



# The TRUTH INSIDE the Lie

by  
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LONG

**R**obert O'Hara wants you to choke. He wants you to get there laughing, but he doesn't want his play to go down easy. "I don't want [the audience] to easily digest the play and then go home and forget it. I want them to remember the sensation of the play just how everyone knows what it feels like to choke. It means something happened to you physically. Something interrupted your natural digestive system."

Anyone who has seen one of his plays before probably knows what he means. The heart of O'Hara's satire lies in the confrontation of the outrageous and the mundane. Or as he says, "Finding the Truth inside the Lie...the Beauty in the Horror." If you've made it this far, you probably see what he means too.

The experience of seeing *Barbecue* hinges, in no small part, on a relative ignorance of the casting and the premise beneath the premise. In other words, no spoilers. But now that you've made it to intermission, or the ride home, I feel a little more at liberty to dive into the truth inside the lie of the play.

The play began as a commission from Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago when O'Hara was watching a lot of the A&E

reality-television show *Intervention*, in which subjects with a severe addiction are confronted by family and friends. “I was struck by the fact that in each of these episodes, the people being intervened on were mostly not middle-class and mostly not black,” O’Hara said in an interview. The show, currently in its 16th season, has featured all white addicts in the 14 episodes broadcast thus far this year. “It led me to questions about the nature of storytelling. Who gets to tell these stories and how do they decide which stories to tell? Who is getting “intervened” on?” O’Hara went on to say in another interview, “I wondered why it was more acceptable to see White Folks getting a chance at recovery than people of color. It’s common knowledge that there’s lots of drug abuse in all parts of our culture, and yet we seem to surround our “reality” shows with nothing but white people.”

*Barbecue’s* audience, and who may meanwhile assume that the black characters aren’t pitiable – they’re just “talking black.”

Our perceptions about what makes a credible story aren’t limited to Hollywood, and have very real consequences for those of us who don’t fit inside common narratives. An intern is assumed to be the boss because he is the only man in the room. A child’s science project is feared to be an act of terrorism because of his faith. A bag of Skittles is believed to be a weapon because of the color of the hand that holds them. The stories we tell about ourselves and others shape our perception of reality.

Regardless of where you fall on the political spectrum, it is certainly no coincidence that politicians are quick to establish a divisive rhetoric by dividing the world into two, radically opposed groups – “us” and “them.” The former is invariably the

**“If you are interested in submitting your loved one for consideration for an upcoming episode, view the casting form.”** -INTERVENTION | AETV.COM

Questions around authority of authorship, representation, and perception are always timely, but at the time that I write these words, we are finalizing our 2017-18 season and holding our annual auditions. In other words, they are particularly resonant for me right now. What stories do we tell? Who do we hire to tell them? Who can convincingly portray Mama Rose or the Scarecrow and who will the audience find credible in the roles? In a world of make-believe, what does credibility really mean?

As Hilton Als writes in his review of *Barbecue* for *The New Yorker*, “poor white people with Southern roots are liable to be looked on with pity or shame by the liberal white Northerners who make up much of

only hope for a solution from the problems caused by latter and are accordingly subjected to anything from name-calling to restrictive legislation. It is difficult to imagine the reverse being a successful strategy [“we are all idiots and we should be deported!"]. Our national ego allows us to supplant our collective failings as the problems caused by “those people.” O’Hara deftly pointed out in an interview, “Why are the aliens in movies always trying to destroy America? Because it’s our fantasy that we’re the greatest place on earth and everyone wants to destroy us.” An easier but much less interesting story to swallow.

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