

**CITIZEN:
AN AMERICAN
LYRIC**

BY

CLAUDIA RANKINE

ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY

STEPHEN SACHS



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

CITIZEN: AN AMERICAN LYRIC
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Citizen: An American Lyric
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Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* was originally published as a collection of poetry and prose by Graywolf Press.

The stage adaptation of *CITIZEN: AN AMERICAN LYRIC* was first produced by the Fountain Theatre (Deborah Lawlor and Stephen Sachs, Co-Artistic Directors; Simon Levy, Producing Director) in August 2015. It was directed by Shirley Jo Finney, the set and video designer was Yee Eun Nam, the lighting designer was Pablo Santiago, the costume designer was Naila Aladdin Sanders, the composer and sound designer was Peter Bayne, and the production stage manager was Shawna Voragen. The ensemble cast was as follows:

Bernard K. Addison
Leith Burke
Tina Lifford
Tony Maggio
Simone Missick
Lisa Pescia

CHARACTERS

CITIZEN 1—Female, Black

CITIZEN 2—Female, Black

CITIZEN 3—Male, Black

CITIZEN 4—Male, Black

CITIZEN 5—Female, White

CITIZEN 6—Male, White

This is not a play

A dreamscape. A meditation. Theatre at the speed of thought.

Fast-moving and fluid, like jazz.

Trios, duets, solos, and ensemble.

Free association. Images, thoughts, moments connect and collide.

Set

A bare stage, open. Nothing becoming everything.

A canvas upon which to paint with light, patterns, video,
human bodies, music, and sound.

Video

Throughout. Sometimes literal, news-like, documentary.

Other times surreal, dreamlike, visions, hallucinations.

Sound and Music

Constant, under all. Except when silence is necessary.

Pulse, heartbeat. Rhythm. Music. Hip. Urban. Now. Hypnotic. Jarring.

To establish time and place, timelessness and no-place.

Cast

Male and female. Shape-shifters.

They engage in scenes, address the audience, both “I” and “You.”

And speak the thought/mind of each other, as one.

CITIZEN: AN AMERICAN LYRIC

An empty stage.

Lights up. Deep blue. Night.

The company of Citizens stand in silhouette.

CITIZEN 1. When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices...

CITIZEN 2. You let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows.

CITIZEN 1. Usually you are nestled under blankets and the house is empty.

CITIZEN 3. Sometimes the moon is missing.

CITIZEN 1. And beyond the windows the low, gray ceiling seems approachable.

CITIZEN 4. Its dark light dims in degrees depending on the density of clouds

CITIZEN 2. and you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor.

CITIZEN 3. The route is often associative.

CITIZEN 5. (*As "school girl."*) You smell good.

CITIZEN 1. You are twelve.

CITIZEN 6. Attending Saints Philip and James School on White Plains Road.

CITIZEN 5. (*As "school girl."*) You smell good.

CITIZEN 4. And the girl sitting in the seat behind asks you to—

CITIZEN 5. (*As "school girl."*) Lean to the right during exams so I can copy what you have written.

CITIZEN 1. The girl is Catholic with waist-length brown hair.
CITIZEN 4. You can't remember her name.
CITIZEN 2. Mary?
CITIZEN 3. Catherine?
CITIZEN 6. Sister Evelyn never figures out your arrangement. Perhaps because you never turn around to copy Mary Catherine's answers.
CITIZEN 3. Sister Evelyn must think these two girls think a lot alike
CITIZEN 4. or she cares less about cheating and more about humiliation
CITIZEN 2. or she never actually saw you sitting there.
CITIZEN 6. You never really speak to the girl, Mary Catherine. Except for the time she makes her request. And later when she tells you—
CITIZEN 5. (*As "school girl."*) You smell good. And have features more like a white person.
CITIZEN 3. Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart.
CITIZEN 6. Dry out the tongue.
CITIZEN 4. Clog the lungs.
CITIZEN 3. Like thunder they drown you in sound.
CITIZEN 2. No, like lightning they strike you across the larynx.
CITIZEN 1. I was at a loss for words.

Lights change.

CITIZEN 6. Haven't you said this yourself?
CITIZEN 2. Haven't you said this to a close friend who early in your friendship—
CITIZEN 5. when distracted—
CITIZEN 2. would call you by the name of her black housekeeper?
CITIZEN 4. You assumed you two were the only black people in her life.
CITIZEN 5. Eventually she stopped doing this.
CITIZEN 2. Though she never acknowledged her slippage.
CITIZEN 1. And you never called her on it.
CITIZEN 4. Why not?
CITIZEN 1. Yet, you don't forget.

CITIZEN 6. If this were a domestic tragedy—

CITIZEN 3. —and it might well be—

CITIZEN 6. this would be your fatal flaw: your memory.

CITIZEN 1. Vessel of your feelings.

CITIZEN 2. Do you feel hurt because it's the “all black people look the same” moment?

CITIZEN 1. Or because you are being confused with another? After being so close to this other?

Lights change.

Citizen 1, sitting up, preparing to rise.

CITIZEN 5. An unsettled feeling keeps the body front and center.

