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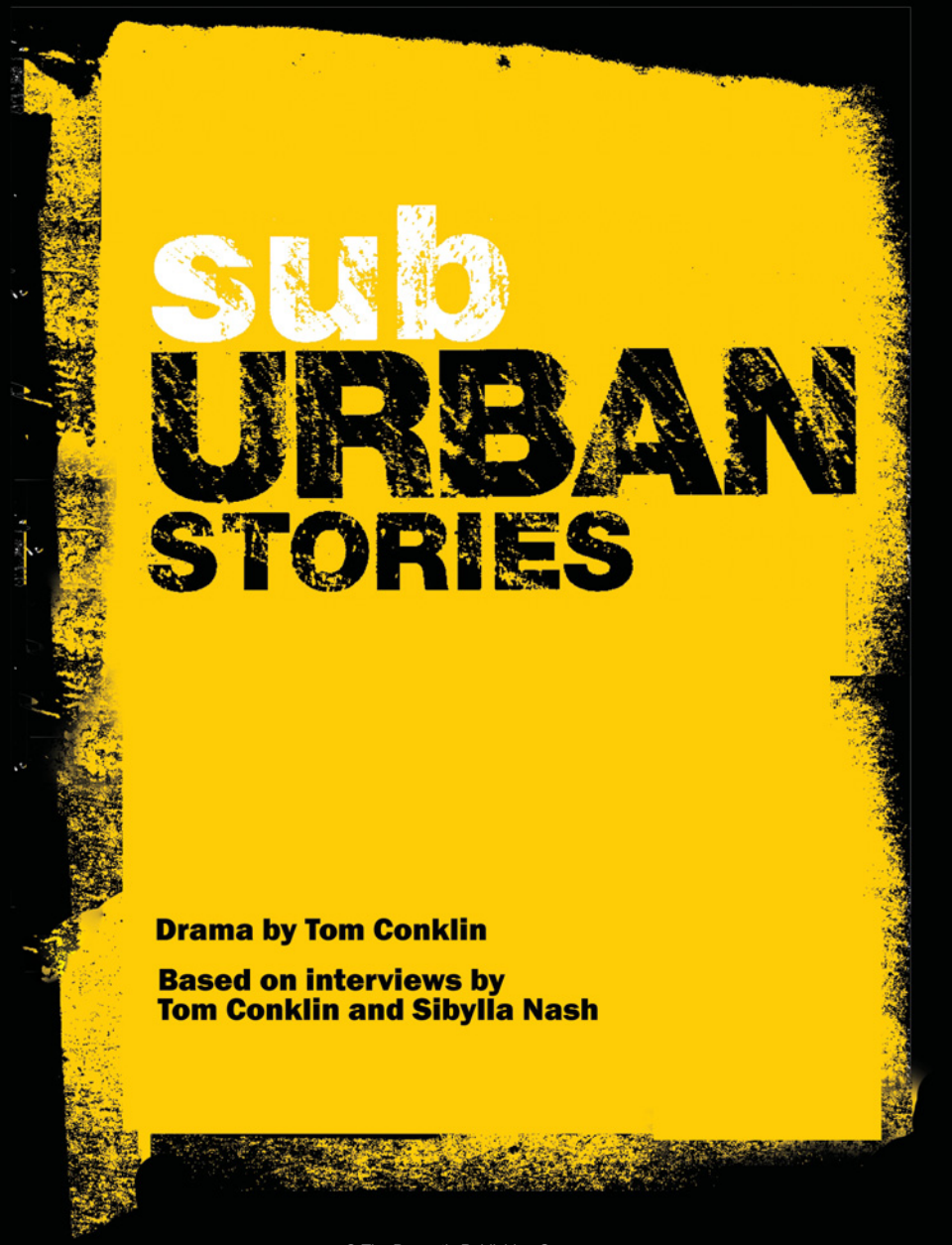

