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Dramatic Publishing

Looking Over the President's Shoulder

by
JAMES STILL

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For Mayland Fields
and
John Henry Redwood

With special thanks to
David Alan Anderson and Wendell Wright

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Looking Over the President's Shoulder is a one-person show. Why? It was my instinct from the beginning to write this play for one actor. There is something intimate and exhilarating about watching one character tell his or her story. As an audience, we feel close to that character, we feel as though we've been cast as his partner, we feel essential to the experience. And on a technical level, there is something dangerous and thrilling about watching one actor bravely inhabit the stage for two hours. But secretly, there was more to it than that.

As the chief butler in the White House, Alonzo Fields was required to be silent, to stare straight ahead, to not smile or acknowledge any of the conversations taking place. As an African-American in the White House from 1931 to 1953, he stood behind four presidents as the country struggled with its complicated history of racism and classism. I remember thinking there was something wonderfully subversive and bold about a one-man play whose character hadn't been allowed to talk on the job. Finally, Alonzo Fields would get to tell his story.

If you're like me, you might never have heard of Alonzo Fields. I first ran across his name while doing research for my play *Amber Waves* at the Indiana Historical Society in 2000. On that fateful day, I happened upon a small, fragile newspaper clipping which said that Alonzo Fields was an Indiana native and that he had been the chief butler at the White House for twenty-one years.

That was the beginning of my fascination and obsession with Alonzo Fields. For the next two years I would make phone calls to the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, Missouri, to the White House, to the Smithsonian, to National Geographic Television. I would travel to Boston and spend time with Alonzo Fields' second wife, Mayland. I would travel to Washington, D.C., and tour the White House, including the kitchen,

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the butler's pantry and the back stairs. I would also walk across Pennsylvania Avenue and look back at the White House just as Alonzo Fields does in the play. It really is a beautiful old house.

The first production was at the Indiana Repertory Theatre in Indianapolis—a city that Fields called home until he took off for Boston to study music at the New England Conservatory of Music. The late (and great) John Henry Redwood originated the role of Alonzo Fields and played it through the first seven productions. Eventually, the play found its way to the famous Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.—and it was a perfect kind of circle, bringing Alonzo Fields back to Washington, back to another city that he loved. On opening night at Ford's in early 2004, there were many guests from the White House in the audience. But the most special guests that evening were the current butler staff of the White House—seven men who joined actor Wendell Wright on stage for a final curtain call. It was a moment I will always cherish.

Working on *Looking Over the President's Shoulder* has reminded me why I feel so privileged to do what I do both as writer and director. It's an opportunity to immerse myself in another man's world, to peek into another man's soul, to give voice to another man's story.

Alonzo Fields died in 1994, so I'll never know what he might have thought about this play, about our production. If he were here, there are things I'd like to ask him. But honestly, mostly I'd just want to say thank you. Thank you for teaching me about living a life with grace and elegance, about doing a job with a sense of purpose and pride, and about being an artist who served dinner to four presidents and their families—but served his country too.

— *James Still*

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NOTES AND THOUGHTS ON PRODUCTION

At the heart of *Looking Over the President's Shoulder* is a great man with a wonderful story to tell. Trust the story—but don't forget to make it theatrical.

Music is extremely helpful to telling Alonzo Fields' story. Sometimes that might be music that he actually hears, sometimes it's just the music inside his head.

Animate the storytelling. Never settle for neutral. Fields (and the actor) has to have an opinion about everything he says, it's never just information, it's always part of the bigger story being told.

Make the story immediate, even when Fields is talking in past tense, it can be PLAYED in present tense, it can feel as though it's happening to him again, it can play out in front of us.

When Fields sits on that park bench at the beginning of the play, he doesn't know he's going to tell a two-hour story. Memory works in funny ways; some of the transitions are obvious, others are less so. But everything is connected to Fields remembering his twenty-one years in the White House—and remembering can be active and muscular. It means that he might remember things he hasn't thought about for a long time, things almost forgotten.

