Acting Edition

The High Ground

by Nathan Alan Davis

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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THE HIGH GROUND premiered at Arena Stage in Washington, DC, on February 10, 2023. The production was directed by Megan Sandberg-Zakian, with set design by Paige Hathaway, costume design by Sarita Fellows, lighting design by Sherrice Mojgani, and original music and sound design by Nathan Leigh. The stage manager was Christi B. Spann and the assistant stage manager was Jalon Payton. The cast was as follows:

SOLDIER . . . . . Phillip James Brannon

VICTORIA/VICKY/VEE/
THE WOMAN IN BLACK . . . . . Nehassaiu deGannes

CHARACTERS

SOLDIER – (m, Black)
VICTORIA/VICKY/VEE/THE WOMAN IN BLACK – (w, Black)

SETTING

Standpipe Hill, Tulsa, OK.

TIME

The Present.

SPECIAL THANKS

Molly Smith and Seema Sueko for setting me on the path to write this play. Jocelyn Clarke and Otis Ramsey Zoey for your dramaturgical insights over many years. Jean Neal and the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation for your generosity and invaluable help with research. Megan Sandberg-Zakian for your support, friendship, and direction of the world premiere. Phillip James Brannon and Nehassaiu deGannes for embracing the roles of Soldier and Vee in all of their dimensions.

1.

(A grassy hill with three stone-lined terraces. On the top of the hill is a tall, brick tower.)

(On the tower, near its top, is a logo consisting of the letters O.S.U. in bold, burnt orange.)

(A Black man in a tattered military uniform enters. His name is **SOLDIER***.)*

*(***SOLDIER** *looks up at the sign. Looks around at the audience.)*

SOLDIER. …

…

So what's the plan?

…

Huh?

…

What's the plan? I know they planning something.

…

O.S.U.

…

What's that about?

…

…

Operation Shitstorm Underway.

Hahaaa!

Oklahoma's Secret Undertakers.

Hahaaa!

Ain't nothing secret from me.

(To the Tower.)

Know what I know?

Standpipe Hill don't belong to you.

It never has. And it never will.

*(***SOLDIER** *picks up a stick and walks down to the bottom terrace.)*

(He sits down with his legs hanging over the edge.)

(He puts the stick in his mouth and uses it as if it were a cigarette.)

...

O.S.U.

Ontological Serial Ulceration.

Ha-haaa!

Ontological Serial Ulceration. Trademark that shit.

...

Wait 'til I get my cannon up here, O.S.U. Ontological Serial Ulceration.

(Mostly to himself.)

Historians now estimate 300 dead. Eighteen hours 300 dead. May 31st. O.S.U. Tried to call it The Tulsa

Disaster. Tried to call it a riot. I see all the way through that. That's a hell of a disaster. Snatching up your grand piano and throwing it in the back of their pickup truck. Dropping kerosene bombs on your house. That ain't no disaster, that ain't no riot, that's a plan. Ontological Serial Ulceration. 300 dead. Eighteen hours. May 31st. 300 dead. 10,000 displaced.

(A Black **WOMAN** *appears onstage. She wears an O.S.U. sweatshirt and carries a backpack.)*

(Her name is **VICTORIA***.)*

VICTORIA. Soldier, what's going on?

*(***SOLDIER** *looks up at* **VICTORIA***. She has caught him off guard, but he conceals his surprise. He takes a moment to size her up, still smoking his stick.)*

SOLDIER. This zone is closed to tourists.

VICTORIA. Oh, I know you're not talking to *me.*

SOLDIER. No pictures, please. No pictures. All tourists are requested to make their way south across the tracks, please. No pictures.

VICTORIA. You run out of cigarettes? Let's go down to the corner store, I'll buy you a pack.

SOLDIER. *(Mostly to himself.)* Don't smoke. Never smoke. All smoke does is keep you smoking. That's a scam. Lotta scam artists out here.

VICTORIA. I was looking for you at Wanda J's.

I was looking for you down on Archer.

*(***SOLDIER** *looks at* **VICTORIA** *again. More closely this time.)*

SOLDIER. You related to Mary?

VICTORIA. *Mary?*

Mary who?

SOLDIER. Talking like you from around here.

VICTORIA. Soldier stop playing.

SOLDIER. I don't play. You the one playing.

VICTORIA. I *am* from here and you know it.

SOLDIER. Uhuh, but where's here, though? What you call it?

VICTORIA. I call it Tulsa.

SOLDIER. Pshh, see.

That's what I thought. *Tulsa.*

This the *Greenwood* district. This Greenwood.

VICTORIA. I know that, Soldier.

SOLDIER. Then don't come up on me talking about no Tulsa.

VICTORIA. Alright.

Greenwood it is.

SOLDIER. I know it is. 'Cause it is. Not 'cause you said it is. 'Cause it is. This is Greenwood.

VICTORIA. I never heard you talk about Greenwood like that before.

I didn't know you felt any type of way about it.

SOLDIER. 'Cause you don't know me.

VICTORIA. ...

SOLDIER. Where was you born?

VICTORIA. Where was I *born*?

SOLDIER. I was born in Greenwood. Raised in Greenwood.

VICTORIA. I was born down in Summit.

SOLDIER. That ain't no real place.

VICTORIA. Oh, I see. Is this how were doing it now? You're telling me what's *real*? While you out here smoking pretend cigarettes.