subURBAN Stories

Drama. By Tom Conklin. Based on interviews by Tom Conklin and Sibylla Nash. *Cast: 2m., 4w.* How well do you know your neighbors? *subURBAN Stories*, a piece of documentary theater, uncovers the secret histories of six neighbors—three black, three white—who live side by side in an idyllic, integrated suburb. The voices heard in this play all come from people who escaped to suburban homes, each bringing with him or her personal histories of anger, pride, violence and hope. Keith, a buttoned-down black professional and amateur cyclist, survived two near-death experiences at the hands of racists. His wife, Nancy, is a white free-spirited child of the '60s whose first marriage was to an abusive motorcycle gang member. Victoria is a black woman who has achieved success as a marketing executive despite being raised in a St. Louis ghetto and enduring forced busing and who flirted with a radical Back-to-Africa movement in the '70s. Her teenage daughter, Latonya, struggles to find her own identity in a middle-class school where kids glamorize the "thug" lifestyle. Patsy is a 70-year-old white woman who romanticizes the good old days in Newark, before the city was burned in the race riots of the '60s. Steve, a white artist raised in Manhattan's housing projects, has exiled himself to the suburbs after being alienated from the mainstream New York art scene. He takes his belief in the superiority of "primitive" cultures to a bizarre and surprising extreme. The intensely personal stories in *subURBAN Stories*—based on interviews with real individuals and all told in their own words—will surprise and shock audiences and leave them wondering what secrets their own neighbors might have buried in the past. May be performed as readers theatre. *Minimal set. Approximate running time: 80 minutes.*

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By

TOM CONKLIN

Based on interviews by

TOM CONKLIN and SIBYLLA NASH

This excerpt contains strong

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"*SubURBAN Stories* was developed with the support of the Community Coalition of South Orange/Maplewood."

SubURBAN Stories was produced as part of the 2006 New York International Fringe Festival and was staged at New York's Center for Architecture in August of 2006. The production was directed by Tom Conklin, lighting and set design were by Fred Kinney and Carrie Yacono. The cast featured:

André Blake, Hunt Block, Ami Brabson,
Louisa Cabot, Lisa Riegel and Reilly Brooke Stith.

subURBAN Stories

CHARACTERS

KEITH. . . . . a black professional, an amateur cyclist, 40s

NANCY . . his wife, a white free-spirited child of the ’60s, in her 40s

VICTORIA . . . a black woman, a marketing executive, 50s

LATONYA. . . . . her teenage daughter

PATSY . . . . . a 60- to 70-year-old white woman

STEVE . . . . . a white artist, 50s

subURBAN Stories

PROLOGUE

(Lights up on an empty stage. The actor playing STEVE comes onstage carrying the stools to be used by the rest of the cast. As he sets up the stools and unfurls the set dressing, the actor addresses the audience.)

WHITE MALE. Welcome to the 'burbs. The suburbs. It's the American ideal, don't you know. A house. A lawn. A two-car garage with an SUV and a basketball hoop. Good schools, Whole Foods. Safety and stability, all in a contrived community. Now, just for the record—the word "suburb" itself is a contrivance, derived from the old French "*suburbe*." Which means, literally, "beneath the city." But y'know, I think that's too judgmental. I mean, we're not arrogant French snobs, are we? Our suburbs aren't beneath the city. It's more like they're… subordinate to the city. Yeah. *Sub. Urban.* If you think about it, if you examine the situation, then you see that a suburb lies in relation to a city as the subconscious relates to the conscious mind. It's an ephemeral place, where memories are buried.

(STEVE finishes setting up the stage.)

WHITE MALE. Now, about this play. It's written by a white guy, and is based on interviews the white guy conducted along with a black woman. The characters you are about to meet are all real people. You are going to hear their life stories, told in their own words. The main thing they were asked to talk about was their views on race. Their experiences with members of the "other" race. At the time they were interviewed, some eighteen months ago, they were all neighbors, happily living within a few blocks of each other in a beautiful, idyllic little suburban town. *(Beat.) Sub. Urban.*

(Lights out.)

YOUNGER WHITE FEMALE. First movement:
WHITE MALE. "This town."

