

WORLD PREMIERE

P.Y.G. OR THE MIS-EDUMACATION OF DORIAN BELLE

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
TEARRANCE ARVELLE CHISHOLM

REALITY BITES

BY LAUREN HALVORSEN

In 1912, George Bernard Shaw completed the first draft of his masterwork *Pygmalion*. Taking its title from the sculptor in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who falls in love with a statue of his own creation, the play tracks an upper-class phonetician's wager that he could pass off a feral flower-seller as a duchess after three months of re-education. But after her successful transformation into a poised socialite, she discovers she can't fully occupy high society or her former lower-class existence, and rebels against her creator.

Eighty years later, MTV debuted *The Real World*, an unscripted drama that famously documented "seven strangers, picked to live in a house, to find out what

happens when people stop being polite...and start being real." Finding action in the lives of real people rather than relying on actors wasn't wholly novel—in 1973, PBS aired the twelve-part series *An American Family*, which chronicled the quotidian dramas of a middle-class family in California—but *The Real World* ushered in a new genre of entertainment: reality television.

The form has spawned countless subgenres—competitions, social experiments, self-improvement makeovers, documentary-style soap operas—and manufactured a new, fame-hungry tier of celebrity (and revitalized the relevancy of faded stars). But despite its purportedly unscripted format, reality television is



deliberately structured: plot arcs and archetypes abound, as people relinquish control of the portrayal of their lives to an editing room.

Separated by decades, *Pygmalion* and the reality television juggernaut both turn on the power of transformation and narrative ownership—and they serve as the thematic bedrock of Tarrance Arvelle Chisholm's *P.Y.G. or The Mis-Education of Dorian Belle*, a blazingly theatrical look at capitalism and cultural appropriation, which will receive its world premiere at Studio in the 2018-2019 season.

Dorian Belle, a Bieber-esque pop star from Toronto, wants to rebrand his squeaky-clean image. Alexand Da Great and Blacky Blackerson (a.k.a. Black) are Petty Young Goons, an up-and-coming rap duo from outside Chicago. The unlikely trio are matched for a reality show where P.Y.G. will school Dorian on the history and culture of hip-hop, increasing his street cred and their own public visibility and cross-over potential. ("We tryin' to get that white people money," Black tells the camera.)

Reality television is both the setting and the structure of *P.Y.G.*; Chisholm employs many familiar tropes of the genre: cutaway confessionals, elaborate montages, private conversations picked up by ever-present microphones, dramatic rejections of the cameras' attempt to capture emotional moments. Chisholm includes theme music (with nods to *The Real World* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*) and commercial breaks, advertising faux products that combat, or comment on persistent micro-aggressions. (The reinforced boot straps of White Man Shoes® guarantee to provide you with all the unearned advantages enjoyed by the patriarchy for centuries: "Our patented Light as a Feather technology will allow you to stand on the backs of others with complete obliviousness.")

Chisholm also explores the perils of viral fame: *The Mis-Education of Dorian Belle* becomes a hit, swarming P.Y.G. with the enthusiasm of those coveted white consumers and criticism from their loyal black fans, causing Alexand to question the cost of their newfound commercial appeal and the oppressive system that upholds the white supremacy enabling cultural and racial appropriation. Because while Dorian can try on a new hip-hop persona, cherry-picking the most appealing parts without fully inhabiting the history and pain, Black and Alexand must reckon with the weight of their portrayal on the show and the pressure to positively represent an entire race. "They watching. All the time...Watching and waiting and judging. Judging you. Judging me," Alexand tells Black. "Holding us up against every black men there ever was and ever will be. Fictional and otherwise. And it's our responsibility to make sure we ain't makin' black folks look turrible."

Chisholm feels similar responsibility as a playwright of color who writes about race in America. "I want to have actors be able to play parts that tell true stories

of black people—it shouldn't be just stereotypes," he says. With blistering insight and devastating humor, Chisholm's fiercely theatrical body of work presents a multi-dimensional experience of blackness, navigating the minefields of identity, racism, and justice (or lack thereof) in this country.

Chisholm was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, but considers DC his "theatrical birthplace": he's won multiple awards from the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, he received his MFA in Playwriting from the Catholic University of America, and Mosaic Theatre Company mounted his first professional production, *Hooded, or Being Black for Dummies*. Like *P.Y.G.*, the searing comic drama traffics in the pleasures and problems of cultural exchange, following two black teenage boys from radically different backgrounds while one teaches the other how to "Be Black." Cited as one of the top ten plays of 2017, *The Washington Post* noted, "Chisholm writes with fury and indignation while making the show fresh, funny and entirely fearless." After an initial sell-out run, *Hooded* was remounted for an encore presentation in May 2018 and received the 2018 Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding New Play or Musical.

After grad school, Chisholm moved to New York to attend the prestigious Lila Acheson Wallace Playwriting Program at The Juilliard School, where he balanced writing and his burgeoning career. In addition to *Hooded, Br'er Cotton*—a Virginia-set family drama chronicling a militant black teenager's mounting anger at the recent killings of young black men like himself, right before homicidal white supremacists descend on Charlottesville—received a rolling world premiere at Kitchen Dog Theatre, Lower Depth Theatre, and Cleveland Public Theatre, and debuted in London at Theatre 503 in a production deemed "bold, brave, and very, very funny" by *The Guardian*.

As for *P.Y.G.*, Chisholm initially approached the play as a kind of theatrical instructional manual for allyship. "I often have white audience members come up to me after [my shows] and ask, in earnest, 'How can I help?'" Chisholm says, "So I wrote this play to tell white people what to do." But over the course of *P.Y.G.*'s development—it's received readings at Juilliard, Magic Theatre in San Francisco, and City Theatre Company in Pittsburgh—Chisholm found that the play was evolving into a "bigger story about art and music and collaboration, and what are the pros and cons of cultural exchange."

P.Y.G. marks a new collaboration for Chisholm as well; he'll be assuming the hybrid role of playwright/director for the first time. He specifically wrote *P.Y.G.* as a directorial project for himself, as he's interested in what "it looks like when I take my vision from the page to the stage without negotiations in between." And, as with his plays, his outlook is infused with humor: "I realize as the playwright and the director I have the ability to fail twice at once and I'm really looking forward to that opportunity." ♦