CITIZEN 3. The wrong words enter your day like a bad egg in your mouth and puke runs down your blouse, a dampness drawing your stomach in toward your rib cage.

CITIZEN 4. When you look around only you remain. Your own disgust at what you smell, what you feel, doesn't bring you to your feet, not right away, because gathering energy has become its own task, needing its own argument.

CITIZEN 1. You are reminded of a conversation you had recently, comparing the merits of sentences constructed implicitly with

CITIZEN 2. yes, *and*.

CITIZEN 1. Rather than

CITIZEN 2. yes, *but*.

CITIZEN 4. You and your friend decided that

CITIZEN 1. “yes, *and*” attested to a life with no turn-off, no alternative routes.

Citizen 1 stands.

CITIZEN 5. You pull yourself to standing, soon enough the blouse is rinsed.

Citizen 1 looks at herself in mirror.

CITIZEN 1. It's another week.

CITIZEN 2. The blouse is

CITIZEN 5. beneath your sweater

CITIZEN 3. against your skin

CITIZEN 1. and you smell good.

Lights change.

Sound of city rain. Citizens walking.

CITIZEN 6. The rain this morning pours from the gutters.

CITIZEN 5. Everywhere else it is lost in the trees.

CITIZEN 2. You need your glasses to single out what you know is there.

CITIZEN 3. You put on your glasses.

CITIZEN 1. The trees, their bark, their leaves, even the dead ones, are more vibrant wet.

CITIZEN 4. And it's raining.

CITIZEN 1. Each moment is like this—Before it can be known,

CITIZEN 6. categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed,

CITIZEN 1. it has to be experienced.

CITIZEN 2. It has to be seen.

Stops.

CITIZEN 3. What did he just say?

CITIZEN 4. Did she really just say that?

CITIZEN 1. Did I hear what I think I heard?

CITIZEN 5. Did that just come out of my mouth?

CITIZEN 4. His mouth?

CITIZEN 6. Your mouth?

CITIZEN 3. The moment stinks.

CITIZEN 1. Still you want to stop looking at the trees.

CITIZEN 2. You want to walk out and stand among them.

CITIZEN 4. And as light as the rain seems, it still rains down on you.

Lights change.

Video and sound: driving in the car.

Citizen 3 drives, Citizen 6 beside him.

CITIZEN 3. You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed.

CITIZEN 6. (*“Passenger.”*) My dean is making me hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there.

A breath. As he drives—

CITIZEN 3. You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested

CITIZEN 2. or retroactively insulted

CITIZEN 4. or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having.

CITIZEN 5. Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me?

CITIZEN 1. As usual, you drive straight through the moment.

As Citizen 3 drives—

CITIZEN 3. You wish the light would turn red or a police siren would go off so you could slam on the brakes, slam into the car ahead of you, fly forward so quickly both your faces would suddenly be exposed to the wind.

He backs off the moment.

You have a destination.

CITIZEN 2. It isn't like this moment hasn't happened before

CITIZEN 1. Hasn't happened before

CITIZEN 2. and the before isn't part of the now as the night darkens and time shortens between where we are and where we are going.

Citizen 6, “passenger,” gets out of car.

CITIZEN 3. You arrive in your driveway and turn off the car.

Sitting. Stillness.

You remain behind the wheel another ten minutes. You fear the night is being locked in and coded on a cellular level and want time to function as a power wash. Sitting there staring at the closed garage door you are reminded that a friend once told you there exists the medical term—

CITIZEN 4. “John Henryism.” For people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure. Sherman James, the researcher who came up with the term, claimed the physiological costs were high.

CITIZEN 3. You hope by sitting in silence you are bucking the trend.

CITIZEN: AN AMERICAN LYRIC

by Claudia Rankine
adapted for the stage by Stephen Sachs

3 men, 3 women

A searing, poetic riff on race in America, fusing prose, poetry, movement, music, and the visual image. Snapshots, vignettes, on the acts of everyday racism. Some of these encounters are slights, seeming slips of the tongue, and some are intentional offensives in the classroom, at the supermarket, at home, on the tennis court with Serena Williams, online, on TV—everywhere, all the time. Those did-that-really-just-happen-did-they-really-just-say-that slurs that happen every day and enrage in the moment and later steep poisonously in the mind. And, of course, those larger incidents that become national or international firestorms. As Rankine writes, “This is how you are a citizen.”

“Emotional...always engaging and exceptionally timely... The work, in short, has gotten under my skin, which is a testament to its power.” —Los Angeles Times

“...powerful...takes a cold, hard look at more subtle, possibly even subconscious, acts of racism. ...can't be forgotten....stunningly evocative...CITIZEN is good theatre.”
—TalkinBroadway.com

“...a transcendent theatrical experience. Rankine's perceptions contain an astonishing universality... It sears while being light on its feet, delivering devastating jabs with grace...”
—StageRaw.com

“CITIZEN grips the intellect, inflames the conscience and strikes at the soul.”
—Twin Cities Pioneer Press

“CITIZEN aims for a tone of sweet lyricism and discomfiting grace that asks us to listen openly and honestly to stories of our fellow human beings.” —Star Tribune (MN)

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ISBN 978-0-8222-3837-9



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