The American Century Theater

COPS BY TERRY CURTIS FOX

AUDIENCE GUIDE

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ABOUT
THE AMERICAN CENTURY THEATER

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, and neglected American dramatic works of the Twentieth Century… what Henry Luce called "the American Century."

The company's mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past artists, nor can we afford to lose our mooring to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all citizens, of all ages and all points of view.

These Audience Guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

Like everything we do to keep alive and vital the great stage works of the Twentieth Century, these study guides are made possible in great part by the support of Arlington County's Cultural Affairs Division and the Virginia Commission for the Arts.

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THE *COPS* CREATORS: PLAYWRIGHT TERRY CURTIS FOX AND DIRECTOR STUART GORDON

Cops, first presented on stage in 1976, was the creation of a playwright who is not primarily known for his plays and a director who is not renowned for stage drama. They collaborated on *Cops* for the then new and daring Organic Theater Company in Chicago, which initially distinguished itself by producing some of David Mamet's early successes. The play that resulted owed its tone and style to the unique talents of both men.

From Fox, *Cops* obtained its unflinching and sometimes cynical view of American life, especially the less savory aspects of it. He is a Los Angeles screenwriter, critic and social commentator who also lives in Asheville, North Carolina, where he is an Associate Professor of English at Western Carolina University. Fox is a journalist by training, a graduate of the University of Chicago. For many years he was a theater critic for the *Village Voice* and, before that, the Chicago *Reader*. He is published frequently in print media and on-line, including *Premier*, *Film Comment*, *New York* magazine, and various newspapers. Lately he has been an active blogger for "The Huntington Post."

His produced plays include *Cops, Justice, The Future*, *The Summer Garden* and *The Pornographer's Daughter*. For television, he wrote HBO's "Perfect Witness" and many episodes of "Diagnosis Murder," (starring Dick Van Dyke as a crime-solving doctor) as well as writing and producing "The Marshal", "Sweet Justice", and "Men". These followed his long tenure as Story Editor for "Hill Street Blues, " an

assignment that was in no small part sparked by *Cops.* His screenplays include "A Very Simple Crime" and "Fortress," another collaboration with his *Cops* director, Gordon.

Cops was a play by an unknown playwright and a young director, yet it managed to attract a cast of talented actors who were not unknown for long. In Chicago, the cast included Joe Mantegna (now seen regularly on TV's "Criminal Minds"), Denis Franz, later of "Hill Street Blues" and "NYPD Blue" (as well as "Earl" in the Dixie Chicks video, "Good-Bye Earl"), and Meshach Taylor, who became a regular on "Designing Women." (Later, when *Cops* was produced off-Broadway, the cast included the late Spaulding Grey.) According to the Organic Theater's notes on the production, when the script was shown to real Chicago police for their reactions, the one most heard was that the police in the play weren't tough enough on the cop killer in the final scene, even though they shoot him. "They should kick him," was the consensus. Director Gordon protested out that the killer was dead at this point. "Doesn't matter. They should kick him anyway," was the response.

Gordon was certainly well-suited to bring out the suspense, horror and mordant humor in Fox's script, for he subsequently became one of Hollywood's most prolific horror movie directors. A Chicago native, Gordon was 29 when he directed *Cops* for the Organic Theater Company, which he had founded six years before. He directed many significant productions at Organic, including *Warp!*, *Sexual Perversity In Chicago*, *Bleacher Bums*, *ER*, and *Bloody Bess.* Gordon moved to Hollywood shortly after *Cops* to direct films, beginning with a screen version of *Bleacher Bums* that he both wrote and directed. Eighteen more films have followed, including the cult classic "Re-Animator" (based

on an H. P. Lovecraft story; Gordon is regarded as one of the prime screen interpreters of the U. S.'s creepiest and most influential horror writer) and 2007's "Stuck." Like his friend Fox, Gordon has also had credits as a screenwriter (notably Disney's "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids") and a producer ("Honey, I Blew Up the Kid") as well as many of his directorial efforts.

