



## Introduction to **Sal Capone: The Lamentable Tragedy Of** for teachers and students

From the playwright, Omari Newton:

*I hope this story makes you all think, laugh and feel inspired to create your own art. Sal Capone is a story about people your age chasing their dreams and fighting to survive some of the pressure associated with growing up. It's also a love letter to Hip Hop culture. I hope you enjoy our show.*

From the director, Diane Roberts:

*Theatre is a tactile medium. You feel things as much as you hear and see them. Sal Capone's characters are ordinary people caught up in extraordinary circumstances. I hope you will be moved by how all of the elements of drama, music, video and movement come together to make you feel the triumphs and tragedies of these potent characters.*

### **What is the play about?**

*Sal Capone: The Lamentable Tragedy Of* (let's call it *Sal* from here-on for short) is about many things and we hope, in watching the play, you will find meanings and themes that we haven't yet realized are there. In particular, we hope that you will find something about you in the play.

The story follows the journeys of a group of friends and Hip Hop crew who are dealing with the fatal police shooting of their friend; a talented but troubled young DJ (inspired by true events that have occurred in Montreal, Toronto, New York, San Francisco and London, UK in recent years and many others that don't reach mass media – see links in “Resources” section). This event irrevocably changes the lives of the three friends and puts the future of their once promising Hip Hop group in jeopardy. In various ways, the characters struggle to understand the tragedy, to reconcile their differences, and to salvage their dreams of a successful album launch and Hip Hop future.

Omari, the playwright, says that *Sal* is about “*people your age chasing their dreams and fighting to survive some of the pressure associated with growing up.*” It is also about the complicated relationship between youth and authority. The pressures in the case of the youth in this play are wide ranging and include dealing with cultural and social difference (being black, being Asian, being gay, being Aboriginal). These “differences,” which are only differences in relation to an understood norm of being white and straight, have harsh and tangible consequences on the lives of these youth, but they also impact the youths’ sense of identity, community, and ambitions. Incorporating a diversity of characters and perspectives, the play seeks to portray a balanced approach to questions of justice, responsibility and cultural stereotyping.

## **What kind of play is it?**

*Sal* is best described as “Hip Hop theatre.” Hip Hop theatre is a blended performance style that has been in existence since the early 1990s. Hip Hop theatre sits in the intersection of Hip Hop and theatre, and so *Sal* is a piece of theatre, but also a Hip Hop performance. The characters performed and the stories played out on stage in an imagined time and space position this play very much as theatre. Hip Hop however, is a key subject within this play, as well as a key medium through which the story is told and the characters are portrayed.

## **A little about Hip Hop:**

**Historically**, the Hip Hop movement has been driven by culturally marginalised youth. It famously began in the 70’s in Brooklyn New York (along with many other urban centres across the US around in the post-industrial era), led by “youth of color and their allies who turned to rap, dance, DJing, aerosol art, and other forms of self-expression to protest the reduction of social services and the bleak post-Civil Rights landscape that met their generation” (Banks, 2014, p.3).

**Culturally**, Hip Hop has many origins, the Bronx pioneers were from African American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Jamaican, and Bajan parentage, with European American allies involved. Today, Hip Hop has been adopted by marginalized youth all over the world, but the culture has expanded to include devotees from social and cultural groups of every color and class. Hip Hop today can be considered as global and multi-ethnic, with a shared commitment to social justice and cultural critique.

**Aesthetically**, Hip Hop is much more than a music genre, or even an artistic genre. It is more accurately described as a grassroots youth culture, however, its form is expressed through an interweaving of related art forms including: rap/emceeing (which is inherently connected to poetry and spoken word); break dancing; graffiti, beatboxing; and DJing. Performance underpins all of the above, and other cultural practices contribute to Hip Hop in important ways, such as video, story telling, clothing, verbal and body language, etc.

