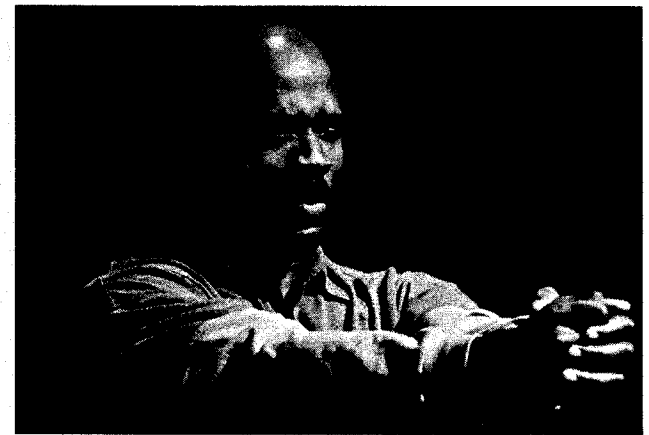


SHOOT!

Lynn Manning



Donny (Lynn Manning) in the Hudson Theater production, Hollywood, California, 1992. Photo by Carol Petersen.

Author's Statement

Shoot! is the very first play I ever wrote. It was born out of Irene Oppenheim's Available Light Workshop. Prior to being invited into Available Light, I was a poet splashing alone in the shallow end of playwriting for the Braille Institute's drama class. All of us student actors, as well as the lead instructor, Ethel Winant, were either blind or visually impaired. Even so, the scenes and monologues that Ethel encouraged us to bring to life were exclusively peopled by sighted characters: *Streamers*, *Days of Wine and Roses*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, etc. It was challenging work, made even more gratifying by the occasional opportunity to prove to sighted audiences that blind actors could convincingly portray sighted characters.

When Irene Oppenheim contacted me about joining her playwriting workshop, I'd already begun exploring the form. She asked to see samples of all my writing. After silently reading through my earliest attempt at a play, she said, "You have a good facility for dialogue." I lit up. Then she went on, "It still surprises me how even disabled writers buy into these movie-of-the-week plots. The disabled characters always need able-bodied people to convince them that life is worth living. It's insidious. Judging from your other writing, this isn't your story, is it?"

It wasn't. The depressed and self-pitying blind man I'd created didn't resemble anyone in my life. Not me. Not my fiercely independent, highly motivated blind friends. That stereotypical character had slithered into my play from a dank dungeon crammed with cliché cripples and inspirational invalids. Sighted for twenty-three years and blind for twelve, I'd been bombarded with such disabled stereotypes, and that had left me brainwashed—so much so that I'd been unwittingly poised to perpetuate the fraud.

Irene's observation embarrassed me to the core. I'm a black man. I should have known better. I had made it my life's mission to shatter the stereotypes and the lowered expectations of mainstream America regarding "young black males." I now vowed to be as diligent about crushing the myths and assumptions held about the blind and disabled:

The Magic Wand

Quick-change artist extraordinaire,
I whip out my folded cane
and change from black man to blind man
with a flick of the wrist.
It is a profound metamorphosis—
From God-gifted wizard of roundball
dominating backboards across America
to God-gifted idiot savant
pounding out chart-busters on a cockeyed whim;
From sociopathic gangbanger with death for eyes
to all-seeing soul with saintly spirit;
From rape-deranged misogynist
to poor motherless child;
From welfare-rich pimp
to disability-rich gimp;
And from "white man's burden"
to every man's burden.
It is always a profound metamorphosis.
Whether from cursed by man to cursed by God
or from scripture-condemned to God-ordained,
my final form is never of my choosing.
I only wield the wand;
you are the magician.

Production History

Shoot! was originally developed in the Available Light Workshop in Los Angeles, 1990-91, with Irene Oppenheim as dramaturg. The play was first produced in the summer of 1992 at the Hudson Theater in Hollywood, California. The production was directed by Roxanne Rogers. The cast was as follows:

DONNY
CHARLES
BROWN

Lynn Manning
John Freeland, Jr.
John Nesci

Characters

DONNY—blind black man in his thirties. Athletic in appearance, at least six feet tall. He is dressed in a sport coat (cloth or leather) and uses a straight, noncollapsible white cane. No sunglasses.

