

We're Here: The Story of Detroit's Gayborhood

A play in One Act

Shawntai Brown

Based on the oral and written testimonies of Palmer Park
frequenters

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Cast of Characters

ANGELA: A queer woman in her late 20s
to early 40s

NAT: A queer woman in her late 20s
to early 40s

CRYSTAL: A queer woman and native
Detroiter in her late 20s to
early 40s

Synopsis: Angela and Nat move to Detroit from New York and are missing the queer community they once had.

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ACT IScene 1

Lights come up the living room of an apartment in the Palmer Park Historic District. The place is pretty bare save a few unpacked box of dishes, a pack of water bottles, and a pile of throw pillows on the floor. A window is imagined in the apartment. Nat is facing away from the apartment entrance and is splayed on the pillows trying to fan the intense heat off of her with a magazine. Her laptop is sitting next to her. Angela enters carrying a chair and a throw pillow. She is visibly tired, but cheerful. Nat hears her enter, but doesn't turn to look at Angela.

ANGELA

I'm home, my love. How are you?

NAT

Hot. Did you find an air conditioner?

ANGELA

Not yet. But, look at what I found at the estate sale down the street. I swear I love this Palmer Park neighborhood, Nat. The treasures that spill out of those big, beautiful houses. It's a thrifters dream!

Angela tosses the pillow to Nat, who is quite disturbed, and urgently sits up to observe the findings. Angela grabs a water bottle and fans herself in the chair with her hand.

NAT

Another pillow, Angela? Really? Do we need more pillows when we don't even have a sofa? Not that I have any friends to invite over to sit on this hypothetical sofa.

ANGELA

We will have a sofa and you will make friends soon.

NAT

Are you sure?

ANGELA

Yes. As a matter of fact, I made a new acquaintance at the publishing office today. She is also into Web design. Maybe you two will hit it off.

NAT

Is she gay?

ANGELA

I don't know, Nat. You can ask her. She's coming over later to see the place.

NAT

And she will sit where?

ANGELA

I'm already on it, Nat. In lieu of a sofa, I did find these beautiful chairs.

NAT

These chairs? I only see one.

ANGELA

The other one is in the car. I just need to catch my breath before I climb the seven flights again.

NAT

Had I known the elevator wasn't going to work half the time, I would have insisted we pick that Ferndale apartment. It was newly renovated, with central air, had a coffee shop nearby, and rainbow flags everywhere.

ANGELA

And it cost twice as much as this gorgeous Palmer Park apartment.

NAT

My freelance is going well. We could have afforded Ferndale.

ANGELA

Remember, I transferred offices from New York so we could save money. Take more vacations. Maybe take that Olivia Cruise we've been talking about. All ladies for 7 days on the sea. Besides, this is closer to downtown, which means it's closer to the publishing office.

Angela takes Nat's hand and guides her to the imaginary window.

ANGELA

And look at the view we have. We can see so much of Palmer Park from here.

NAT

Can you see the plastic grocery bags floating in the pond with the ducks? It wasn't like that in the pictures the realtor shared with us, Angela.

ANGELA

Is it really so different from New York, Nat? I mean there was trash all around our apartment there, and not a single window in the place.

Nat pulls away from Angela and goes to sit in the new chair. She pulls it up to the box of dishes and begins unpacking it.

NAT

But at least there was a coffee shop right under us. The nearest one is a bit of a hike.

ANGELA

You love walking. You won't even learn to drive because you prefer walking. Why are you being Negative Nat?

NAT

I'm not being Negative Nat, and I hate when you call me that.

Nat playfully tosses a pillow at Angela. Angela dodges it, and walks over to Angela. She attempts to rub the stress out of Nat's shoulders. Nat flinches away.

NAT

Careful. The neighbors might see.

ANGELA

Since when do you care about neighbors? Nat, every time you have anxiety about something, you start pointing out everything that's wrong or could possibly go wrong. What's really bothering you, love?

NAT

I miss our community.

ANGELA

I have a couple of my old friends from high school who moved to Detroit from Sterling Heights. You've met them. You liked them.