## **A little about Theatre:**

Although forms of aesthetic expression have been traced as far back in history as the earliest known homo sapiens, the majority of our knowledge of the history of theatre dates back as far as the development of language. Western theatre as we understand it today is typically traced to ancient Greece in the 6th Century BCE. But for the purposes of this introduction, we will leap into the 20th century, to modern Western theatre, and summarize contemporary theatre in the words of Peter Brook, a great director and auteur: “I can take any empty space and call it a stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (Brook, 1972, p. 11). This stage that Brook beckons, has been influenced by cultural performance practices from many parts of the world, not least, those of African and Indian traditions. Theatre movements globally have journeyed through many variations of the dynamic described above, and in the 1970’s when Hip Hop was becoming established; the form of theatre was being explored in relation to other art forms. This resulted in performance art being established, along with devised theatre, physical theatre, happenings, and invisible theatre, to name but a few. Today, theatre is often considered to be a niche luxury for the wealthy, or a curiosity for the young, but it was once a populous and influential form of entertainment. Playwright, Omari Newton, was motivated to write *Sal* by both his skepticism for much contemporary theatre and his passion for good theatre. In this piece of Hip Hop theatre, Omari hopes to speak to audiences often excluded from theatre, and address issues often ignored.

## **Some themes and topics explored:**

**Art/Hip Hop/Poetry:** Hip Hop contributes both content and form to the play and in this way, becomes a central theme throughout.

**Protest:** Protest comes in many forms, but today its presence is tangible in many parts of the world. The Occupy Movement, and the Arab Spring are two examples that reached global recognition.

**Authority:** In the case of this play, the police represent authority. The relationship between youth and authority, however is much broader than that. Young people have to negotiate many layers and types of authority between home, school, and state, and as young people get older these dynamics can become complex, especially when cultural, social, or personal differences become entangled with age.

**Gender and sexuality:** Gender is addressed in the play through the relationship between the three friends (two male and one female) in regard to the stereotypes and roles of women in Hip Hop. Sexuality is addressed in particular in relation to DJ Sam I Am who had been concealing his homosexuality from his friends.

**Culture:** Various cultures are explored through the characters in the play, in particular Caribbean Canadian culture, Filipino Canadian, First Nations, and Italian Canadian. In poignant, direct, and often-humorous ways, cultural identities and characteristics are toyed with and unpacked.

Many other themes can be drawn out of the play, including power; ambition; friendship; media; profiling; artistic voice; family (specifically fathers and daughters, fathers and sons); truth and different versions of truth; language and poetry; rhythm; street culture; posing; the disappeared (who we see and don't see); justice; faith; loss and grief; revolutionary voice; hope; "the medium is message;" masks (hiding behind, wearing, fronting, dropping...).

## Characters

**Freddy Salazar Jr. (aka Sal/Freddy):** Is an 18 year old African Canadian poet/MC. He is of Trinidadian Descent and lives with his mother and younger sister, Naomi. He is the frontman/lead MC of the Hip Hop group, Sal Capone.

*"Sal Capone is a unit. There is no RUN DMC without Jam Master Jay, No Beasties without MCA and no Sal Capone without DJ SAM I AM. Period."*

Sal is played by **Tristan D. Lalla**. Tristan is a professional actor (film, tv, theatre, video games, cartoons, radio) originally from Montreal. One of his favourite Hip Hop artists is Missy Elliott! One of his favourite plays is *A Raisin In The Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, which he got to act in in 2010. One thing about his character, Sal, that he strongly connects with, is his love for his family and those he considers family.

**Naomi Salazar:** Is a 12 year old girl of African Canadian descent and SAL's beloved younger sister. Older than her years, she is a diligent student and good friend.

*"If I'm old enough to edit your essays I'm old enough to go to your hip hop show!!"*

Naomi is played by **Letitia Brooks**. Letitia is a Montreal born actor, as well as producer of her own independent theatre company *Nu Spyce Productions*. One of her favourite Hip Hop artists is Lauryn Hill. One of her favourite plays is *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange. One thing she has in common with her character, Naomi, is she also thinks David Suzuki is great!

**Jewel de la Reyes (aka Jey):** Is a 17 year old Filipino Canadian. She is a dope MC, the most gifted of the ensemble. A fierce battle rapper with many victories over unsuspecting, cocky male adversaries under her belt.

