

Becoming Black and Falling Eggs

Two Plays with Long Titles

by [BRENDAN KILEY](#)



THE FINAL TRIBUNAL INTO THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF MISTER SENOR SALVADOR DALI

Though both men might bridle at the comparison, solo performers Chad Goller-Sojourner and Mike Daisey have some striking similarities. Both are rotund guys with Seattle roots whose physical size and mannered style of delivery give them a peculiarly strong stage presence. (As opposed to, say, solo performers David Schmader and Mike Birbiglia, who have a more naturalistic, conversational style.)

More importantly, Daisey and Goller-Sojourner play a similar game of emotional chicken—they strategically reveal deeply intimate and sometimes embarrassing facts about themselves, then use that vulnerability as a launching pad to talk about broader social issues. (I'm going to pass over the controversy about Daisey inventing key details for his show about working conditions in Chinese factories—the incident was career-staining, but not so relevant to this argument.)

Of course, the two men have some major differences: Daisey is straight and white; Goller-Sojourner is gay and black. But while Daisey has always been white, Goller-Sojourner had to, in a sense, *become* black—and he wasn't always happy about it. His new show, titled *Riding in Cars with Black People and Other Newly Dangerous Acts: A Memoir in Vanishing Whiteness*, is a dispatch from that period in his life between high school in Tacoma and grad school in Harlem when he became, to his surprise, a young black man.

Goller-Sojourner was adopted, the son of white parents growing up in an overwhelmingly white suburb. But when he turned 18 and "flew the coop" (as he puts it) for Western Washington University, he was woefully unprepared to be seen as other people would see him.

He first tumbled to this when police began pulling him over in his flashy new car and asking not for his license and registration but, "Where ya headed?" Police, Goller-Sojourner says, repeatedly claimed he had been pulled over because he was too close to the centerline. Or too far from the centerline. Or had broken lights that magically healed themselves by the time he got to a gas station to check. When he was no longer in tow with his white family and friends, strangers—especially cops and store clerks—were suddenly much more suspicious of his every move.

"Clearly, my suburban upbringing had ill prepared me," Goller-Sojourner tells us. "Not just for the stops, but for the anticipation. That's what'll kill you—the anticipation." He had abruptly "aged out" of white, suburban privileges he didn't even know he had.

And he wanted them back.

If, to him, the rest of the world suddenly seemed more suspicious of black people, so was he. "Black people scared me," Goller-Sojourner admits, adding that he'd cross the street to avoid groups of black men. "I had never been afraid of young white men." Finally, after reluctantly joining the black student union, noticing the systematically different ways police interacted with his white frat brothers and his black friends, going to grad school at Columbia University, learning to love cosmopolitan New York, and doing some heavy lifting with his own emotions and experiences, Goller-Sojourner, in his words, learned "to get over it."

Growing up "white" (or least under the umbrella of certain white privileges) and "becoming black" gives Goller-Sojourner a powerfully unique position to talk about the strange racial ruptures in our culture—he has lived on at least two sides of the many-sided divide and can describe its contours more accurately than most anyone. He discusses professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. being arrested in his own kitchen after breaking into his own home, the differences between the way police handled noise complaints for white frat parties and black parties, and the young black men who have been shot by police because they were supposedly reaching for weapons—weapons that oftentimes didn't exist.

And he has a truly funny bit about white ladies clutching their purses—he tells a story of making a financial-aid windfall at Columbia and buying his first Louis Vuitton handbag, plus a full-length mink coat. He wryly notes the irony of white ladies in elevators clutching obvious knockoff purses that are significantly less valuable than his.

Goller-Sojourner is a good performer, but hasn't quite become the master of his own stage—he has a strong style and strong material, but he doesn't seem totally at ease up there, the way more seasoned solo performers do. Hopefully, that will come with time. His voice is one we should be hearing more often.

Playwright and director Brendan Healy and his company Pony World are promising stars in the constellation of Seattle theater. Healy has made fragmented and gleefully imaginative work, including a sweet play about conformity in a wealthy planned community juxtaposed with voice messages Vladimir Lenin recorded for a secret sweetheart in Kansas. For the more recent *Suffering, Inc.*, Healy and his crew cobbled together an office tragicomedy entirely from passages of Chekhov. (That worked stupendously, as Chekhov wrote lots about money and work.) Pony World's latest, *The Final Tribunal into the Mysterious Death of Mister Señor Salvador Dalí*, is a loose scattershot—a meditation on what surrealism meant and means, a profile of the artist and his wife, an investigation into the unusual circumstances of his death, and a police love story. *Tribunal* is ambitious but feels only half-incubated, with uncertain performances and material that hasn't quite resolved itself into a whole.

A play about surrealism doesn't have to be neat and tidy, but one reason for Dalí's enduring popularity is the feeling that a skeleton, an inner logic, holds his work together—that skeleton is esoteric and unseen, but it (or at least the perception that it exists) is necessary. *Tribunal*, on the other hand, leaves bits of flesh here and there on the stage. Some of those little chunks are gorgeous (raw eggs falling from the ceiling, a detective reflecting on her erotic attraction to slices of pepperoni), but they don't quite add up to a fully formed creature. ★

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