

THE PANIC DEFENSE

A Full-Length One-Act (Sample)

By Sam Affoumado

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

TRAVIS WILKINS: A southern gay man with an acerbic wit. A chef at a Dominican Restaurant. In a relationship with Romeo. Age: 30s-40s

MIKE HOUSEMAN: A kind-hearted, divorced parent. Trying to battle alcohol addiction. A Truck driver. Bisexual. (Caucasian) Age: 30s-40s

MAXINE: A Transgender woman. She is a sex worker who aspires to become a certified cosmetologist. (African American) Age: 20s

BENNY: An effeminate, bullied, special needs student. He has just begun to express a new gender identity. (African-American, Mixed Race or Latinx) Age: 15

FEMALE: PROSECUTOR/TEACHERS A,B (Caucasian) Age: 30s-40s

MALE 1: PROSECUTOR/JAMES (PERPETRATOR) (African-American) Age: 30s-40s

MALE 2: ROMEO/CATCALLER (PERPETRATOR) Handsome and in the closet (Latinx) Age: 30s-40s

MALE 3: TOMMY/JEFF/DANIEL (PERPETRATORS) (Caucasian) Age: 20s

SETTING

Time: The present; the past

Place: Everywhere, USA; a jury box, a bathtub, a sofa, a Park Bench, and a computer classroom.

THE PANIC DEFENSE: SCENE BREAKDOWN

SCENE 1: FOUR SEPARATE LOCATIONS ARE REPRESENTED DOWNSTAGE. THEY CAN BE PROJECTED VISUALS OR ACTUAL SET PIECES INCLUDING A BATHTUB, A SOFA, A PARK BENCH AND A COMPUTER DESK WITH LAPTOP. UPSTAGE THERE ARE BENCHES/CHAIRS REPRESENTING A COURTROOM JURY BOX. LIGHTING AND SCREEN PROJECTIONS WILL INTRODUCE THE VARIOUS LOCATIONS.

SCENE 2: SCREEN PROJECTION: "THE PANIC DEFENSE" THE COURTROOM CASES

EPILOGUE: ACTORS (Not in character) ADDRESS THE AUDIENCE

IN MEMORIAM:

MUSIC: PAVANE FOR A DEAD PRINCESS BY RAVEL PLAYS.

SCREEN PROJECTION: PHOTOS OF LGBTQ+ AND TRANS WOMEN OF COLOR WHO WERE MURDERED. THEIR NAMES ARE SPOKEN ALOUD BY EACH ACTOR IN TURN.

(PHOTOS WOULD BE UPDATED WITH EACH NEW PRODUCTION TO REFLECT THE MOST RECENT CRIME DATA.)

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SCREEN PROJECTION: "EVERYWHERE, USA"
"VOIR DIRE - JURY SELECTION"

LIGHTS UP ON THE UPSTAGE COURTROOM AREA.

MALE 1/PROSECUTOR

(to the audience)

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your cooperation and your patience. In a few moments, we will begin the jury selection process. We will be questioning you about your lives, your viewpoints, beliefs and perhaps, even explore your attitudes about certain alternative lifestyles. Please understand that we are not trying to be intrusive. It is our obligation to find out how your particular set of life experiences may affect your reactions to this particular case either in a positive or negative way. So, if during the course of questioning, we decide to excuse you... don't take it personally.

This case will, more than likely, reference terms such as "gender identity", "gender fluidity", "gender queer", "inter-gender" and so on. As you may know, nowadays the term "**gender**" has taken on a new and more complicated meaning. **Gender** can be defined as the state of being a man, a woman, both, neither, somewhere in between or something entirely different. And you should be aware of the fact that these concepts may be relevant when it's time to deliberate and resolve the case put before you. These are terms that you may or may not be familiar with but you will, ultimately, need to comprehend.

FEMALE/PROSECUTOR

(to the audience)

Let's face it, ladies and gentlemen, it's a new world we live in and we know, for some of us, it's difficult to even imagine. I must warn you that this trial could include some... foul language, gruesome photographs, and graphic descriptions of criminal acts but... as potential jurors, you must be able to put your own discomfort and your own predispositions aside. Ask yourselves this question. With the knowledge of your own personal views... is there anything that would cause you to believe that you could not consider the evidence fairly and impartially according to the law?

(MORE)

FEMALE/PROSECUTOR (CONT'D)

After hearing testimony, even if you find that you are out of your own comfort zone, you must be able to evaluate the facts objectively. That's all we ask.