*You don't know what it's like... Ok. Being a girl in this game...especially an Asian girl with a big mouth and a habit of embarrassing dudes on the mic... NOBODY takes me seriously..."*

Jey is played by **Kim Villigante**. Kim is a visual artist, singer-songwriter, emcee, art educator, and university researcher from Vancouver. One of her favourite Hip Hop artists

is Nitty Scott MC. *Sal Capone* is her favourite play, “hands down”. Kim says: “It's relevant and explosive, come see it!!!” Kim connects to her character, Jey because, “Jey has this burning dream to have the most powerful impact in the world around her and so she uses every opportunity she gets to spit her raw, fiery expression and shine bright.”

**Chase Stagnetti (aka Chase Chedder):** Is a 16 year old male of Italian Canadian descent. Chase is the group's producer.

*“Battle scars like bullet wounds are great for business in hip hop.”*

Chase is played by **Jordan Waunch**. Jordan is a Metis artist from the Okanagan Valley; a professional actor with experience in film, TV, and voice-over. He is also a Hip Hop MC, AND, as well as all that, he works in Vancouver's Downtown East Side as a mental health worker. When asked about one of his favourite Hip Hop artists, he says: “ONE?! Impossible.” But he has shared a few of his regional favourites and the work he loves best: KRS-ONE (USA), *I Got Next*; K-os (Canada) *Joyful Rebellion*; Kyprios (Vancouver) *The Midnight Sun*; Nneka (International) *Soul is Heavy*. One of his favourite plays is *Little Shop of Horrors* by Alan Menken & Howard Ashman. And just like his character Chase, he LOVES Hip Hop and believes in its power to connect people. Jordan can also relate to Chase's struggles with trying to find himself in the world and understands his obsession with needing to execute business in a professional manner.

**Mac/Shaneyney:** Mac is a two-spirited Cree man in his late 40's living on the streets and battling addiction. Sha-ney-ney is his/her alter ego. A mask s/he wears to survive the streets. Mac and Shaneyney are the same person, and these two personalities are taken up by choice. S/he is not crazy.

*“I could have been Prime Minister of your country but I chose to be Queen of the night. Welcome back to my palace.”*

Mac/Shaneyney is played by **Billy Merasty**. Billy is a First Nations Cree Actor from Brochet, Mb. He is celebrating 30 years in the performing arts, and is now based in Toronto. One of his favourite Hip Hop artists is Bruno Mars, one of his favourite plays is *Sal Capone!* He doesn't connect with his character(s) except that he too is Native and gay, he writes: “It's a role I play.” In extension, and to add insight to Billy's contribution, he writes: “I have never allowed alcohol to control my life, and I certainly don't smoke tobacco, and I still speak Cree, and I still live in a Native World! Summing it all up: I know I'm doing Life Right, I know that I'm on the Right Path, and I know I Love Being Cree!!!! Thank you to my Guardian Spirits, igwa, Tapwe Geetchi N'Muntoum! Teenigee!!!!”

**DJ Sam I Am:** Is a DJ, Canadian of Haitian descent. Talks with a stutter. Is a rising Star DJ.

The beats “Sammy” plays were put together by DJ Killa-Jewel from Montreal.

## Pre-show activity suggestions:

### 1. Poster work:

- a. Look closely at the *Sal* poster (or header of this introduction). Discuss the two images that are overlaid.
- b. Divide the class in half. Ask one half of the class to consider the role of the police/riot police in today's society (or Vancouver today). Consider questions such as: What relationship (if any) do you have with them? What assumptions do we have of them? Where do we think they come from? What challenges do they face? What services do they provide?
- c. Ask the other half of the class to consider the role of the Hip Hop artist in today's society (or Vancouver today). Consider the same questions: What relationship (if any) do you have with him/her? What assumptions do we have of them (do we assume it is a man or woman)? Where do we think s/he comes from? What challenges does s/he face? What service does s/he provide?
- d. Option 1: Bring the class together for an open discussion of the roles, assumptions, and challenges of Hip Hop and authority/Police. Option 2: Form pairs composed of one student from each discussion group. Ask each pair to create a tableau/body sculpture to represent a relationship between "police" and "Hip Hop." Once these have been viewed, follow up with whole-class discussion.

### 2. Hip Hop Music:

- a. Select some examples of Hip Hop to watch and listen to as a class, for example (*note: mature language and content*):  
Kendrick Lamar Riga-mortis  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBvngg87998>  
Dead Prez Hip Hop  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1U3q9zgYaUA>  
Jay Z Picasso  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMG2oNqBy-Y>  
  
(see <http://www.ohhla.com/> for a database of lyrics.)
- b. Discuss the pieces, especially with regard to themes, artistic forms, and cultural heritage.