Neither the writer nor the director of *Cops* were made rich and famous by their best joint effort, but what they accomplished was more lasting than riches. Their play was a significant catalyst for the birth of a new genre in drama, especially television. It may be unfair that, like many catalysts in our culture, *Cops* itself is obscure while the works it helped inspire are far more famous, but it is not a tragedy. What would have been a tragedy is if the play had never come into being at all.

We might all be still watching "Police Woman," "Adam 12" and "Dragnet" today.

COPS, FOX'S *COPS* AND THE OTHER FOX'S "COPS": EVOLVING PUBLIC IMAGES OF URBAN POLICE

"Bad boys, bad boys…what you gonna do? What you gonna do when they come for you?"

The theme song of the Fox network's "Cops" (by the reggae band Inner Circle) has been around long enough to be considered an "oldie," and the show itself, one of the

first "reality shows" and certainly the most successful, began its 19th season in 2007. The show premiered in 1989, the next development in popular culture's de-mythologizing of the police that had taken a major step forward with the gritty police dramas of the 1980s. These, of course, were direct descendants of Terry Curtis Fox's *Cops.*

TV's "Cops" attempts to do a living-room version of what Fox's *Cops* brought to the theater, a "you are there" view of police in action, without Hollywood gloss. But like all reality shows, "Cops" can never be truly real. The footage is edited, the obscenities bleeped away. The police departments that permit filming will not look kindly on being embarrassed, so "Cops" producers have always known that they cannot feature episodes in which police misbehave. An event like that portrayed in the stage *Cops*, riveting television though it would be, couldn't be shown on the program; indeed, the footage would probably go right to CNN and the network news, as well as city prosecutors. Neither "Cops" nor *Cops,* therefore, tell anything like a complete story. But taken together, they do help reveal the nature of police work, the stress it places on the men and women who perform it, and some of the ways that stress affects them.

As Jon Katz, media critic for Rolling Stone, discusses in this assessment of the television "Cops" for the Columbia Journalism Review in 1993, art has managed to do what journalism could or would not before *Cops* and "Cops."

COVERING THE COPS : *A TV SHOW MOVES IN WHERE JOURNALISTS FEAR TO TREAD*

By Jon Katz

Perhaps the most mythologized figure of modern journalism is the urban police reporter, that tough-talking, street-savvy wise-ass who matched "Cops" drink for drink and wisecrack for wisecrack, and who got rewrite from Sweetheart.

But that reporter looked a lot better in The Front Page than on it. Coming, most likely, from a working class background, he identified with and protected the men he covered, becoming their ideological comrade-in-arms rather than watchdog or chronicler. Rarely did he report on police racism, brutality, and corruption and therefore, for middle-class America, such evils hardly existed. These days, the stereotypical police reporter has virtually vanished from the country's newsrooms, while the police are often shown to be corrupt, brutal, and bigoted.

Today's upper middle-class, college-educated journalists have little in common with the police, and are frequently to the left of them politically. Brutal police response to anti-war demonstrations and the civil rights movement shook idealized notions of law enforcement. Officer Murphy, twirling his baton and occasionally cuffing an errant rascal for the lad's own good, was replaced by Bull Connor -- or, more recently, his heirs on the LAPD. Meanwhile, police seem increasingly isolated, abandoned by journalists and everyone else as they try to deal with horrifying levels of social decay, hatred, and bloodshed. They seem to have

turned inward, talking to and trusting no one but their lawyers and each other.

Against this backdrop comes “Cops”, perhaps the inevitable television appropriation of the police reporter's role. Syndicated nationwide by Fox television, “Cops” is one of the most successful of the gritty new telecasts that offer Americans more reality than they ever imagined possible. Taped by crews carrying mobile shoulder-held video cameras, shows like “Cops” are what producers call "unfiltered" television -- a new wave of reality-based entertainment with serious implications for a news media already reeling from the invasion of talk shows, tabloid telecasts, newsmagazines, and cable-casts.