CHARLES—Donny's sighted younger half-brother. Similar size and build, more casually attired.

BROWN—white pawnbroker. At least fifty years old. Rough around the edges, shabby dresser.

NEWS ANCHOR'S VOICE—female, unavoidably sexy.

Set

The stage is empty, save for the suggestion of a pawnbroker's counter, which can be brought downstage by Brown as needed.

Time

The present.

Place

Los Angeles, California.

The stage is black. We hear static and the garbled voices of a radio being tuned in. It settles on a newscast. Donny appears and taps his way downstage.

NEWS ANCHOR'S VOICE: Now for the lead story on K-I-L-R News this Monday morning. County law enforcement agencies report thirteen shooting deaths this past weekend—a near record number. Eight of the deaths are believed to be gang-related. Thirty-one people in all fell victim to shootings since Friday, making this one of the most violent weekends in Los Angeles County history. A police department spokesman said, "This willful violence runs deeper than turf wars and drug rip-offs." He compared it to "a malignant cancer devouring civilized society."

DONNY (*Now center stage*): It went down like this: I walk right up to the counter of Brown's Collateral Loan Company—that's what they're calling pawnshops these days—and I say, "I'd like to see what you have in handguns for sale." So, there's this long silence.

(Lights up on Brown, behind pawnshop counter.)

BROWN: You won't believe what happened at the shop today. This blind guy comes into the store. Big, black, cane as long as I am tall. And he wants to buy a gun.

DONNY: Now I know the man's giving me this "you must be kidding" look. So I say, "You do sell handguns here, don't you?" The man stutters a bit, says, "Ah ah ah, yeah." So I say, "That's what I thought. I'm in the market for a pistol. Something reliable, preferably automatic. I'd like to see what you have."

BROWN: An automatic! I figure the guy's gotta be puttin' me on, right? What's a blind man want with a gun? Besides, except for the white cane, the guy don't look all that blind. I figure he must be fakin'. Next thing you know, the guy from that hidden video show will come crawlin' out of the woodwork. I kinda look around just to be sure he ain't hidin' in the store somewhere.

(Brown does this, initially oblivious to Donny approaching the counter. He then turns and tentatively wiggles his fingers in front of Donny's eyes.)

I also kinda wiggle my fingers in front of this big guy's face. Believe it or not, he's as blind as a May Company mannequin. And serious about the gun.

DONNY: The man tries to play me off at first, so I whip out my wallet. And the dude leaps into action. Abracadabra, zip, zap, bam! Three pieces on the counter in front of me. Like they say, "Money talks and bullshit walks."

BROWN: The fella lays out the cash to prove he means business. So, *(Snaps fingers)* business we do. After all, there ain't no law against a blind man ownin' a gun. He might even sue if I don't sell him one. I show him what we have. *(Places three pistols on the counter. Speaking loudly, as if Donny is hard of hearing)* Okay, let's see now. Here you are, sir. How's that baby feel? *(Sticks the largest gun in Donny's hands. Donny scrutinizes it, frowning. Aside to audience)* Just to make sure he's not jerkin' my chain, I flip him off a few times while I show him the merchandise.

(Brown does so, blatantly at first, then with creative selectivity throughout the rest of the scene.)

DONNY: What is this?

(Donny inadvertently points the pistol in Brown's face and Brown gingerly moves the barrel aside.)

BROWN *(With reverence, and still too loudly)*: That there is a Desert Eagle .44-Magnum automatic!

DONNY *(Recoiling from Brown's volume)*: You hard of hearin' or somethin'?

BROWN: No. I thought . . .

DONNY: Me neither. Not yet anyway. *(Quickly moving on)* You say this is a .44-Magnum automatic? I didn't even know there was such a thing. *(Hefts it)* This baby's heavy too.

BROWN *(Softer)*: Weighs two and a half pounds, without the nine-cartridge clip.

DONNY: Damn. A serious piece of business. How much?