MALE 1/PROSECUTOR

That's all we ask. Do you think you can do that?

FEMALE PROSECUTOR

Do you think you can do that?

BLACKOUT ON COURTROOM AREA.

SCREEN PROJECTION: "2011, CLIFFSIDE PARK, NEW JERSEY"

LIGHTS UP ON THE BATHTUB AREA

TRAVIS

(to the audience)

I have a new bathtub and I just love it! Oh, I like my new shower, too. Especially when the two of us are in the shower at the same time. That can be an intensely titillatin' experience. That man sure knows how to... "dip the pickle" unless, of course, he has had way too much to drink. In that case, his pickle would be rendered... "out of service."

Fortunately for me, that is seldom a problem area. But there is something... amiss. You see, I can always sense some hostility after we... do the deed. It's like he is ashamed of what we do. I mean... most of the time he is the one who initiates it but even when he is ready, willing and eager... he can never allow himself to bask in the afterglow. I never could understand that.

BLACKOUT.

SCREEN PROJECTION: "E.O. GREEN JUNIOR HIGH"
"2008, OXNARD, CALIFORNIA"

LIGHTS UP ON THE COMPUTER DESK AREA.

BENNY

(to the audience)

Computer class. My favorite. I love this class. My best teacher brings us in here. We are doing a unit on "tolerance." Today we have to finish the reports. We had to read Anne Frank... the book. I don't read so good but I ain't dumb. I watched Anne Frank... the movie. (BENNY laughs.)

Only the girls is doing Anne Frank. The boys is doing World War II. Like Hitler and all kinds of weapons and gas. I don't like guns. Teacher say I don't gotta stick to World War II 'cause the topic is "tolerance" anyways.

(MORE)

BENNY (CONT'D)

I wanna be different. I wanna do World War I but I don't remember nothin' about it. I think we skipped World War I in History or maybe I was absent that day.

I gotta type my report **today** but I don't got nothin' written down. I'm not so good with reading but I'm even worst with writing. Wanna know a secret? When I go on the computer, my work looks real good... just like everybody else. Yesterday, I tell the teacher, "Teacher I don't know what to report about." (To the audience) I don't want the kids to make fun of me. I say, "Teacher, what could I do?" Teacher say to me---

FEMALE/TEACHER A

---Benny, what are you interested in? What do you like?

BENNY

(To the teacher) Well, I like music.

FEMALE/TEACHER A

Music, huh. Okay. Benny, how about doing a report on peace songs. How does that sound?

BENNY

(To the teacher) Sounds good. Wow! Okay! "Peace" songs! Thanks, teacher. (To the audience) I don't know what that means. My counselor, at the residence where I live at, he's very smart. He helped me do research on the internet all last night and guess what? I found a hundred songs with the word "peace" in the title. I listened to all of them but now I got so much "peace" song information in my head... I don't know what to do with it.

BLACKOUT

SCREEN PROJECTION: "2013, RIVERSIDE PARK, NEW YORK CITY"

LIGHTS UP ON THE BENCH AREA

MAXINE

(to the audience)

It may sound crazy but this here bench means everything to me. It's my home away from home. Me and my sistas hang out here all the time. It's where we meet and... greet. Lots of memories here, let me tell you... if this bench could talk. Mm-hmm. Every day, at twilight, I sit right here before I go to work. I only work nights, you know. I been at my... job since I was fifteen and it's gettin' tiresome but I'll keep doin' it a little longer 'cause I see that light at the end of the tunnel. I know it's only temporary and that notion is what keeps me goin'; the fact that I won't be... hustlin' forever.

(MORE)

MAXINE (CONT'D)

When you come from where I come from and try livin' in your truth, you don't get the opportunity to pick and choose your career. Know what I'm sayin'? Not too many options in my 'hood.

You could see the sunset from here. Never seen the sunrise 'cause I'd be sleepin' way past most of them but I do see quite a few sunsets. I like the twilight hours the most because, truth be told, I look amazing in the twilight. Mm-hmm. It gives me a kind of glow that you don't get in regular daylight. I ain't blowin' smoke or nothin' but that's what I been told... that in the right light, I look amazing.

I know it's a risky way of life. My mama always says, "Maxine, you never know who you gonna run into or who's gonna run into you." And mama is so right. There sure are some crazy people out here but... where else am I gonna make money like this? (PAUSE) Nowhere! That's where!