No reporter or producer narrates “Cops”; no equivalent of the journalist offers a detached perspective. The cameras ride with the police in their patrol cars, following the officers and picking up the sounds of jangling keys and handcuffs, squawking radios and creaking leather as they arrest drunk drivers, rush into vicious bar brawls, quell domestic disputes, chase burglars onto rooftops, arrive at murder and accident scenes, pursue kids in stolen cars at hair-raising speeds, and get punched, kicked, run over, spat upon, stabbed, and sometimes shot at by the people they confront. Those old-time police reporters would keel over in shock.

Some departments -- in Los Angeles and New York City, for example -- have declined to allow “Cops” cameras in their police cars, citing legal concerns or fears for the safety of camera crews. Many, including those in Kansas City, Hoboken, and Boston, have agreed to be subjects for the broadcast. Needless to say, the officers selected by their departments to participate are articulate, meticulously

professional, sometimes even laughably solicitous. On "Cops", the police thank drunk drivers profusely for cooperating and hand out quarters to teenagers caught driving without licenses so they can call Mom and Dad to come pick them up.

But the officers on "Cops" are nonetheless revealing, often poignantly so. They almost pleadingly make their case to a public they know is skeptical. An office in New Jersey wonders how the wailing grandchildren of the woman he has just arrested will feel about the police who searched their grandmother's apartment and arrested her on drug charges. A California policeman frets about court rulings that allow lawsuits against individual police officers as well as the municipalities they work for, endangering everything he owns. An officer in Kansas City talks about how serious the consequences of a policeman's mistake may be -- far more serious than mistakes made by other American workers.

What is striking about these sometimes-eloquent voices is that they rarely are heard in the conventional press.

The cameras recording "Cops" probably would not catch a Rodney King-style beating. The officers would know better than to behave like that; even if they didn't, it's unclear whether the broadcast's producers would show it, since the program depends on the voluntary cooperation of the police. As with the old police reporters, the police point of view is what the audience sees and hears.

But "Cops" can be riveting, as it is when the camera moves into a woman's house minutes after she's been murdered and lies in a pool of blood, or when it looks over an officer's shoulder as he or she prowls through a pitch-black attic in search of a man they've been told has a gun. In one

episode, officers rush to surround a woman who, a caller to 911 has said, is carrying an Uzi submachine gun. As the officers frantically scream for her to put her hands up, a machine gun protrudes visibly from her rear pocket. It turns out to be a realistic-looking plastic toy. The viewer can't help but wonder what would have happened to the woman -- and the officers -- if she had reached suddenly for her pocket or had not understood English or had been drunk or high on drugs.

The media have made it clear that members of minority groups fear and resent the way they're treated by some officers, especially whites from other communities. What "Cops" reminds us is how dangerous, terrifying, and complex a police officer's job is, and how unseemly it is for journalists sitting in safe and comfortable newsrooms to make self-righteous snap judgments about police work.

In Los Angeles, New York City, Miami, Detroit, and scores of other cities and towns, police behavior has led to bitter condemnations and sometimes to rioting, destruction, and killing. Typically, the officer confronts a young male in an urban neighborhood, is or feels threatened, and wounds or kills the young man. If the officer is white and the youth black or Hispanic, the community and the media -- sometimes both -- explode.

The shooting of Jose "Kiko" Garcia in New York City's teeming Washington Heights last summer is a case in point, not only embodying the tensions between minority groups and the police, but also posing serious questions about how the media cover them.

According to the police, on the night of July 3 plainclothes detective Michael O'Keefe and two other officers spotted Jose Garcia on a crowded street and thought they saw a

gun in his pocket. O'Keefe became separated from his partners and confronted Garcia alone. Within minutes, O'Keefe was shrieking for help on his police radio; by the time other officers arrived, Garcia lay dead.