BROWN: For you? Seven hundred. Comes with a lifetime guarantee.

DONNY: I'll bet. Must come with homing-device bullets too. *(Hands it back to him)* Too serious for my taste. I'm looking for something a little cheaper and handier.

BROWN: Okay. Try this one on for size—a chrome-plated .22. *(Hands Donny the smallest pistol)*

DONNY *(Turning to audience with a look of disgust on his face)*: Now I'm startin' to feel like Goldilocks or some-damn-body. *(Puts on effeminate voice)* Oh, that one's too big, oh, this one's too small. *(In own voice)* It's too feminine for a man my size. The mugger's liable to bust out laughin', I flash somethin' this small. I mean, the white cane's bad enough. The low-life mothahfuckah already thinks he's got an easy mark. No need to add insult to injury. What I need is something that's gonna put the fear of God in his heart *(Taps his chest with a fist)* and the fear of lead in his ass. *(Mimes pulling trigger; to Brown)* You got somethin' like that?

BROWN *(Chuckles)*: Why didn't you say so. I've got just the thing. *(Hands Donny the third gun)* Try this beauty. *(Seductive)* It's a sweet, nickel-plated, .9-millimeter semiautomatic. It's got the look, and it's got the power.

DONNY *(Pleased with the feel of it)*: I'll take it. *(Lays pistol on counter)*

BROWN: It's yours. *(Puts other two guns away; to audience)* Blind or not, he knows what he likes. *(Places forms on counter and hands Donny a pen)* Now, if you sign on the dotted line, we got a done deal. *(Brown busies himself putting away the guns)*

DONNY *(After a moment)*: Ah, you have to show me where to sign.

BROWN: Oh, yeah, right there.

(Uses his middle finger to tap a spot on the paper, then takes Donny's finger and places it at the same spot. Donny signs.)

(To audience) After seein' his ID I know for sure he's blind, so I say, (To Donny, once again too loudly) "Ah, screw the coolin' off period. You can take it with you today."

(Brown shoves the gun into Donny's hands. Donny takes it, turns downstage and freezes.)

(To audience) You get a hunch about these things. Besides, who ever heard of a blind felon?

(Brown exits with counter.)

DONNY (Becoming animated): This is it! Ready to wage war. Dropped by Big-5, got me some ammo. (Cocks pistol) Now I'm ready for Freddy and his whole fuckin' family. This baby holds thirteen rounds! That's lead for a mothahfuckah's ass! (Holds the pistol up for audience to admire) Doesn't look like it, does it? No, never have to worry about missin' with this baby. If the first one doesn't get him, the next twelve will. (He tucks pistol away in lower back, then draws it out quickly and brandishes it beneath the nose of an imaginary assailant; grins and imitates Gomer Pyle) "Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!" (In own voice) Guess who's rippin' who, mothahfuckah? (Laughs maliciously) Yeah, best believe he'll think twice before he tries to jack another blind man.

(Blackout.

Muted city night sounds; lights come up on Charles, making his way downstage center.)

CHARLES (Highly agitated): Donny must be out of his fuckin' mind—the stunt he pulled tonight. I'm beginning to doubt we're related at all, let alone half-brothers. Check this out. We dropped by the Juicy Jungle after work, like we usually do on payday. You know, kick it over a couple of boilermakers while I describe for Donny the bumps and grinds of the bikini dance girls. (Imitates girls) Not that he gives a damn for my play-by-play. I think he digs the joint 'cause the girls eventually let him check out the merchandise for himself. (Aside) We should all be so blessed. (Back to audience) Anyway, we fall out of there after a couple of rounds and a little friendly touchy-feely, and we're both feelin' good!

Now, out in the parkin' lot, we get approached by this freaky-lookin' white boy. The dude is barefooted, dreadlocked and raggedy. Nasty-lookin'.

He says to me, (Imitating weird white boy) "Yo, bro, can you spare some change for a man on a mission?"

I ain't carryin' nothin' smaller than a twenty, besides, he don't look like his mission is anything I care to contribute to. So, I say, "Sorry, man. Out of pocket." Donny mutters something, too, and we keep steppin'.

