

EXCERPT FROM THE FULL-LENGTH PRODUCED DARK COMEDY PLAY THE AMERICAN BOYS. The play explores the lives of four main characters—African-American men and Vietnam Veterans—who have returned to Detroit after serving as pallbearers in Springfield, Illinois for their recently deceased mutual friend and Vietnam Veteran, Ben. A friend they come to quickly discover was gay and had died of AIDS. The four friends—James Beckworth, Sparkman Blade, Dodge Parker and Oliver “Sherlock” Jones—had not seen their recently deceased friend in years. Now, in the early morning hours of a bar modeled after Detroit’s Bronx Bar, the four friends struggle to understand and find perspective on the nature and responsibilities of friendship, confront the ghosts of their past while navigating an unsure present and future. They come to grips with their own deeply rooted and culturally fueled homophobia and explore both by intent and accident what it means to be a black male American in an age where no one—black or white, male or female—is quite sure of who they are or where they are going.

In the darkness we hear the Temptations song “Can’t Get Next to You.” As the lights come up we see the guys—James, Sparkman, Dodge and Sherlock—downstage. Sparkman is slightly front and left of the other guys—he is acting as lead singer while the others act as back-up. They seem to have the movements of the Temps down, save for Sherlock who is enjoying himself nevertheless. At the end of the song, they slap each other on the back, laugh, etc. They continue to drink. Dodge walks over to the jukebox and deposits several more quarters and makes his selections—mostly Motown. After making his selections, he kisses the jukebox and pats it gently before resuming a place at the bar.

James: (Happily)                      Aw, shit!

Sparkman:                              Yeah, boy, The Temps!

Dodge:                                    Jesus, they were great! The best, man! The best!

James:                                    Yes, Lord!

Sherlock:                                They’re back together, aren’t they? I mean, I thought I read something—

Dodge:                                    Yeah, I think you’re right, man. Somethin’ ‘bout the Fox Theater—

Sparkman:                                I hope so, man, ‘cause I swear this city ain’t been the same since the Temps split.

James:                                    You got that right.

Dodge:                                    The Tems and Martha Reeves, boy.

Sherlock: (Suddenly concerned) Martha Reeves split up?

*The others laugh and throw bar napkins at Sherlock.*

Sherlock: (Embarrassed) Well—

Sparkman: Just drink ya beer, boy.

Dodge: (Looking at his watch) Shit, Donna's gonna kick my large yet incomparably good-looking black ass if I don't get home in the next (Squints at his watch) five years.

Sparkman: Hey, what the fuck you talkin' 'bout, man? It's—(Checks his watch)—it ain't even three-thirty, man. Donna's probably asleep or milkin' the milkman. She ain't even stuttin' yo funky black ass, man.

Dodge: (Calmly) Yeah. Yeah, you're probably right, Sparkman.

Sherlock: (To Sparkman) How can you say things like that about Donna, Sparkman?

Sparkman: Hey, it's a joke, okay? I don't mean nothin' by it, awright? Geez, Sherlock, man, (almost to himself) get a personality.

Sherlock: (Indignant) Well, I just don't think it's right that someone's spouse—a friend's spouse—should be referred to in such lascivious terms. And right in front of their back!

Dodge: Hey, don't worry, Sherlock. She probably is knockin' off the milkman. How do you think I met her?

James: (Slight laugh) Y'all are bad. You showin' some age, too, talkin' this "milkman" shit.

Sherlock: (Shaking his head) "Der emes shtarbt nit, ober er lebt vi an oreman."

Sparkman: Say wha'?

Sherlock: "Truth never dies, but lives a wretched life."

Dodge: (Handing James his beer mug) As Ben might have said—gimme some head.

James: (Drawing a beer for Dodge) Watch ya mouth, boy.

Sparkman: (Thoughtfully) Why us, man?

Dodge: "Why us" what, man?

Sparkman: I mean—none of us had seen him for eight, ten years, man. Why was we called to be his pallbearers?

James: Leave it be, man.

Dodge: Hey, James, come on—(Gesturing to Sparkman)—the man's right. I mean, hell, the four of us haven't been together for two, maybe three years. And here we all are getting calls

Dodge: (Cont'd.)            from people we don't even know in Springfield. People who had been closer to Ben than any of us for the past ten years.

James: (Trying to control his temper)    He wanted us there because we were his friends, awright? The neighborhood. The 'Nam. Jesus, why can't you guys let it be, huh?

Sherlock: (Hesitantly)    I, uh—I think I know why Ben wanted us to be his pallbearers.

Sparkman:            I can't wait to hear this.

Sherlock:            Because he—he didn't want us to leave each other behind like we left him. (Beat. He shrugs) I don't know. Maybe it was—just time, you know? Drifting apart. The phone calls are less frequent. The forgotten Christmas or birthday card. Distance is a great excuse for forgetting. For—reducing the burden of friendship. For—caring less. (Beat. He looks at each of the others) And we knew, didn't we? Something in us knew about what he was a long time ago. We just couldn't get right up in his face and say, "Hey, I don't know if I can handle who you are—what you are—help me understand." We let time and silence do our lying for us. We chose to forget. He chose to remember.