BLACKOUT

SCREEN PROJECTION: "2008, COOK COUNTY, ILLINOIS

LIGHTS UP ON THE SOFA AREA

MIKE

(to the audience)

I love my new sofa. Well, it's a hand-me-down sofa but it's a pull-out with a brand new mattress and that's great because now, when my son comes over for his weekend visits, he can sleep in a real bed.

He's almost a teen. I think they call them tweens nowadays. In my time we were called pre-teens or we were just... ignored. Anyhow, whatever the new label is, it signifies that he's growing up and growing awkward and a couch is just not that comfortable for a growing boy.

My ex wife was not on speaking terms with me. Couldn't blame her. I drank more than I should have and I guess I hung out with the wrong sort of people. She said, "Mike, you're a bad influence on my son." She was so pissed that she kept him away from me for a year with one lame excuse after another.

But she changed her tune when Johnny, who is becoming this amazing little person, finally threw a fit and told her that he had a right to spend time with his dad. He said, "I know what 'joint custody' means and mom, you are breaking the law!" He swore that he was gonna go to court to tell the judge. Can you imagine that? Tough little bugger! (MIKE laughs.) My poor ex didn't have a clue what to do. And when he demanded that she drive him over to see me, well... she did. Of course she did. What choice did she have?

LIGHTS UP ON ALL DOWNSTAGE AREAS.

TRAVIS

(to the audience)

Now, the bathtub is my peaceful place. Just for little 'ole me. It is my time for simple contemplation. How did the day go? Was I successful? How could I improve my culinary skills at the restaurant? What new recipes shall I try? What plans should I make for the weekend?

No tension. No stress. Just me and the manscapin' fragrance of the body wash; the translucent bubbles burstin' with sunlight. The sound of the warm, ripplin' water echoin' in contrast to the cold silence of the tile surround. (PAUSE) See now? When I am relaxed I can get downright poetic!

Me and Roméo (I call him Romeo) share a rather large but uninspiring studio apartment but the bathroom is my fabulous oasis. My renovation idea and... my money. Beautiful, white subway tile, double vanities, walk-in shower with a rain head system to die for and... my own, claw-foot tub. I say "my own" because he does not like to bathe. He did not want a bathtub at all. In fact, as I recall, he said,---

MALE 2/ROMEO

---"Trabee, de tub it is for pussies"!

TRAVIS

And I said... well, never you mind what I said. (PAUSE) Oh, he calls me Trabee 'cause he can't pronounce Travis. I just love his accent. Suffice it to say, I performed a few maneuvers on my macho man that even he could not resist and... voila!

MALE 2/ROMEO

Okay. Get your pussy tub. But I will never use it.

TRAVIS

(To ROMEO) Awww! What a shame! (To the audience) I suppose I am more resourceful than even I had imagined. When I really want somethin' I will go to great lengths to get it. (PAUSE) I just can't tell you how much I love my tub!

BENNY

(to the audience)

I want my report to look professional. I wanna be a professional. You know... you gotta look professional, too. That's why, last week, at school, I put on eye makeup. I got earrings and... high-heel boots.

At the residence, they got a very pretty lady sittin' at the reception desk. I think she is a secretary.

(MORE)

BENNY (CONT'D)

She wears all kinds of make-up, earrings, a pretty dress and high heel shoes. She gets lots of attention from all the men and everybody likes her. I wanna be a secretary when I graduate from high school but I'm only in the eighth grade.

I already picked out a new name for my professional life. (PAUSE) I don't wanna be **Benny** anymore. I don't feel like **Benny**. Benny gets picked on all the time and I'm tired of it. Kids say, "Faggot! Faggot! I smell a queer." I hear that every day. They push me around... every day. They trip me and throw things at me. Food!

I'm gonna be professional. I'm calling myself **B-r-i-a-n-n-a!** (PAUSE) Don't that sound good? **Brianna** is a professional and everybody likes her. No one makes fun of **Brianna** and if they do... well, she smiles and blows them kisses and gives it right back to them. She don't take shit from no one 'cause she's a professional.

I will start my report on peace songs and at the top of the page, I will type my new name. **B-r-i-a-n-n-a!** (To imaginary students) My name is **Brianna!** Call me **Brianna** from now on.

MAXINE

(to the audience)

News flash! I'm about to enter phase two of my life plan. I got goals, you know. I haven't told this to nobody yet, not even my closest sistas but...