The dude follows us, sayin', "That ain't cool, bro. That ain't no way to be. I know you got some money!"

He says it with this threatening tone in his voice and Donny and I both turn to check him out.

(Donny enters, cane in hand, making his way toward Charles.)

The dude's all wide-eyed and crazy-lookin', like he's trippin' on somethin'. I want to tell Donny, but the dude is too close. (Takes a couple of steps backward)

DONNY (With hand on Charles's shoulder): There was somethin' menacin' about the dude's voice—like he was hintin' he might have to hurt somebody if he didn't get some change pretty damn quick.

CHARLES: I tell the dude, "Hey, man, I don't know what your problem or your mission is, but don't sweat me. I told you, I'm out of pocket."

DONNY (Using exaggerated "surfer dude" voice): You need a translator, dude? The brother said he didn't have any change to spare. Now, fuck off, dude-ski!

CHARLES: I knew that was a bad move right off. The dude kind of went into shock, like Donny's voice had blindsided him. His face started twitchin' somethin' serious.

DONNY: All of a sudden the dude starts talkin' like Shakespeare or some-damn-body. Sayin' . . .

CHARLES (Using Shakespearean voice while striking a fencer's pose): "What say you, knave? Whoreson rascal! Disinherited slave and heir of a mongrel bitch; I'll beat you into clamorous whining."

DONNY: I ain't no brainiac, but I catch his drift. (To imaginary man) I got you, homeboy. You wanna throw down. I'm game. Let's get it on.

CHARLES: I'm wonderin' why Donny wants to jump bad so quick. (To Donny) Squash it, man. This dude's wiggged-out. (Takes Donny by the arm)

DONNY (Pulling free): He ain't that wiggged out.

CHARLES: Then the raggedy mothah says, "How, now, you dog! A blind nigger stand up thus?! By God, I'll smite thee!"

CHARLES AND DONNY *(After a shocked pause)*: Now I know the dude is crazy.

DONNY: You must be out of your fuckin' mind. *(He moves toward imaginary man and Charles attempts to pull him back)* Screw you and the God you rode in on, mothahfuckah! This "blind nigger" is more than you bargained for.

CHARLES: I haven't seen Donny this pissed in years. He's twitchin' bad as the white boy.

DONNY: You want some of me, punk? Come get some. *(Donny invites him forward with one hand and tosses his cane to the ground with the other)*

CHARLES *(To imaginary man)*: Look, man, go on about your business. *(Picks up cane and gives it to Donny)* Squash it, Donny. Take your cane and let's go.

DONNY: Nah, man. This punk needs to be taught a lesson. *(Throws the cane down to the opposite side)* Come on, patty boy. Come get some of this blind niggah. Let's get it on!

CHARLES: Next thing I know, the freak is growlin' and rushin' Donny like a linebacker. *(Shouts)* Look out! *(Shoves Donny upstage)* I have to tackle the mothah to stop him.

(Charles goes down on his knees and mimes the struggle he describes upstage; Donny looks around in a panic.)

We get to squabblin' right there on the spot. The dude smells like who did it and why. He's tryin' to bite me; tryin' to scratch my eyes out.

DONNY *(Recovered)*: Let the mothahfuckah go! Turn him loose, I got somethin' for his ass. *(Reaches around his back and brings out pistol)*

CHARLES *(Still struggling)*: He's got that crazy-man strength too. I'm thinkin', Holy shit! What have I gotten myself . . .

(Donny fires the gun in the air. The report is thunderous. Charles instinctively drops to all fours, taking cover, then whirls around to look on the gun in frozen horror. Donny points gun in Charles's direction with trembling two-handed grip.)

DONNY: Now what you got to say, mothahfuckah? Who's smitin' who?

CHARLES: The freak was outta there in a flash.

(Charles watches the imaginary man run off as Donny tracks the man's receding footsteps with the pistol.)

DONNY: Yeah, buster, you better run. *(Lets out a triumphant howl)* Woooooo!

(Donny hears Charles get to his feet, realizes he's not sure who ran away, and quickly turns the gun on Charles.)