(Lights up on VICTORIA.)

VICTORIA. When we moved here? It was like we were Ozzie and Harriet. When I first saw the village—it was beautiful. I knew up front that it was a diverse community because my realtor had told me that. When we moved in our neighbors behind us baked us a cake. The neighbors across the street bought us a bottle of champagne. We were the first people of color on the block. Such a warm reception. *(Quietly embarrassed.)* It was almost *too* much, you know.

(Lights up on PATSY.)

PATSY *(proud as can be)*. This town? This is how you want it to be. People from other towns, they read about it, like the arts, and the way Christmas is set up, I mean, every town doesn't have that. Yeah. I really love this town. *(Chuckles.)* In fact, on my old street, they used to call me the mayor. They used to say, "If you wanna know anything, just go to her. She'll fill you in." I mean, I really love the town. *(Sharing a secret.)* And it really hurts me when I see things going on, if you know what I mean. It just hurts me, to, you know, to see it, like… *(eyes VICTORIA, gives thumbs down, whispers)* …go down.

(Lights up on KEITH.)

KEITH *(no nonsense)*. I provide solutions. Networking hardware solutions, for corporate clients—I don't want to mention who they are, but they are usually financial institutions. I was born and raised in Queens, New York. Living here? Compared to living in the city? *(Thinks it over.)* It's a totally different experience. It's more…*rural* out here. It's more upper-middle-class compared to where I was from. And…it's green here. That's why we moved here. It's just for space…just for space.

(Lights up on NANCY.)

NANCY *(bubbly)*. When my husband and I first came here, we had been looking in Westchester for a house. We never got the warm and fuzzies out of those neighborhoods. Up the Hudson line, up the Hudson River. And when I stepped off the train here, I got a nice and warm

and fuzzy feeling. Right here. Right in this town. I didn't want to come to Jersey. My husband had to force me to come to Jersey. When I got here, and saw all the different colors of people, just acting normally—Indians, Asians, black, green, purple, white, everything—living together, and it wasn't a big deal, everybody just living together—it was…it was… *(Big sigh and big smile.) Nice.*

(Lights up on LATONYA.)

LATONYA *(sassy)*. Now it seems like, since the more minorities are coming into the town, the more Caucasians move out. I mean, just lookit the way the town's set up! On the one side is where you see more of the minorities. Then you go like, to the other side—bigger, nicer houses. Gas street lamps. All these backyards. Tramp-o-lines. And it's just like our streets—since I live on the other side—our streets are like, smaller. The houses are smaller. Two-family and all. But, like, *now*, you see more African-Americans moving into those nice places. But it seems like, the more we move in, the more Caucasians move out. *(Thinks it over for a beat.)* To even *better* places, probably.

(Lights up on STEVE.)

STEVE *(laconic)*. We moved here in '94. We had a loft in Tribeca, lived there for twenty years, right near Canal Street. Which is no trees, no nature—just truck exhaust fumes, and at that point it really wasn't built up at all. I liked it. I liked the desolation of it. We had a big, huge

loft—but it only had windows in the front. Our neighbors who took the back half of the loft, they were both dying of AIDS. All of their friends were dying of AIDS. That, with everything else going on there, made it feel like it was time to get out. We looked at a bunch of houses, and found this one that looked sort of beaten up and lonely. And of course, it was totally made out of asbestos, my favorite material… *(Beat—decides to share something.)* The real problem I have with our town? It's that you've got a lot of incredible people here. But there's nothing incredible about the town. It seems like people just stay in their houses and sort of…hide.

(Lights out.)

WHITE MALE. Second movement:

OLDER BLACK FEMALE. "Everything goes through stages."

(Lights up on NANCY, KEITH and PATSY.)

NANCY. I grew up in Arizona. Arizona was the melting pot. "Melting pot," as in, all kinds of *white* people lived there.

KEITH. I grew up in St. Albans, Queens. It was predominantly black. I guess when I was very young it was more integrated. And as the older folks moved out, the community changed, so it became predominantly black.