I registered for night school. Mm-hmm. Just two classes so I can test the waters, you know. But I did it! Oh, it ain't college or nothin' but it is a certified school... to get my Cosmetology License. I start tonight. Got my book and everything. You know you need a cosmetology license if you want to open a Beauty Salon.

Oh, I already know somethin' about beauty techniques. You won't believe this but I got my first real tips at an in-store beauty class at Sephora. Sephora! Mm-Hmm. (PAUSE) Oh, I know they got some diversity learnin' to do and I know that a one-hour gender identity, race and sensitivity workshop ain't nothin' but... I gotta tell 'ya... they gave me the confidence to go after my dream.

Someday, I will open a beauty salon of my own. Not just your ordinary salon neither. My salon will be for an all-inclusive community. And by that I mean... exclusively inclusive! (MAXINE laughs.) I even thought up a name for my new business. TRANS-FORMATIVE BEAUTY BOUTIQUE. Elegant, right? I learned a lot at the Sephora class for confidence.

So tonight, I'm on my favorite bench, waitin' for the sunset.

(MORE)

MAXINE (CONT'D)

And when the sun goes down, I'm gettin' on the number ten bus to my very first certified class in beauty culture that will get me closer to my new, entrepreneurial life.

This bench has helped me finance a better future. This bench is everything! Mm-hmm.

MIKE

(to the audience)

I'm a trucker and my schedule is crazy but whenever I get time off, I take my son fishing or hiking. I take him to the batting range every now and again. I once took him to Sycamore Speedway and he went nuts for those race cars. Who could blame him? I went nuts for them, too. She, my ex, takes him... to the library. (MIKE laughs.) No contest!

I know I'm not perfect but, honest to god, I am tryin' to cut down on my drinking and I'm more of a loner these days. I'm doing it for my son. He's a great kid and I don't want us to screw him up.

My parents screwed me up bad with their drinking and carrying on. Left me on my own most of the time when I was just a kid. I forgive them 'cause I know that they was just kids themselves. Not gonna happen to my boy. He's going to grow up to be something... someone. I'm going to make sure of that.

I'm glad I got this hand-me-down pull-out sofa. I'll get to see my kid and he will get to sleep on a new and comfortable mattress. He's staying over this weekend and I can't wait. Man, I know he's going to love this brand new, hand-me-down, sofa bed as much as I do.

TRAVIS

(to the audience)

The nerve of some people. There I was... languorously soakin' my cares away, when Romeo storms into my luxurious oasis, and bellows---

MALE 2/ROMEO

---Trabee! Get out of the pussy tub! You have to get ready. Tonight it is party night!

TRAVIS

His friends, Maria and her new love interest, Alejandro and his unsavory, thug friend Tommy and a bunch of the neighborhood ne'er-do-wells I hardly know, are all coming over and whoopee, guess who will be plyin' his culinary skills for the group?

MALE 2/ROMEO

Trabee! You will make something special for tonight, yes?

TRAVIS

(To ROMEO) I don't mind. (To the audience) Of course, I realize that my beneficent nature is being taken advantage of but... I do have an unrivaled reputation to uphold. You see, after working at the restaurant for less than a year, I had acquired quite the monicker. Best "gringo chef" of Comida Dominicana in the area. People just flocked to the restaurant for two reasons: one - to get a taste of my infamous Sancocho and two - to get a gander at li'l ole me, "Chef Gringo."
(TRAVIS laughs.)

Romeo was the new dishwasher at the restaurant. He was very hot and very quiet at first. He kept to himself but I often caught him staring at me, especially when I was preparing, what turned out to be his favorite dish. He said---

MALE 2/ROMEO

--- Mangú! You know, my mother she made that food for me. She cook that all the time in la República Dominicana. Ay, it smell so good."

TRAVIS

Mashed plantains. He said it gave him comfort and made him think of home. Well, I was so touched that I, too, felt the need to offer him some comfort by lettin' him sample my sweet and velvety wares and later on I let him sample my... sweet and velvety Mangú. And then he moved in. (PAUSE) He said---

MALE 2/ROMEO

---"You know, Trabee, I love the way you cook."

TRAVIS

And I said, "You know, Romeo, I love the way you look." We were just a mutual admiration society... for a time.

MALE 2/ROMEO

Trabee! You will make something special for tonight? Maybe you can do some Bacalaitos? Or maybe Albóndigas de Res? For all my friends! Okay?