CHARLES: No, Donny! Don't shoot! *(Shields himself)* It's me. Don't shoot.

(Donny recoils, shocked. The two men freeze, their horror palpable. Light goes out save for a single spot on Donny. Charles exits. There is a weighty pause, then Donny lowers the pistol and laughs long and hard.)

DONNY: It was too cool the way that freak jettied out of there. Dude coulda outrun Ben Johnson on steroids. I don't know what Charles got all bent out of shape about. *(He feels around on the ground with his feet, searching for his cane as he speaks)* He oughta know I got more sense than to shoot when he's mixin' it up with somebody. That would be stone crazy. 'Bout as crazy as that patty musta been—frontin' off a couple of brothahs with that "nigger" shit. *(Picks up cane)* Musta been mad-dog crazy. *(Moves toward downstage center)* Lucky for him Charles was there, or I'd have put some lead in his ass right off. Nothin' to do but shoot a mad dog. *(Puts pistol in front waistband)*

You know what really pissed me off about the dude, though, was he acted like I wasn't even there at first—like I was a big zero. I get that kind of shit all the time; can't stand it. It's like they be sayin' a blind man, no matter how big or buffed he is, don't count for shit when it comes to throwin' down. *(He sneers)* It's like you ain't a man in that way anymore.

(Light shifts as sounds of morning birds rise.)

Donny listens to the birds a moment, his mood lightening.)

It's like what went down the day I decided to cop this piece. I was catchin' the bus to work. Since I have a ways to go, I gotta head

out early. There are usually just a couple of people at the stop. (*Stands as if waiting for bus*) On this particular morning, a group of young dudes are waiting, too.

They're shootin' the shit—talkin' the same trash we used to talk when we were that age—early high school. (*With exaggerated cool*) All about gettin' laid (*Clutches his crotch*) and gettin' high. (*Mimes hitting a joint, coughs, then laughs*) And every other word a cuss word.

(*Sounds of city traffic begin to rise.*)

I figure there's five of them—two brothahs, three Chicanos. I think. There's some progress, anyway.

So, after a while they start trippin' on me—wonderin' out loud if I'm really blind or (*Imitates teen*) "fuckin' fakin' to ride the fuckin' bus for free." (*Imitates second teen*) "Yeah, dog, the mothahfuckah don't look blind to me." I overhear this kind of shit all the time, so I ignore it. Then one of them decides to test me.

(*Traffic noise rises with increasing tension of Donny's tale.*)

He walks up and asks, "Hey man, you really blind?"

And I say, (*Bored*) "Yeah man, I'm really blind."

"Then how come you don't look blind?"

I can tell he's wavin' his fingers in my face (*Waves fingers in front of his face*) and I say, "What am I supposed to look like? This?" (*Throws his head back, grins and rocks, then stops abruptly*) "Is that blind enough for you?"

"You tryna be fuckin' funny or somethin'?"

"No. Just get the fuck out my face!"

He says, "Fuck you!" And spits in my face! (*Recoils, wiping at face and clothes*) It's tobacco juice or snuff or some shit. I'm drippin' with it. (*Shaking with anger*) I go after the mothahfuckah, but he jumps back. I try to hit him with my cane. (*Lashes out with cane*) But he stays out of reach, laughin'! His fuckin' friends are laughin', too. (*Swings after friends*)

You gon' remember this one day when you get yours, mothahfuckah! You bad, now. Spit on a blind man and run. Real bad. Let me get my hands on you; I'll show you bad. (*Stops swinging*) Just fight me like a mothahfuckin' man!

(*Traffic noise ceases. Donny's words hang in the silence.*)

(*Struggling to compose himself*) I woulda given my life on the spot to be able to run that mothahfuckah down like back in the old days; show him what kind of damage an "All City" linebacker can do. (*Places his hand on butt of pistol and regains composure*) Best believe I'll catch his ass next time. (*Smiles, slow and malicious*) Then we'll see who's really bad.