Find the humor, always. Fields enjoyed telling stories, he enjoyed telling a joke, he enjoyed making people laugh.

The tone of each administration (Hoover, FDR, Truman and Eisenhower) was distinct and particular. There are hints of that tone in the writing as Fields talks about each one of those administrations. You can enhance this with music, with pace, with posture.

Fields comes to the White House when he's a young thirty-one years old. He leaves a mature fifty-three-year-old man. This can inform choices too.

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The play isn't a "kiss and tell" kind of story. That wasn't Fields' style, so it isn't the play's either. I made the choice to honor Fields' character that way. The reason there's nothing in the play about FDR's mistress or the dropping of the atomic bomb is because I never found anything on those subjects in all of Fields' personal writings. Either he chose not to disclose what he knew, or he never saw or heard anything about those events.

Finally, the closing passage of the play… I suggest that a huge round mahogany table set with beautiful crystal and china float down from heaven and that Fields sings "Ave Maria" to those imagined guests sitting around that White House table. This is an image that we did indeed create for the original production that I directed and went on to play in several theaters. Subsequent productions directed and designed by other teams have come up with their own versions of that moment. What's important to me is a bold theatricality, something that surprises us at the very end of the play, something that suggests that great artist that lived inside of Fields all those years. When he does finally sing in the end, it's a taste of what might have been.

— *James Still*

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Looking Over the President's Shoulder was originally commissioned by the Indiana Repertory Theatre, Indianapolis, Ind., Janet Allen, artistic director, Daniel Baker, managing director. The play premiered at the Indiana Repertory Theatre on November 2, 2001. Direction was by James Still, scenic design by Russell Metheny, costume design by Kathleen Egan, lighting design by Darren W. McCroom, sound design by Michael Keck, vocal coaching by Steven Stolen and dramaturgy by Richard Roberts. The stage manager was Joel Grynheim. The cast was:

Alonzo Fields . . . . JOHN HENRY REDWOOD

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LOOKING OVER THE PRESIDENT'S SHOULDER

A Play in Two Acts
For One Actor

CHARACTER

ALONZO FIELDS . . . . . . an African-American, in his 50s

TIME and PLACE
Lafayette Park, Washington, D.C., 1953.

Flexible unit set.
Approximate running time: 2 hours.

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ACT I

SCENE: *A park bench. Dusk.*

AT RISE: *A MAN enters from the street. ALONZO FIELDS. He's African-American, in his 50s, tall, elegant, dignified. He's wearing an overcoat and hat and carries a small beat-up suitcase. He could be coming or going. FIELDS looks down the street. The occasional car can be heard passing by. He moves into the space, sits on the bench. He takes out a small notebook and starts to make a few notes. He looks down the street for any sign of a bus. Something else catches his eye.*

ALONZO FIELDS

When the Old House first got electricity—that was during President Taft's time—when they first got electricity they were afraid to push the button to turn the lights on. If they'd only walked across the street and sat on this bench…if they'd known what it looks like—all lit up… It's a beautiful old house.

One hundred and seven rooms. Forty halls and corridors. Nineteen baths. Construction began in 1792. The architect was an Irishman. Negroes—slave and free—did the bulk of the labor that built the White House. 1800: John and Abi-

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gail Adams move into the Executive Mansion. 1833: Running water is piped into the White House. 1877: The first telephone is installed for President Rutherford B. Hayes. The phone number is simply "1." 1891: Electric lighting is installed. 19-ought-1: Teddy Roosevelt officially gives the White House its name. 1922: Electric vacuum cleaners are used in the White House for the first time. 1926: The White House acquires its first electric refrigerator. Not only do I know every piece of china, glass and silver in the White House pantry—I know where it came from, who gave it, and when. I even— *(Catches himself, laughs.)* My wife says I even talk in my sleep—and that it's always about the White House.

(He looks out at the street for any sign of a bus.)

Tonight I walked out that gate on Pennsylvania Avenue. I shook hands with the officer on duty. Then I crossed the street, walked over here where I wait for my bus…

(Beat.)