TRAVIS

(TO ROMEO) Okay. We'll see. (TO THE AUDIENCE) A big batch of chips de plátanos is all they deserve. They are not my favorite people. I do not know what it is but when other people are around, he summarily ignores me. There are times when he can be downright belligerent. I am certainly not going to go out of my way to make anything special. Oh, my macho man will make his famous killer Mamajuana using only the finest rum - Brugal and I'll make some fresh pastelitos and we're good to go.

MALE 2/ROMEO

Trabee! You know I like to have the parties.

TRAVIS

(To ROMEO) I know, Romeo. (To the audience) Though they always end the same way. We all get polluted and then... who knows what! After they leave, maybe he'll show me some... affection. I would like that. (PAUSE) Or, maybe he'll just take his large "pickle" out of the jar. Unless his inevitable inebriation transforms it into a small, limp Gherkin.

BENNY

(to the audience)

I heard a lady singer... Joan Baez. You know about her? Well... she sings "peace" songs so... I will write about her life. I saw some old picture of her. She is very pretty but I don't know why she don't wear no makeup. She would definitely look better with make-up. Somebody should tell her to wear make-up. Then, she could look more professional, you know? She could be a professional singer... of "peace" songs. I think she is a Mexican lady. I heard her sing some old song, "We Shall Overcome." It made me sad but... she sings real good. I gotta get the words down so I can write about it.

(BENNY PUTS ON HIS EARBUDS.)

MAXINE

(to the audience)

My first class is in hair-cutting, coloring and styling. My second class is about waxing and other forms of hair removal. (MAXINE laughs.) I already know a lot about hair removal from personal experience. And let me tell you... that shit hurts! Mm-hmm! But it is worth the pain. Men do not like hairy women. At least the men I know. I think there are some cultures that like their women a little more... ripe but not the men I have encountered.

Truth be told, I used to have a hair problem above my upper lip mostly. I let it go for a while because I had enough trouble with messed-up hormone treatments and other medical issues without worrying about a few stupid hair follicles. But now that I am on my way to clarifyin' my own truth about who I am and who I desperately wanna be, I realize that with a little effort and with a little help from my friends Tweezer, Laser and Nair... I can become the best person I can be and say "bye bye" to the few unsightly hair follicles that are getting on my last nerve.

Oooh! Here comes that divine sunset. Lord have mercy! I swear I am glowin' already.

MIKE

(to the audience)

Just got off the phone with my ex.

(MORE)

MIKE (CONT'D)

She said, "Mike, I'm bringing your kid over first thing in the morning." Oh, now he's "my kid." She is a piece of work sometimes. Whatever it takes. I am ready to be a parent again.

I wish I had someone to celebrate the good news with. I could have a beer down the street at the Dive Bar. Some of the neighbors hang out there. There's one guy, Jeff, he plays the saxophone. I heard him play once. Yeah, just one beer, so I can kill time and make some conversation with Jeff.

You know, now that I am on the road to reforming... well, it can get pretty lonely. I'm not complaining because I make a decent salary driving my tank truck. I transport milk between farms and commercial establishments and sometimes I have to take milk samples for laboratory analysis. It's interesting but, I mean... I work alone and when I come home, I come home to an empty apartment. (PAUSE) Yup. What the hell! I'm in control. I'll just have **one** beer down the street.

TRAVIS

(drunkenly)

Okay, okay. Party's over. Thanks for comin'. Time for bed. Oh shit! Tommy! Go home! Can't you see I wanna be alone with Romeo? Baby, are you asleep? (PAUSE) Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou... pickle? (TRAVIS laughs.)

BENNY

(singing)

"We shall overcome. We shall overcome. We shall overcome some day." Okay. I think I can type that. Boy, this is gonna take a long time. (To the audience) Did I tell you that my spelling is the worstest?

MAXINE

(to the audience)

What a beautiful sunset! That look like a orange. Like a henna. Like a... you know, like a ginger blonde henna. Almost like a burnt orange. Never seen that before. It glows.

(MAXINE TAKES OUT A COMPACT MIRROR.)

See now? I told you. I never looked so good. See what the right light can do? Now that there amazin' sunset is what I call... heaven.

MIKE

(drunkenly)

Jeff, the bathroom light switch is on the right side!

MALE 3/JEFF

(drunkenly)

Got it!