(*Blackout.*)

(*Lights come up on Charles.*)

CHARLES: Donny's lost it for real. A blind man with a gun. (*Shakes his head*) It's bad enough when somebody who can see packs a piece on the street. Self-defense or not, sighted or not, the shit's crazy! Folks start bustin' caps, no tellin' who gets hit. It's like sayin', "Fuck everybody else, I got mine covered." You got to go for yourself. Fuck the little kids watchin' TV in the front room across the street. Screw the family eatin' dinner down the block. And to hell with that old couple struggling to get their groceries out of that cab.

It ain't cool, not cool at all. The way I see it, it's better to lose hand-to-hand or blade-to-blade rather than endanger all those people. Give up the cash, the ass, whatever. If dyin's what I gotta do, fuck it. You gotta go sometime.

I told Donny that. Put it in terms I thought he'd understand. "Defendin' yourself with that thing ain't no different than one of these gangbangers pullin' a drive-by, man!" (*Guilt shades his tone*) But he had nerve enough to get pissed at me. Said I was takin' a cheap shot, since that's what happened to him.

See, back in high school, some gangbangers from a rival school rolled up and opened fire on the football practice field. (*Voice cracks*) Donny's helmet was full of blood. He's lucky his sight was all he lost. And he didn't have nothin' to do with gangs. Nothin' at all. (*Pauses*) Now he says he can't see how this amounts to the same thing. (*With resignation*) Blind in more ways than one.

I told him, "Fuck the world then, Donny. Just stay the hell away from me. I'm not gon' be one of your accidents. I hope you aren't either." (*Turns and exits*)

(Lights come up on pawnshop counter.)

BROWN: I gotta tell you, looks are deceivin' things. You wouldn't believe the guy that cleared for a gun license today. Wild-lookin' young guy. A white kid, but he's got his hair all matted up in that African style. His clothes are filthy and he stinks to high heaven. You wouldn't think he's got the price of a cup of coffee, to look at him, but he does. Sure as I'm standin' here, he lays seven brand-new hundred dollar bills on the counter. Wants the best gun I got: .44-Magnum, Desert Eagle. I gotta take this one through the rigmarole, though—lookin' the way he's lookin'. Besides, the guy mutters this old-sounding English to himself when my back is turned. Stuff like, *(Shakespearean voice)* "To face the dark night, take up a cudgel of like kind." *(Whistles and waggles hand)* I think, Maybe he's a mental case. But I ain't worried. I keep a loaded Magnum underneath the counter at all times. *(Nonchalantly reveals revolver)*

But that was a week ago. The paperwork cleared this mornin' and he picked up the weapon this afternoon. *(Slightly defensive)* No law sayin' he can't own a gun if he don't take a bath. I guess he's got the right to stink if he wants. And the right to protect himself. Who am I to judge? Hunh?

(Lights out on counter.)

Lights up on Donny, confidently tapping his way to downstage center.)

DONNY: Yeah, the next punk that steps to this blind man better be able to outrun a bullet, and do it without touchin' the ground. 'Cause if I hear him, I can hit him. *(Chuckles softly, savoring the idea. Handles his cane as if tracking a moving target through the audience with a rifle)* Yeah, if I hear him, I can hit him. If I hear him, *(Sights down the cane)* I can hit him. *(Freezes)*

(Sound of thunderous shotgun blast.)

Donny recoils as if he fired the shot, then freezes.

Blackout.)

END OF PLAY

LYNN MANNING is an award-winning playwright, poet, actor, former world champion judo competitor and paralympic silver medalist. He accomplished all of this after being shot and blinded at the age of twenty-three. Mr. Manning's autobiographical one-man play *Weights* won three NAACP Theater Awards in 2001, including Best Actor for Manning. His other critically acclaimed plays include *The Last Outpost*, *Private Battle*, *The Convert*, *Object Lesson*, *Colorized Version* and *Before the Drive to Oakwood Station*. Mr. Manning wrote and stars in the independent short film *Shoot!*, inspired by his one-act play of the same name. The film premiered at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival and debuted on HBO/Cinemax later that year. He has several plays and screenplays in the works. He is cofounder of the not-for-profit Watts Village Theater Company in Los Angeles.