PATSY. Like now, if you mention that you lived in Newark, people of today, that don't really know Newark, they say— *(Stage fright.)* "Oooh! You come from Newark?"

NANCY. Arizona was really Donna Reed country. You know what I mean? It was "ignorance-is-bliss" country. Everyone has the same car, the same hairdo, everybody's the same. No one is exposed to anything different. Not moving—keeping perfectly still—that's the goal down there.

KEITH. In St. Albans there are some very, very large homes. Duke Ellington lived there. Louis Armstrong. James Brown. Arthur Prysock—my sister grew up with his son.

PATSY. When I was a kid, we lived in a nice—it was a regular neighborhood-neighborhood. Everybody knew everybody. We had the first TV in the neighborhood, in our house. When they first come out, my father and mother saved all the Roosevelt dimes, and that's how they bought their first TV. And we were the only ones in the entire area to have one.

NANCY. To have the mall really close to your house. That's the goal down there. It's kind of like Stepford Wives country. It's the dullest place I've ever been to.

KEITH. St. Albans was a decent neighborhood. But, you know, there was the good side, there was the okay side, and then there was the going-downhill side. We were somewhere in the middle.

PATSY. We had gangs of people over watching TV. Like when my father come in from work, he had to plow through all the kids watching the Lone Ranger, and Hopalong Cassidy and all. And of course, my brothers, they had their cowboy outfits on. They had their Roy Rogers holsters, and guns, they had the hats, and as it's playing on TV, they're— *(Firing six-shooters.)* "Boom! Boom! Boom!"

KEITH. My mom still lives at the same house. I was talking to her today, we were talking about how everything goes through stages. Crime used to be worse there. Like when I was in my mid-teens. This was the early ’70s. The gangs were the big thing. It was kind of a weird time, because…I couldn’t go anywhere! My parents were like:

OLDER BLACK FEMALE. You’re not leaving the street.

KEITH. “I’m fourteen years old!”

OLDER BLACK FEMALE. You can’t leave!

KEITH. “Whaddya mean? I can’t leave the street?!”

NANCY. Now, I’m very surprised at teenagers around here. At how they talk. You go into stores, like Whole Foods, which is an expensive store, and I see the kids working the checkout are actually rude to the customers!

PATSY. When we were there, our school, it was very, very, *way* ahead of its time. They had a bowling alley. They had a bar. A real bar! In the school!

NANCY. I would *never* act like that when I was growing up! I was a good girl. I knew how to act. There’s something to be said for that. Here? Just total rudeness, with every other word being, you know… *(Stage whisper.)* “Fuck.”

PATSY. I mean, that bar wasn’t open to *us*. It was a Catholic school. Saint Columba! Get that straight.

KEITH. The whole thing is—the gangs, back then, they’d try to recruit you. I mean, they were so bold, they knew where I lived, they’d knock on the door and say, “Keith needs to come out, we need him to join our organization.”

PATSY. My brother, my brother that got killed, he worked in the school’s bowling alley. His fingers were always

banged up, 'cause the boys had to set the pins up. That was a very good school. My other brother, he graduated as president.

KEITH. The gangs weren't selling drugs, or anything. Back then, there were no guns. There were knives, but I never heard of anybody getting stabbed. It was mostly fist-fights and just, you know, bragging rights.

PATSY. Now, my father—he got kicked out of that school, back when he went there. Because of mouthing off.

NANCY. The disrespect. That's what I'm surprised at. Just the total disrespect. Like, going downtown on a Friday night, going down the street and there's a bunch of kids—black, white, purple, green—and they're in the middle of the street! And instinctively, I don't want to drive *around* them. I want to drive *through* them. And that's pretty weird.

KEITH. The gangs nowadays, what are they? The Crips and Bloods. To them—it's a way to make money.

PATSY. My brother graduated as president, which made my father very proud. He said:

WHITE MALE. I got kicked out. But my son? Graduated as president.

NANCY. It's not that I want to run over the kids. But I don't want to have to go out of my way to avoid them.