For days, local newspapers, but especially local television, aired account after account suggesting that Garcia had been killed for no reason. A deputy mayor was widely quoted as saying that Garcia had no arrest record and never carried a gun, and that O'Keefe had been "abusing people for a long time. There was no reason to kill Kiko." The Garcia family's lawyer said pretty much the same thing.

On the night of the shooting, an unidentified man told WNBC-TV that O'Keefe had beaten Garcia "until he couldn't stand up, and then just pulled out a gun and killed him. No reason." The reporter, shaking his head sympathetically, never questioned his account in any way.

Other eyewitnesses told reporters that O'Keefe beat and kicked Garcia through the inner hallways and lobby of the apartment building into which he had pursued him, then shot him three times as he lay helpless on the floor. Several people said they saw O'Keefe using his radio to beat Garcia and heard Garcia screaming "Mommy" and "Why are you doing this to me?" in Spanish. "He's laying on his face in blood, and then the cop takes out his gun," one supposed witness told New York Newsday. "I ran back to my apartment, and then I heard the shots."

Some neighbors claimed that O'Keefe was not only a brutal cop, but that he had a reputation for stealing from drug dealers.

Not surprisingly, the shooting and its subsequent coverage sparked several days of disorder, looting, and destruction.

O'Keefe was burned in effigy, and Washington Heights residents threw trash cans, bottles, and rocks at officers, smashed windows, and burned police cars.

Two months later, a Manhattan grand jury cleared Officer O'Keefe of any wrongdoing in the shooting of Garcia, who, it turned out, did have a criminal record involving drugs. The shooting occurred in a building sometimes used by drug dealers. Garcia did have a gun, said the grand jury, and O'Keefe was justified in feeling that his life was in danger during the violent struggle between the two men. Pathologists found cocaine in Garcia's system at the time of his death. There were no bruises or marks on Garcia's body to suggest a beating, nor were there any signs that O'Keefe's radio had been used to beat Garcia.

The audio tapes of a panicked O'Keefe shouting for help were shockingly at odds with accounts that had O'Keefe mercilessly beating Garcia. Moreover, the grand jury found, those eyewitness accounts would have been impossible given lighting, sight lines, and the witnesses' supposed locations. Other witnesses wouldn't testify, recanted their original testimony, or disappeared. Nor did the grand jury find any evidence to support charges that O'Keefe was brutal or corrupt.

The most detailed media account of O'Keefe's version of events did not appear until two months after he had been exonerated by the grand jury. In a November 2, 1992, interview in New York magazine, O'Keefe described being cut off from his partners in a brutal battle with Garcia that saw the two men fighting desperately for Garcia's gun, O'Keefe screaming for help over his radio as Garcia pointed the barrel of his gun into the police officer's face. "I thought I was going to die," O'Keefe told the magazine.

The officer said he grabbed Garcia's wrist, drew his gun, and fired a shot at point-blank range into Garcia's stomach.

Two days after the shooting, in an effort to calm the Washington Heights community (the Democratic National Convention was only a week away), Mayor David Dinkins visited Garcia's family, enraging many of the city's police officers. The mayor's call for an all-civilian review board enraged them further: in September, more than 10,000 “Cops” and supporters demonstrated at city hall in protest. Some of the officers and their off-duty supporters staged, in effect, their own riot, storming police barricades, blocking the Brooklyn Bridge, shoving reporters and photographers. Some were overheard shouting racial slurs.

The protest touched off another wave of condemnation of the police from politicians, community critics, and journalists. THUGS IN BLUE was one tabloid headline. Columnists and editorial writers cited the “Cops”' behavior as yet another example of why minority groups were right to distrust and fear the police. "All those years when we gave police the benefit of the doubt seemed extraordinarily naive in retrospect," wrote Anna Quindlen in The New York Times.

The media's outrage was certainly appropriate. But no New York City news organization acknowledged that it would also have been appropriate to point out the errors of its coverage of the Garcia shooting, apologize to O'Keefe, or explain to readers and viewers why much of their reporting had been false and misleading.