NAT

I did, but your friends are your friends. Plus, they are so ... so straight.

ANGELA

Is that so bad?

NAT

You know what I mean. We don't have OUR community here. I miss lesbian couples holding hands and drinking coffee being the norm. Or having a gay bar we could walk to in any direction. And did you see the way your friends looked away when we kissed?

ANGELA

They don't like public affection. That might make anyone uncomfortable. That doesn't mean they don't accept us.

NAT

No one would have blinked an eye in our old gayborhood. And I don't want to just be accepted. I want to belong. That's why I moved to New York in the first place. I don't want to go back to the strange stares and being the only out lesbian around, like I was in Cincinnati. I need to be around people like me.

ANGELA

We can't be the ONLY lesbians around. Statistically that just can't be true.

NAT

But it won't be the same. You really think we are going to find here what we had in New York?

ANGELA

I don't know. But we're here now. Can't we just be optimistic and make the best of it?

A knock is heard at the door.

Angela goes to answer it.

This must be Crystal from the office.

Crystal enters carrying a bottle of Sangria and a throw pillow.

ANGELA

Hello, Crystal! Thanks for coming over. Welcome to our apartment!

CRYSTAL

Thanks for inviting me. I used to live in this area. The next building actually. I've been wanting to see the inside of this place again for years.

ANGELA

Well, look away. But first, meet my girlfriend, Nat.

Nat greets Crystal with a handshake. Crystal rejects the handshake and hugs Nat. Nat is a little uneasy but accepts the hug.

CRYSTAL

So nice to meet you, Nat. I'm Crystal. And I brought gifts. A pillow, which it looks like you all are fans.

NAT

Wow. Another pillow. I'll add it to the pile. You can sit in our one chair. Sorry we, don't have more options yet. We don't have many guests to invite.

CRYSTAL

Oh, it's fine.

ANGELA

And you brought Sangria! Perfect. I'll unpack some glasses for us.

CRYSTAL

Please do.

Angela takes the bottle, unpacks a few glasses and pours three drinks while they talk.

CRYSTAL

This place is beautiful. I just love the historic architecture. Imagine this place in it's heyday!

NAT

I don't think I can.

CRYSTAL

Where did you two move from, again?

NAT

New York. By way of Cincinnati for me.

ANGELA

And I grew up in Sterling Heights, but we didn't come to the city much growing up. Just for the occasional Tigers game.

CRYSTAL

Go Tigers! And you and Nat met in New York?

ANGELA

Two years ago. I had an author who needed a Website built, and Nat gave the best offer.

NAT

We had a business meeting over drinks, and haven't wanted to spend a moment apart since.

CRYSTAL

Now, see that's nice. Your careers led you to each other. And you make such a cute couple. I've been single for years. Meeting people is such a hassle on the east side of the city. I'd rather move back to Palmer Park area.

NAT

Meeting women?

Angela hands everyone a drink.

CRYSTAL

Yes, women! At this point, she doesn't even have to be attractive.

Angela gives Nat a promising look.

CRYSTAL

I hate these new apps. It's like looking for love on the Home Shopping Network. Except I can't even call the hotline. Everyone just wants to text. Like you can find love using emojis. I just want to do things the old way. Meet someone at a bar or at a park. That's why I've wanted to move back over here for years. But my parents live far east side, and the older they get it's just easier to stay over that way. But with this architecture, and the big park, I wouldn't mind living in the gayborhood.

NAT

Excuse me gayborhood? This area? I mean, I read somewhere it was popular decades ago.

CRYSTAL

Oh it was. I had an uncle who never married but always had a roommate. You know what that means. Wow! I just described myself, minus the roommate and being a man. Anyway, he used to tell me about his nights at Footlights, this bar attached to the restaurant called Backstage. And from what he said, it was the place to be. Better than any New York or Chicago joint.

ANGELA

It was a gay bar?