### 3. Create a Hip Hop name and/or tag:

- a. Discuss Hip Hop artists' MC names, research their real names, and reasons for their MC name if any.
- b. Ask each student to think about what MC name they would choose for themselves and why.

## Post-show activity suggestions:

### 1. About the play:

- a. Each student write down a word or a short statement that articulates something that resonated with them from the play (it could be a theme, a recalled line said by a character in the play, a personal connection, etc.). Collect the pieces of paper.
- b. Each student randomly select one of the pieces of paper (that wasn't their own) and form groups of approx. 4.
- c. In these groups, discuss the words/statements/ideas collected from the pieces of paper; create 1, 2, or 3 tableaux to represent the ideas. Consider the ways in which the ideas relate, align, contrast, contradict, etc.
- d. Present and discuss the tableaux as a whole class.

or

- a. In groups of approximately 4, choose a part, a scene, or a moment of the play that resonates with you the most, or that is a favourite. Discuss the options and choice as a group.
- b. Create a tableau of that scene/moment/memory.
- c. Present and discuss the tableaux as a whole class.

### 2. About you:

The following activity can be done in various ways. You can just do step a., just do step b. or do them both in any order. Steps c. and d. can of course be done in various ways depending on time, space, objectives, etc.

- a. Remember your Hip Hop name, created before the show. In groups of approximately 3, compose a short piece of spoken word/rap in response to the show.
- b. Tape a large piece of paper to the floor or wall. Gather pens together, larger pens are usually best. Gather around the paper as a class to collaboratively create a piece of "Hip Hop art" in response to the show. *It can resemble graffiti but does not have to employ the techniques or materials of graffiti.* In response to Sal (or any of the discussions or activities that have followed the show), one by one, contribute a visual image or idea of any size or in any position on the paper. Once one person has finished (this may take a few seconds or minutes), allow someone else to volunteer an addition. Continue in this way until the piece is completed and/or everyone has had a chance to contribute. More than one student at a time can work on the piece, depending on space, time, atmosphere, etc. Encourage experimentation, mistakes, use of words as well as pictures, abstract as well as literal, encourage the use of varying (visual) perspectives, levels, etc.
- c. Present the short pieces of spoken word/rap in front of the Hip Hop art.
- d. Discuss the content and the forms of expression.

## Resources:

1. The following are the names of some victims of police shootings that have been reported in the media in the recent past – there are many more.

Fredy Villaneueva

<http://homelessnation.org/node/12944>

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/story/2009/12/09/villanueva-dec9.html>

Trayvon Martin

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/20/us/judge-in-trayvon-martin-case-says-his-files-can-be-used.html>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/17/george-zimmerman-trial-trayvon-martin>

Derrick Gaines

<http://sfbayview.com/2012/derrick-gaines-15-his-life-stolen-by-ssf-police-is-beloved-by-family-and-friends/>

<http://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/Police-Shoot-Kill-South-SF-Teen-157645885.html>

James Riviera Jr.

<http://www.news10.net/news/article/87758/2/Stockton-teen-killed-in-police-shooting-identified>

[http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100724/A\\_NEWS/7240338](http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100724/A_NEWS/7240338)

Alan Blueford

<http://oaklandlocal.com/article/statement-family-alan-blueford-killed-oakland-police-community-voices>

<http://www.ktvu.com/news/news/crime-law/da-no-charges-against-oakland-officer-fatal-may-sh/nSYky/>

Francisco Diaz

<http://www.laht.com/article.asp?ArticleId=502689&CategoryId=14093>

2. The following are books on Hip Hop Theatre and Hip Hop and education.

Banks, D. (2011). *Say Word! Voices From Hip Hop Theatre: An Anthology*. The University of Michigan Press.

Seidel, S. (2011). *Hip Hop Genius: Remixing High School Education*. Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Low, B. E. (2011). *Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip Hop and Spoken Word Classroom*. Stanford University Press.

Runell, M. & Diaz, M. (2007). *The Hip Hop Education Guidebook*. Vol. 1. Hip-Hop Association Inc.

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