Everything about the shooting -- the time of year, the place it occurred, the ethnicity of the officer and of the person he shot -- cried out for journalistic restraint. Reporters know

that eyewitnesses at crime scenes are often unreliable, excitable advocates for one side or another, sometimes so anxious to be on television that their accounts become more melodramatic than what they actually saw. Reporters also know that some politicians exploit police-community tensions. Besides, police brutality lawsuits can involve enormous amounts of money -- some damage settlements have reached into the millions -- so that principals and attorneys often have financial stakes in eyewitness accounts and in the outcome of investigations.

Add to the threat of violence and civil disorder and there are lots of reasons for reporters and editors to be extraordinarily cautious about explosive eyewitness accounts of police-community confrontations offered in the heat of the moment. New York's media, prodded by the city's first black mayor, had helped to squelch rumors and maintain calm in the wake of the L.A. riots last spring. But there seems to be less restraint or caution when police shootings are involved.

"So what were the Washington Heights riots all about?" The New York Times disingenuously wondered in an editorial following the grand jury report. The editorial cited a number of factors that might have led to the unrest -- drug gangs trying to force a police retreat, past complaints of police brutality. Coverage of the shooting was not on the list.

Among the questions the press faces in dealing with its coverage of the police is whether or not the overwhelming focus on brutality and racism obscures fundamental issues about urban policing:

* Has violence in some urban neighborhoods escalated beyond the ability of police departments to cope with it?

In Newark, young -- sometimes pre-adolescent -- thieves in stolen cars ram police cruisers for kicks. They taunt police officers, who are prohibited from engaging in high speed chases. In November, four people were killed in one night by joy-riding kids whose stolen cars crashed. In New York City, 430 children under the age of sixteen had been shot in the first ten months of 1992, 73 of them bystanders. In the first seven months, according to city officials, 51 children under sixteen became homicide victims.

* How should police best deal with inner-city males in areas where violence has escalated dramatically? Gun control advocates say there are as many as 150 million guns in America. Scholars and authors like Andrew Hacker (Two Nations) and Christopher Jencks (Rethinking Social Policy) have begun to document the conditions that overwhelm many urban police departments. The new statistics hardly excuse police brutality, but they at least partly explain why police officers and young males are increasingly confronting one another in violent situations: more kids have guns and are using them more frequently.

Federal researchers report that by the late 1980s, as the drug epidemic swept America's cities, more teen-aged males in urban neighborhoods began dying from gunshot wounds than from any other cause. Death from guns among all U. S. teenagers shot up by 61 percent from 1979 to 1989, but among black teenaged males in major cities the increase was a staggering 233 percent. A study by the National Crime Analysis Project at Northeastern University found that from 1985 to 1991 the number of sixteen-year-olds arrested for murder climbed by 158 percent, while homicide arrests of fifteen-year-olds more than tripled.

* Can white police officers who live in outlying areas control minority urban communities? Should cities enact police residency requirements, thus increasing the number of minority officers? Should different kinds of policing and patrolling be considered, using neighborhood security aides, social workers, parent-training programs, school-based tutoring, parents, even teen-agers?

* Should states of emergency be declared in neighborhoods where children are being slaughtered? Should federal troops or state militias reinforce beleaguered police departments? Should the media deploy more of their own resources to covering violence committed by and upon urban children, thus demonstrating -- and pressuring the government to demonstrate -- that their plight is as important a story as suburban car-jacking?

The police themselves often aren't much help. “Cops” may resent reporters, but journalists remain the best and most credible vehicle for exploring and explaining police work. Police departments need to be more forthcoming more quickly when their officers are involved in shootings and confrontations, not wait weeks or months for official reports, as happened in the Garcia case.

