, journalist Lisa De Paulo and CNN legal analyst, Jeffrey Toobin. Toobin immediately noted that crime stories have always been a staple of journalism and that cable TV ratings are a factor

in their presentation. To Kurtz’s question: “Is this the kind of company that serious, capable journalists should be keeping?” Lisa DePaulo replied: “I think these days there is a very fine line between a victim and a celebrity. I mean, what you see in all these cases, you know, these family members go from the funeral to the green room.” 2.

Subsequently, Kurtz made the point that previously these people weren’t known by anyone outside of their community. DePaulo explained: “The reason they became celebrities is we in the news business put the spotlight on them, so—it doesn’t happen by accident.” 3.

Jeffrey Toobin summed up the discussion with this statement: “There is a core of people interested in it, and we’re in the business, at least in part, of satisfying people’s interest in following the stories they want followed.” 4. Thus, Toobin’s summation reinforces this quotation from Clive Barnes, an esteemed *New York Times* theatre critic:

“Television is the first truly democratic culture—the first culture available to everybody and entirely governed by what the people want.”

<http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0307/06>

Rojek, Chris. *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books, 2001.

1. Rojeck, p. 18.
2. CNN. com, p. 3.
3. CNN. com, p. 3.
4. CNN. com, p. 4.

Tabloid TV

DAVID: “—The current thinking—because it’s a women’s network, and because NBC is doing incredibly well with this, uh, “*Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*”—the idea is to shift the focus to sex crimes. Lots of interest in sex crimes right now.”
After Ashley

“*Law and Order: SVU*” is one of the television series that uses sex crimes as the basis for its stories; others include “*CSI*,” “*CSI: Miami*,” “*CSI: New York*” and its other locations. The inspiration for these shows may have come from an Australian import which arrived in America about 1986.

This tabloid sensibility began with Rupert Murdoch and his entrance into United States journalism. But his interests are not limited to newspapers. He has shares in or holdings of Twentieth Century Fox, Harper Collins publishing, *TV Guide* magazine and the Fox television network. One of the first projects Murdoch launched on his TV network was “A Current Affair,” which was variously described as a “combination of tragic, offbeat and human stories” or “a show that will make and break news” or just “reality programming.”¹ With Maury Povich as its news anchor, the program was micromanaged by Murdoch to create a buzz about his new network.

From the beginning “A Current Affair” focused on programs involving sleazy crimes, the courts, sex and celebrities. “It bounded from one salacious story to the next.”² The litany included the Preppy Murder case, Jessica Hahn and Jim Bakker scandal, William Kennedy Smith and allegations of rape, Amy Fisher and Joey Buttofuoco (dubbed the Long Island Lolita), Tanya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan skating bash, Michael Jackson and his oddities, and, ultimately, the O.J. Simpson saga. In addition, “A Current Affair” aired the earliest TV reenactment: two actors portrayed Jennifer Levin and Robert Chambers (of the Preppy Murder case) as they met at a Manhattan bar and left together for that fateful walk in Central Park. Some journalists may argue that a few of these were legitimate news stories, but the difficulty lay with the extent and manner of the coverage.

The high (or low) point of “A Current Affair” and all TV coverage was the O. J. Simpson case. It taught us more about the media than any previous event except the Lindbergh baby kidnapping. The competition between journalists and TV networks in covering the case showed the lack of restraint on the part of reporters and the manipulation of the public.

Alden’s book about Ashley is akin to other publications by some families of murder victims. For example, the Ramseys wrote *Death of Innocence* about Jon Benet and the false charges brought against them; Sharon Rocha is now touting her book, *For Laci*. Justin finds this whole practice objectionable, but he is most enraged at Alden for manipulating the truth of his mother’s life in his book. He says: “Editing the truth is just a different way of lying.”

A ratings sag forced “A Current Affair” off the air in 1996. But its influence has been felt by the other networks. Fictionalized series still abound, but “Dateline NBC” and “ABC’s 20/20” use reenactments of crimes and continue to feature stories about female murder victims.

As Lisa DePaulo said on “Reliable Sources:” “There is something really voyeuristic about being able to look at this couple (the Petersons) who seemed to be the perfect couple and then the layers of the onion peel away——.”³

<http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/030706>

Krajicek, David J. *Scooped! Media Miss Real Story on Crime While Chasing Sex, Sleaze and Celebrities*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1998.