CRYSTAL

Apparently, the food and entertainment was so good, it was for everyone - gay, straight, curious- but it was really popular with the boys. He said there would be posters all around the place signed by Detroit's Broadway stars. He and his friends would flirt and tear up the dance floor. And you

weren't allowed to take photos in there, so it was safe to be yourself.

NAT

Really? When was this?

CRYSTAL

The 80s, baby. Oh, my uncle had the stories of the 80s. He told me he met his first special friend, Tony. He never said boyfriend, but that's what Tony was. They met at the bar. He said this classy man noticed him at the bar and ordered him this big drink. They called the drink the Big Girl. Next thing he knew, he was on the dance floor getting down with Tony. Tony invited him to live in this apartment building with him.

ANGELA

This very building?

CRYSTAL

That's why I wanted to see it! He said he never felt so free until he moved into this neighborhood. And moving in was a big deal. You had to know someone to even be considered for a place in this area. It was a gay Mecca. Of course, he and Tony didn't last but a year. But my uncle said he kept going to Footlights after that and met a lot of kindred spirits.

NAT

Where is the place?

CRYSTAL

Well, it used to be on Woodward between 6 and 7 mile. People living over here would walk to the place. It's gone now. Burned down years ago.

ANGELA

I had no idea we were living in gay history. Wow, Nat. Can you believe that?

NAT

But that's all over now? This isn't a gayborhood anymore?

CRYSTAL

Well, a lot of people moved to Ferndale and elsewhere over the years. The city changed quite a bit. But the flame still burns. When wealthy people moved out, the rules of who could apply for housing changed, and new residents, many in the LGBTQ community moved in, including me for a couple of years. It's pretty close to Menjos, the leather bar down the street. A few of us used to meet up there every night. I should go back. I haven't been to Menjos in a hot minute.

NAT

A gay bar is still over here?

CRYSTAL

Oh, we'll have to go together one night. Maybe ya'll can be my wing-women. And the young people over here that hang out in the park can easily catch the bus into Highland park to the Ruth Ellis Center.

ANGELA

Oh, the center for homeless teens?

CRYSTAL

Oh, more than that. It's a resource center and also home to amazing evening Vogue sessions. I used to volunteer there, and those kids, I tell you! The energy in that place spills right on down Woodward.

NAT

The place doesn't read very gay anymore. No rainbows. No resource center in the area. I don't even see any couples, really.

CRYSTAL

You have to look a little closer. Just wait until summer is really cooking. You won't even be able to drive down the street when Hotter Than July hits.

ANGELA

Hotter Than -

CRYSTAL

July. It's the black gay pride of the city. And you two will have the perfect window view. You'll see the little parade, and the dance competitions, and the drag kings and queens, the vigils, the outfits. Everyone fills the park and spills into the street!

NAT

A pride festival happens at this park?

CRYSTAL

And more! Barbecues all summer long. You all moved during the perfect season. It's the end of the cold season hibernation. Detroit shows all its colors in the summertime. Especially over here.

ANGELA

So what you are saying is we moved to a good neighborhood if we want to be in the gay community.

CRYSTAL

I'm saying it's no New York. Detroit's it's own thing. There's community if you look for it. You know, you should join the People for Palmer Park so you can know about all the activities around here. There's yoga, and cycling groups, and people who help clean the park.

NAT

Even the pond?

CRYSTAL

Especially the pond. It's hard keeping trash from blowing in there after all the snow melts.

ANGELA

So Palmer Park is still for LGBTQ people?

CRYSTAL

It's not all gay people, but you know, we're here!

ANGELA

What do you say, Nat?

NAT

I say, let's hurry up and get a sofa. Sounds like we'll be having friends over in no time.

CRYSTAL

Don't forget to invite me.

NAT

Of course. You can come back any time.

CRYSTAL

Well, that calls for a toast!

Crystal raises her glass. Nat and Angela follow suit.

CRYSTAL

To new friends in Detroit!

ANGELA

To Palmer Park and all it's history!

NAT

To being here!

ANGELA NAT AND CRYSTAL

To being here!

Angela, Nat and Crystal all clink glasses and sip.

Lights out.

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