As “Cops” makes clear, the more the public sees of their work, the more comprehensible their work becomes. In October a New York Times reporter, trying to explain the pressures that had led to the unruly police demonstration outside of city hall a month earlier, asked for permission to spend a week with the police in a Brooklyn neighborhood. But departmental officials would agree to allow only one night on radio car patrol and one day on foot patrol. Even though the reporter asked to be assigned to a tough, high-

crime precinct, the department insisted that she be assigned to a safe, low-crime precinct. Even there, precinct commanders had to intervene before the reporter was permitted to a second day on car patrol. Despite the limitations, the piece was revealing and compelling, in much the same way "Cops" is, belatedly conveying the violence and tensions of urban policing.

Broadcasts like ""Cops"" are moving into a vacuum that would be better filled by journalists. The press needs to move closer to where it belongs on one of the biggest and most important stories in American life: into the middle, prepared to challenge the police when appropriate, but also willing to capture and put into context the environments in which they work.

GUNS ON STAGE: FLIRTING WITH DANGER IN PURSUIT OF ART

On-stage gunfire is crucial to the action of *Cops.* That places any theater company producing the play in a perilous position, but one that is nearly unavoidable in the dramatic arts.

Early in the morning of March 31, 1993, in Wilmington, North Carolina, actor Brandon Lee (the son of martial arts legend Bruce Lee) was filming his final scene, in more ways than one. It was the death of Lee's character at the hands of street thugs, and was a pivotal plot element to the movie. Lee was to walk through a door carrying a bag of groceries. Actor Michael Massee fired a revolver

loaded with blanks at Lee as a small explosive charge went off in the grocery bag. A fragment of a dummy bullet, used earlier in close-up shots, was lodged in the gun's barrel. The blank charge propelled the fragment into Lee's side, killing him.

This is the nightmare scenario that has every theatrical producer, director, props designer and actor on edge whenever a play calls for on-stage gunfire. Dummy bullets are never used in the theater, but there are other ways for unloaded guns to kill. In 1984, rising TV hunk Jon-Erik Hexum put a blank-loaded revolver to his head, apparently as a joke, and pulled the trigger. The explosion was violent enough to dislodge a piece of his skull about the size of a dime and propel it through his brain, ending his life. Guns symbolize violence and they create violence: this makes them dangerous and, in the world of story-telling, essential.

It is not only guns, of course. Actors have been stabbed by on-stage knives and daggers (Orson Welles' famous Broadway production of *Julius Caesa*r once resulted in Caesar ending an act lying in a pool of his own blood, because Welles himself had gotten careless and nicked him), had bones broken by sticks and clubs, and lost teeth with misplaced stage punches. Acting is a dangerous business, and the more realistic stage action has to appear, the more dangerous it is.

Many theaters have reacted to this centuries-old truism by becoming cautious to the point of making convincing drama impossible. The same risk-averse instinct that has most stage fights in D.C. and elsewhere resembling dance breaks too often results in tinny starter-pistols being used in

place of accurate-looking fire-arms, or off-stage taped or manufactured explosions substituting for gunfire originating from an on-stage gun. There are also companies that simply avoid plays that call for on-stage gunfire, removing a significant and vital section of the theatrical repertoire.

Back in the Golden Age of live theater, canny playwrights tended to avoid the problem by relying on the "off-stage gunshot," usually signifying a suicide, as in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour,* Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and Arthur Miller's *All My Sons.* This also allowed the use of a Plan B or even C if, as is always a possibility when guns are involved, the weapon failed to fire. The usual hierarchy of off-stage gunshots goes like this:

- **Plan A:** Revolver fired by Stage Manager or Props Staff
- **Plan B:** (If Plan A fails): Back-up revolver fired by Stage Manager or Props Staff
- **Plan C:** (If Plans A and B fail) : Recorded gunshot over sound-system.
- **Plan D:** (Usually improvised in case A, B, and C fail): Somebody slams a book to the floor or yells, "Bang!"

It is surprising how often Plan D comes into play!

Of course, on-stage misfires do not allow for such solutions, which is another reason on-stage gunfire is so rarely called for. The device has also fallen victim to increased sensitivity by audience members (local laws often require theaters to post warnings when a play includes gunfire), overly broad local gun regulations (many of the guns audiences see on stage, especially in theaters near or in schools, are technically illegal, though authorities seldom enforce this), and political correctness.