KEITH. There was no making money back then. The gangs weren't about money. It was just a power thing.

NANCY. It's a power thing. It's that teenage thing. I guess when I was growing up I was totally a crazy teenager, too.

PATSY. My brothers and me—the three of us went there. Yeah. Saint Columba.

NANCY. I wanted to party and stuff. But we were quiet about it.

PATSY. We had our regular cliques, we hung on the corner at night.

NANCY. We weren't out in the streets!

PATSY. Saint Columba. It's gone now. The church is still there.

KEITH. Gangs back then—it was all just territorial…

NANCY. We'd go off to party in somebody's house. Secretly…

KEITH. That was my perception…

PATSY. I'd love to go see the old neighborhood, but…

NANCY. Hanging out in the streets was not cool.

KEITH. And I wanted no part of it.

PATSY. But I'm afraid.

(Lights out.)

BLACK MALE. Third movement:

OLDER WHITE FEMALE. "A whole different world."

(Lights up on STEVE.)

STEVE. I was raised in a project in Manhattan, in Hell's Kitchen, a low-income project. It was probably eighty-five percent black. There was no Lincoln Center at that time—it was all tenements. It was mostly black and Puerto Rican. And as you went further to the south, it was Hell's Kitchen. Irish. Hard-nosed Irish working class. My father—he grew up in the Bronx. He was Jewish, and worked in the post office. My mother was kind of an Irish mix—she lived in the Bronx, too. No educa-

tion, or anything. My father specialized in sleeping. He's the only person ever got fired from the post office.

(Lights up on VICTORIA.)

VICTORIA. I grew up in St. Louis. From the time I was born up until about fourth grade we lived in what would be considered a ghetto area. Three-story walk-up in St. Louis. My father drove a truck and my mom worked in a factory. Then, when I was in fourth grade, my father was working three jobs—one in the day, one at night, and one on the weekends—to get enough money so that we moved to an all-white area.

STEVE. When I was six years old, I'd be out of the house at eight in the morning. There was no parental supervision. It was a neighborhood of kids making up their own games and making up their own environment. It was much more inventive than what you find today. You know? We organized our own baseball teams—it was the kids from the front of the projects versus the kids from the back. We went to an empty lot, we made it into a field. The alcoholic that slept on the corner was the umpire for that day. It was like…using the resources of each other to create.

VICTORIA. At our new home—it was like a whole different world. I had not seen manicured lawns and trees—it was just incredible to me. We lived in a two-family house. We lived downstairs and the black family that owned the house lived upstairs, and we were the only black families on the block. It was like a dream. It was like being a "Lil Rascal." It really was! We put together little shows and sold lemonade. Our neighbors were very

accepting. Neighborhoods usually are when there's only one or two black families. Because that's no threat.

STEVE. In the projects you can find every kind of kid. You have kids that are artists, you have kids that are carpenters. You have kids that'll do just about anything. Like for instance—we had three or four kids that would climb high things. That was their thing. And there were kids that swallow things. That was their show. Swallowing money. 'Course there were negative things, too. One time they did tie me to a fountain and left me there. You always get kids who get incredibly stupid ideas. But the basic feeling I had was that it was very, kind of…poetic. For instance, there were these four guys that used to be on the corner all the time. Alcoholics, that lived on the corner. My mother said not to talk to them. But of course, they always stopped the kids on the street. And they'd say—

BLACK MALE. You ever see a pussy?

STEVE. Stuff like that. Or—

OLDER BLACK FEMALE. You ever hear of Socrates?

STEVE. Then they'd start arguing with each other.

BLACK MALE. What're you telling the kid about Socrates?

OLDER BLACK FEMALE. What're you telling him about pussies?

STEVE. It'd start a big argument between them. And then, there were the stories. The rumors and the stories. For example. There was a guy who had a hunchback. *(Hunches over.)* His arm was all twisted up, like so…

BLACK MALE. You see that guy?

STEVE. "Yeah." I was like, eight.