All day it's been "this will be the last time I have to walk up and down these stairs." "This will be the last time I plan tomorrow's menu." "This will be last time dinner-for-four suddenly becomes dinner-for-twelve." "This will be the last time I'll sit on this bench and look back at the old house—"

(He stops, the moment hitting him.)

This *is*—the last time.

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(Beat.)

I've held the chair for four presidents. Herbert Hoover. Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Harry S. Truman. Dwight D. Eisenhower. As the chief butler of the White House I've come in contact with kings, queens, prime ministers, lords, admirals…labor, political, race, and church leaders. Some rabble rousers too. Movie stars. Singers…

(SOUND of Marian Anderson singing "Ave Maria." FIELDS listens, lost in a memory, then shakes it off and comes right back to us:)

Working in the White House wasn't something I planned… I didn't want to be a DOMESTIC. I wanted to be an artist, I wanted to be a musician, I wanted to be a singer.

(He listens to the singing. Then:)

I wanted to be a great singer. I had my heart set on it. But during the Depression—art was the first thing to go. Music became a luxury I could hardly afford. How can music ever be a luxury?

(The singing fades away.)

When I came to work here in the winter of 1931, it was the best offer I had. It was the only offer I had… My first morning on the job—and President Hoover's cabinet is buzzing about who the Democrats will nominate to run against Hoover in 1932:

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"What about the governor of New York—Franklin Roosevelt?"

"Oh, the Democrats wouldn't dare nominate an invalid."

"But he has a sincere voice—the people like that. He'll be impressive on the radio."

"Once they see his condition—they'll never vote for him. The American people don't want half a man for president!"

A Supreme Court Justice has the last word: "Very few people will even realize Roosevelt has a physical handicap. He'll always be sitting or standing. Roosevelt can be very impressive."

(Writing in a small notebook:)

I heard everything that went on—and I started to jot things down, notes to myself, scribbles…my own shorthand, like a secret code. I had to be careful, didn't want anyone to think I was a snoop. Or a spy. I just wanted to remember, I wanted to remember how things happened, who was there, what was said… It was like being in the front row and watching the passing parade of history.

(Puts notebook away.)

My dad keeps a diary. He was born in 1865, started writing in his diary when he was fifteen years old. He records the happenings of the day. If nothing happens, he writes about the weather. Working in the White House I *never* had to

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write about the weather. I was born on April 10th, 1900, in Lyles Station, Indiana—which is down in Gibson County, one hundred and twenty miles East of St. Louis. Lyles Station is an all-colored community that was founded by freed slaves. My grandfather had been a slave. People were proud to be from Lyles Station, it gave you the sense of being from someplace special, a place where people respected one another.

(SOUND of a colored brass band playing in the distance.)

When I was growing up there, Lyles Station was a town of about eight hundred people. We had a post office, a general store, a church, a school, a baseball diamond, picnic grounds with a bandstand… Trains ran through Lyles Station twice a day—back and forth between Louisville and St. Louis. My mother—Mary Ann—kept a boardinghouse for the railroad workers. My father—Clint—owned the general store. The general store was the center of all activities. We had band practice there, horseshoe-pitching and the railroad workers and farmhands told tall tales…mostly stories about hunting and the wisdom of some old hound dog. Some of the older men had been slaves and had fought in the Civil War; the younger men had been in the Spanish-American War. *(Discovery:)* I think hearing those stories in my dad's general store, that's what gave me my interest in listening and watching people. One of the men had been a sergeant in the Negro cavalry that charged up San Juan Hill in Cuba to help Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders out of a tight spot. *(As Teddy Roosevelt:)* "It was bully of you boys to give us a helping hand, just bully!" Then to finish off his performance he'd say, "Just

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think—Teddy Roosevelt is now the president of these United States—sitting on top of the world without a worry."

As a youngster in Lyles Station, Indiana—little did I know that years later I'd come to see the truth: being the president is a mighty and powerful seat to sit in—but it can also be a mighty hot and troublesome seat.