A particularly silly outbreak of the latter came in the wake of the recent Virginia Tech shootings, as several colleges, including Yale, briefly banned the use of any stage prop weapon, including fake guns, knives and swords, that *looked* real, as if stage props had anything at all to do with one mad student's rampage.

Omitting the brightly-colored toy guns that a temporarily bonkers Yale administrator forced Yale students to use during this period, there are four types of guns used in stage productions:

- **Non-Firing Replicas** ---Obviously the safest gun for use on stage, this looks and feels like a real gun, but will not fire, lacking as it does several key components. Relatively inexpensive, these guns are manufactured from original blueprints, and sometimes are made of realistic molded rubber, as were the WWII M-16s used in TACT's *Home of the Brave.* They can be used when a gun needs to be displayed on stage but not fired. Non-firing replicas are still treated as real guns and locked up when not in use.
- **Starter's Pistols**--- Small, cheap, and often sold with a red plastic tip (that must be painted over or removed for use on stage---a violation of the law), these make a sound that is loud and sharp but only marginally more realistic than a cap pistol. Fine for comedy (TACT's *Hellzapoppin* used them exclusively, like the original), they are so instantly recognizable as props that they are inadequate for realistic drama.
- **Blank-Firing Replica (Blank Gun)** – This is a gun built specifically to chamber a blank round. A blank round is a shell that does not contain a bullet. Generally, these are built from blueprints matching real guns and then modified to chamber a blank round, usually

8mm, and ported so that the gasses from firing do not come out of the end of the barrel, but are shunted out the top or side. These come in three basic types: the revolver and semi-automatic handgun styles, and the long gun.

- **Revolver**– This handgun has a cylinder that holds the blank rounds and rotates to bring them under the firing pin. Best for use on stage because of its simplicity and the fact that it does not eject spent shells.
- **Semi-Automatic**– This handgun holds its blank rounds in a magazine in the grip and, when fired, uses a slide powered by expanding gases to chamber the next round. This has the effect of ejecting the spent shell from the gun onto the stage or even into the audience. And the shells ejected are *hot.*
- **Long Gun** A blank-firing replica of a rifle, these are not often called for in plays.

Real guns should never to be used on stage.

Blank-firing replicas fire rounds containing only a primer and powder. A blank round looks very much like a spent shell from a real gun that may or may not be crimped at the end. Sometimes it has a piece of paper or cardstock inside that holds the powder in place. This ammunition comes in several different sizes: .22 caliber acorn, .22 caliber long, .32 caliber, .380 caliber, 8mm and 9mm. Most blank-firing replicas made specifically for use on stage use 8mm and 9mm, although the .32 and .380 are also popular revolver loads.

The rules of safety for on-stage guns haven't changed in a hundred years, though the enforcement of them is more

vigorous, partially because fewer actors and technicians have experience with real guns than was once the case.

The Ten Rules of Stage Firearm Safety:

1. **Every gun must be handled, stored and treated as if it is real and loaded.**

2. **Never point a gun directly at an actor or audience member. Aim and fire upstage or well to the side of the target. The audience will never know the difference.**

3. **Never fire a gun within 2 feet of another person, because escaping gasses can injure them and the sound can cause hearing loss.**

4. **Do not fire a gun while the gun is in contact with a person, even through clothing.**

5. **Make sure that only one person, typically the props manager or stage manager, has control of the guns until they go out on stage, and that they are immediately returned to the same person following their use.**

6. **The production's gun handler must be trained in gun safety and be familiar with guns, their maintenance**

and cleaning. The gun handler should make sure each gun is inspected, cleaned and in good working order each time it goes to the prop table.

7. The gun handler must be the only one responsible for loading and unloading the stage guns, although all actors must be familiar with how they work.