1. Krajicek, p. 36.
2. Krajicek, p. 41.
3. CNN.com, p. 2.

TV Psychology

“DR. BOB : —and I will say to you—what I say to patients in my private practice. There are five things you need to know to get yourself a life license.—”
After Ashley

Dr. Bob is a talk show psychologist who, according to Justin, has a degree in sociology but is not licensed to practice psychology. If he is an emulation of Dr. Phil McGraw, he has an audience of “6.5 million Americans, mostly female—who tune in for life changing advice on the sublime, the ridiculous and all points in between.” 1.

Unlike Dr. Bob, Dr. Phil has a degree in neuropsychology from the University of North Texas. He speaks in homespun one-liners to advice-seeking guests such as: “Get real”; “Is that the truth or a lie?”; “This is gonna be a changing day in your life”; and “Don’t think, just start talkin’.” 2. Guests are required to sign a waiver in which they acknowledge that Dr. Phil’s advice is not to be construed as “therapy or a substitute for therapy.” 3.

In a transcript of a show aired in January, a woman named Angela had a sleep-eating problem. During the night she would raid the refrigerator or cabinets without knowing it. After listening to Angela and her mother, Dr. Phil said: “Sounds like rebellion to me... If we’re restrictive with ourselves, that’s what bingeing is all about. You’re just doing it while you’re asleep.” 4. Dr. Phil’s advice to Angela is to keep junk food out of her cabinets and put a bicycle lock on the refrigerator door. Ultimately he tells Angela to work on her attitude and if she is on a diet, to buy his book, *The Ultimate Weight Solution*.

A psychiatrist friend (who wishes to remain anonymous) opines that Dr. Phil is more entertainment than therapy. His diagnosis

comes after a 15 minute chat with the guest and that limited procedure cannot determine the problem and certainly, not the solution. In addition, his suggestions for help or a cure are just common sense and a plug to buy his book.

In an essay entitled “The Shelter of Each Other: One Big Town,” Mary Pipher watched a number of TV talk shows including Sally Jesse Raphael and Maury Povich. She was struck by how wrong these shows felt. “Poor and needy people were manipulated into revealing personal information. People were selling their souls and their most private pain for a few minutes celebrity.” 5. Perhaps Justin is right when he says: “Shame is an idea whose time has come.” (play, p. 59).

Salerno, Steve. *Sham: How the Self Help Movement Made America Helpless*. NY: Crown Publishers, 2005.

Shea, Daniel M., ed. *Mass Politics: the Politics of Popular Culture*. NY: Worth Publishers, 1999.
Pipher, Mary. “The Shelter of Each Other: One Big Town.”

www. Dr. Phil.com.

1. Salerno, p. 65.
2. Salerno, p. 65.
3. Salerno, p. 71.
4. Dr. Phil.com, p. 2.
5. Pipher, p. 158.

Song Lyrics

“It’s Different for Girls” by Joe Jackson

What the hell is wrong with you tonight?
I can’t seem to say or do the right thing.
Wanted to be sure you’re feeling right
Wanted to be sure we want the same thing.
She says, I can’t believe it./You can’t possibly mean it.
Don’t we all want the same thing, Don’t we?
Well, who said any thing about love?
No not love she said./Take a little time and find the right girl.
Then again don’t end up on the shelf./Logical advice gets you in a whirl.
I know, a lot of things that you don’t wanna hear some
She said, just give me something, anything./Well, give me all you got but not love.
No not love she said./Don’t you know that it’s different for girls?
You’re all the same.

“Stan” by Eminem. *This song is a fan letter written to a star named Slim who never answers “Stan.” Stan’s letters become personal, violent, full of scatological language and finally, suicidal because Slim does not respond.*

Dear Slim, I wrote but you still ain’t callin’
I left my cell, my pager, and my home phone at the bottom
I sent two letters back in autumn, you must not-a got ’em
There probably was a problem at the post office or somethin’.
Sometimes I scribble addresses too sloppy when I jot ’em
But anyways——what’s been up? Man, how’s your daughter?
My girlfriend’s pregnant, too; I’m ’bout to be a father.
If I have a daughter, guess what I’m a call her?
I’m a name her Bonnie.—————
Anyways, I hope you get this man, hit me back,
Just to chat, truly yours, your biggest fan

This is Stan. *(Slim finally answers.)*

Dear Stan, I meant to write you sooner but I just been busy
You said your girlfriend’s pregnant now, how far along is she?
Look, I’m really flattered you would call your daughter that
And here’s an autograph for your brother, / I wrote it on the Starter cap.
I’m sorry I didn’t see you at the show, I musta missed you.
Don’t think I did that *(stuff)* intentionally to diss you.

(Slim finds out that a drunken young man drove his car over a bridge with his pregnant girlfriend in the trunk and an audio tape by his side. When he realizes who it was——)

Come to think about, his name was—it was you
Damn!