(FIELDS listens to the SOUND of FDR's Pearl Harbor speech: "Yesterday—December 7th, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan…")

To say that Sunday started off as a quiet day in the White House would be wrong—for Mrs. Roosevelt was home and no day was ever quiet when Eleanor Roosevelt was at the White House. Mrs. Roosevelt had great stamina, she never seemed to tire. On this particular day she was having a luncheon for forty guests in the State Dining Room while the president was having a few guests upstairs in his study. The president suddenly screamed, "Where in the hell was everybody? Did they close down for the weekend? How sneaky can you be? The little yellow sons of bitches. Harry!" Harry Hopkins was the president's advisor on foreign affairs. "Harry! Did you get Marshall?" General Marshall was one of the president's military advisors. A military aide was storming in and out saying, "It looks like they got the whole damn fleet. What in the hell will we do?" I left to check on Mrs. Roosevelt's lunch party, stopped by the pantry, and found all of the crew huddled

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around the radio turned down low, listening to the news report.

(FIELDS listens to the SOUND of radio news report: "We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin. The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, by air, President Roosevelt has just announced. The attack also was made on all naval and military activities in the…")

None of us had ever heard of Pearl Harbor.

When I returned to the president's study, the president was sitting at the desk with his head in his hands, shaking his head, saying "My God! My God! How did it happen? Now I'll go down in history disgraced." At midnight I was clearing the bar and I heard the ambassador saying, "If we can keep our forces together—even if we have to retreat as far back as Chicago—we can still beat their tails!"

At one-thirty in the morning I went out the gate on Pennsylvania Avenue. My simple mind was spinning from what I had heard that night. I thought about the Japanese sweeping as far as Chicago. All of my family would be in that sweep.

(Beat.)

My dad—was the director of the only military-trained colored brass band in the southern part of Indiana. When we moved to Indianapolis in 1911, Dad and I played in the YMCA military brass band. Politically, my parents sepa-

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rated during the election of 1936. Dad was the G.O.P. ward leader for Alf Landon and Mother became the Democratic ward leader of women for President Roosevelt. Mother always licked Dad in the elections! But they had a truce at home: no politics allowed. But once they left the house—no holds were barred and the community enjoyed their fights.

I had several jobs in Indianapolis: I worked in a packing-house, I was a pitcher in the Negro baseball league, I even tried my hand at boxing…and of course there was my music. I had planned a musical career from as far back as I can remember. In my early twenties I was the director of the Bethel A.M.E. church choir, I was teaching all of the brass instruments, studying voice, and judging choir contests. I also helped sponsor concerts to encourage talented Negro artists. We gave Marian Anderson our first scholarship and presented her in concert in Indianapolis early in her career. I met her. During those days, I too was considered a great potential, singing excerpts from opera…from *Carmen* and *Aida*, *La Giocanda* and *Il Trovatore*.

(He SINGS a few bars of the "Toreador's Song" from Carmen.*)*

Well. No matter how popular and respected I was becoming in the musical field, I still had to earn my living in another way. So I ran a grocery store in Indianapolis—just as my father had done in Lyles Station. "You call—we deliver. Alonzo Fields. High-grade Groceries, Meats and Vegetables." *(Remembering:)* 320 West 20th Street. It was in one of the better colored neighborhoods, between Boule-

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vard Place and Highland Place. But after the death of President Harding in 1923, most businesses went into a recession, people were being laid off…and my grocery store began to fail. So I sold the business, took off for Boston, and enrolled at the New England Conservatory of Music. I thought I'd get a degree so I could teach music in the public schools. But my teachers in Boston told me that I could make as much noise as Caruso. They convinced me to take classes directed toward concert work. I felt like when they looked at me, they saw an artist, a singer. And I began to see him also.