8. All guns are to be locked up when not actually needed.

9. Firing guns should never be loaded until just before use.

10. Each actor who uses a gun must be taught basic gun safety, and be familiar with the rules of the theater regarding the use and storage of stage guns.

CASTING *COPS*: WHEN RACE MATTERS

By Jack Marshall

In *Cops,* police engage in a tense stand-off with a hapless gunman in the wake of two pointless shootings. The situation is what it is, with the audience free to draw its own conclusions about an isolated event presented in "real time." In this production, a white actor plays the adversary of the police. Why? Is that right? Does it matter?

It certainly matters. While advocates of "color-blind casting" are welcome to their fantasies, there are obviously types of stories in which the race of specific characters materially changes the meaning and dramatic narrative of a play. It would be difficult to find a stage drama where this is more true than in *Cops*. Many, perhaps most, urban police departments have faced accusations of racial prejudice in recent years; in some cities like Los Angeles and New York, this is a continuing theme. Because the police officers' handling of the situation presented in *Cops* is controversial, casting the killer as a black man would necessarily add the issue of race conflict to a play that wasn't written to explore it. Terry Curtis Fox wrote the part to be played by a white actor.

Doing otherwise would lead to several results…

1. It would shift the emphasis of the play away from the cops themselves.

2. It would over-power the issues that playwright Fox intended to raise.

3. It would, in the mind of some at least, make the play "about" race relations.

4. It would make the play “relevant.”

5. It would provide an acting opportunity to a minority actor.

The first three of the five results are unequivocally bad.

Casting must support the intent and focus of the playwright, not hijack it to serve the political or philosophical agendas of the director. Agreed: when a play is well-known and frequently performed, when the author’s original purpose is likely to be understood by much of the audience before the lights dim for a new production’s first act, additions and embellishments, even updates of the original material may be justifiable. But this is seldom the case with shows produced in this theater, plays which by definition are not familiar to most audiences.

The fourth result of casting the killer as an African American, increasing the relevance of an older play to present day playgoers, has its benefits, even for the playwright. It may increase the chances of a positive review, for example, bolstering the play’s success and making future productions more likely. Many reviewers in the Washington D.C. area and elsewhere have adopted a peculiar bias against older plays, especially older American plays, on the dubious grounds that stage works written prior to 1990 have no connection to the current attitudes and culture. Such a point of view requires a constriction of the status of plays as literature, bizarrely presuming that unlike other forms of literature such as poetry and novels, plays cannot speak to us through the decades; that the passions of O’Neill’s common folk and the yearning of Williams’ women are alien to today’s more sophisticated Americans, that the wars, plagues, social prejudices and class struggles of the past cannot teach us anything about our own world in 2007.

Though such an attitude requires a particularly potent recipe of arrogance and ignorance, with a dash of literalism tossed in, it is nonetheless common. Unfair or not, theater companies have the choice of adopting it, submitting to it or defying it. The choice that is fairest to the piece itself and its creator is to remember that plays are written for a purpose, and it is the author's purpose, not ours. If one wants to do a play about race relations and the police, the proper approach is to find one or write one. *Cops* has its own issues. Those issues have not disappeared in 31 years, just as most issues that were dramatized on Broadway stages in the 20's, 30's, 40's, 50's and 60's are still with us. The insights of our best playwrights regarding them then have continuing relevance today, whether critics acknowledge it or not.

The fifth result is the pragmatic, economic and social goal of non-traditional casting: providing more opportunities for a group of actors that competes for far too few roles, especially among the 25 year-old plays in the repertoire of The American Century Theater. But that goal, a valid and worthy one, cannot be elevated above the aesthetic and artistic goals of a production. Just as it would be unfair to play, playwright, production and audience to cast an inferior performer to meet casting diversity objectives, it is wrong to use these objectives to change a play's emphasis and meaning. There are many roles during a season that can and should be cast from the widest range of races and ethnicities without affecting the plays in any substantive way. Indeed, every part in Cops *except* the killer could have an African American actor without altering playwright Fox's vision.