But I still needed to make money—so a friend introduced me to Dr. Samuel W. Stratton who was the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—M.I.T. Even though I was little qualified for anything other than grocery clerking and music, Dr. Stratton offered me a job in his household where I learned etiquette as well as I knew my chromatic scales. I'd arrive at six, serve breakfast by eight, complete my chores, and then practice my singing in the reception hall where there was a grand piano. In the evenings, Dr. Stratton's guests were people like Thomas Edison—who was one of Dr. Stratton's best friends. Rockefeller. Guggenheim. And I once served tea to Mrs. Herbert Hoover.

My Boston concert debut was set for April of 1932 at Jordan Hall. I wrote home and told my family the good news. But six months before my concert debut, my employer, Dr. Stratton, went to the door to talk to reporters who wanted to know if he had any thoughts about the death of Thomas Edison. Well, Dr. Stratton didn't know about Mr. Edison's

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death—and was so shocked by the news that he dropped dead right there in front of his house. I was suddenly without a job.

I was thirty-one years old. I had recently gotten married, and my wife had a daughter who I was now father to. I had no idea what I was going to do. Maybe it was the good Lord, maybe it was good luck—because the White House called. Mrs. Hoover had heard about Dr. Stratton's death… she remembered me…she's inviting me to come work at the White House. I know I should be elated—the White House is offering me a job. But my salary will be much less—about ninety dollars a month—and my expenses will double. But I have a wife and child depending on me—and food and shelter are the paramount issues. What about my singing? There aren't many jobs for a Negro opera singer. There aren't many jobs, period. *(Beat.)* I'll postpone my debut at Jordan Hall for a year. It's just a year.

Within forty-eight hours I'm on my way to Washington, D.C.

I go by bus to save money. I see idle factories and soup lines. But by the grace of God, I too could be one of those jobless men.

I report to the east entrance of the White House carrying my suitcase packed with a tuxedo. I give my name to the guard, "Alonzo Fields…" I walk through that long corridor of the ground floor…into the East Wing…on through the corridor of the main house. I'm in the White House. Up winding spiral stairs… I'm—in the butler's pantry.

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(Beat.)

In the middle of the huge dining room, I see a man polishing a great, round mahogany table—Encarnacion Rodriguez. He's Puerto Rican, very polite and soft-spoken. Everyone calls him "Connie." Connie introduces me to the rest of the men, all dressed in black tuxedos. One of the other butlers—a man named Robert Neal—shows me the locker room…

(FIELDS changes into his tuxedo—transforming himself into the very picture of grace and elegance. It is a story moment—the point of no return. And he seems to know it.)

When I return to the pantry—all the men are in a huddle, talking about me…it seems my arrival wasn't expected. They ask me where I've worked, where I'm from, they're suspicious because I'm a Yankee, I'm from the North where Negroes can do what they want. Robert Neal then says: "Since Fields has his uniform, you might as well take him into the dining room tonight. Mrs. Hoover doesn't like big men—you'll soon be on your way back to Boston."

I keep a poker face and polish the silverware.

Finally the dinner hour approaches and I'm assigned to Mrs. Hoover's side of the table. I can feel the tension, all of them waiting for Mrs. Hoover to say, "Get that big galoot out of here!"

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We stand in our positions near the table. My back is to the door—and of course you never turn to see who's entering.

"Fields! I heard that you were here. I'm so glad to see you. Father, you remember me telling you about Fields, Dr. Stratton's man?"

And the president says, "Yes, Mother. Hello, Fields."

Robert Neal—who was so anxious to see me on my way back to Boston—looks like he's going to faint! *(Beat.)* What he didn't know, what no one knew—was that I would have welcomed any excuse to return to Boston and my music.

Well, the next day the rumors had it that I had been brought in to take over. "So this is the White House! The help gossips here just like any other place." I didn't think much of the job at first. It was like walking into a kitchen full of plantation servants. The other butlers had been recruited from fine homes in Maryland and Virginia. They'd never heard of Lyles Station, Indiana.

(Feeling criticized, he's determined, convincing himself:) I keep telling myself that this job will help me in my career as a singer, that learning about culture will give me a background, it will give me confidence in myself, it will teach me how to approach people.

(Beat, composed again:)

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