*(***SOLDIER** *looks at the stick in his hand.)*

SOLDIER. This ain't no pretend cigarette.

This a stick.

VICTORIA. …

Okay, Soldier.

Listen, it isn't safe for you to be up here like this. I've got something I need to tell you about.

Can we talk down on the sidewalk?

SOLDIER. 'S a damn shame. 'Cause you really do look like somebody. I really did think you were one of Mary's girls.

VICTORIA. Mary who, Soldier?

SOLDIER. Mary Parrish. Who else?

VICTORIA. Oh! I didn't know you were into local history like that. Okay.

SOLDIER. Come up here looking like you somebody. Like somebody real. And you ain't nobody.

VICTORIA. You're hurting my feelings, talking to me like that.

SOLDIER. …

VICTORIA. I looked for you this morning. In all your usual spots.

I was all up and down on Archer.

VICTORIA. I went by Wanda J's. Asked Wanda if you'd been by to bother her. She said not this morning.

I said, Hmmm. Okay.

...

What're you doing up here?

SOLDIER. ...

I'm waiting.

VICTORIA. For what?

SOLDIER. For my wife.

VICTORIA. ...

...

SOLDIER. She ain't down with the ulceration, so they put her in the maze. But they don't know she's like me, she don't give up. She'll make it out. May 31st 1921, climate records indicate a low of 61 degrees Fahrenheit. Climate records don't include the fires. That's off the record. Let the record show the motherfucking arsonists are off the record. June 1st, high of 95 degrees Fahrenheit, 35 degrees Celsius. Stovetop weather. 95 degrees, no shelter. Black Wall Street burned down, gunned down, no shelter. Walking. The labyrinthine road. 95 degrees on June 1st 1921 let the record show she's on her way back.

VICTORIA. ...

SOLDIER. She gonna be walking down the highway tryna get her bearings, and she gonna see the Ontological Serial Ulceration. But it's alright I'll be here to explain. I'll let her know. Let her know what happened to the house, she ain't gonna like it but she got to know.

VICTORIA. ...

What does she look like?

SOLDIER. …

VICTORIA. Your wife.

What does she look like?

SOLDIER. Perfect.

VICTORIA. Haaa! Okay. And what does perfect look like?

SOLDIER. You know perfect when you see it. Perfect is perfect.

VICTORIA. Looking around for perfect to walk down the highway, that must be a strain on the eyes.

Why don't you put the search on hold a while?

…

I was gonna ask if you wanted to take a trip with me.

SOLDIER. Can't do that.

*(***VICTORIA** *climbs down to the terrace that* **SOLDIER** *is sitting on.)*

(She sits level with him, though not very close.)

VICTORIA. Soldier.

…

Soldier.

Let me see your eyes.

SOLDIER. How you know I'm called Soldier?

VICTORIA. 'Cause that's your name.

SOLDIER. …

I know that.

I know my name.

VICTORIA. …

SOLDIER. You think my mama knew I'd turn out looking like this?

VICTORIA. Maybe.

My mother named me Victoria.

I'm not feeling so Victorious just now. But I'm on my way.

SOLDIER. On your way where?

VICTORIA. I'm about to graduate. I'm about to have my MPH.

SOLDIER. Who?

VICTORIA. My Master of Public Health degree.

SOLDIER. What they wanna give you a degree for?

VICTORIA. For passing my classes.

SOLDIER. You don't go to no classes.

VICTORIA. Yes I do, Soldier. Can you just –

SOLDIER. Where at?

VICTORIA. Right across the street.

SOLDIER. You go to O.S.U.?! You learning from them?!

VICTORIA. …

SOLDIER. Alright. Okay, Victoria. Go ahead to class, then.

VICTORIA. I don't have class today.

SOLDIER. What you walking around with that bigass backpack for if you ain't going to class?

VICTORIA. I have to study. I've got books to read.

SOLDIER. You ain't got no books in there.

VICTORIA. Soldier.

SOLDIER. Not no real books.

VICTORIA. …

SOLDIER. What are they about?

VICTORIA. They're about Public Health.

SOLDIER. That don't sound like no fun.

VICTORIA. It's not. It's not fun.

SOLDIER. Then what you do it for?

VICTORIA. For you.

SOLDIER. …

For me?

VICTORIA. …

Yes.

SOLDIER. Stay right there for a minute, Victoria. Stay there, I'll be right back.

*(***SOLDIER** *walks up the terraces and stands near the tower.)*

*(***VICTORIA** *stays on the terrace below.)*

HAAAA! HA-HAAAA! I ain't coming back!

You gave up your position!!

You snuck up behind me so I had to play possum. Had to act like I didn't know who you was, like I didn't know what was going on but I always know what's going on, Victoria. Now I got some questions for *you*. And you better have answers.

VICTORIA. You better stop talking to me like I'm your enemy. Or you're not getting any answers. I'll tell you that right now.

SOLDIER. Tell me then.

VICTORIA. I just did.

SOLDIER. *Tell me*, then.

VICTORIA. I just told you. You need to stop playing.

SOLDIER. How'd you find me?

How'd you know I was here?

VICTORIA. This is the most visible spot in the city. Everybody can see you walking around up here.

SOLDIER. Why'd they send you?

What's the tower for?

What are they planning?

VICTORIA. Their plan was to be ugly. Mission accomplished.

SOLDIER. That's a diversion.

Ugly.

That's a distraction.

Ugly.

That's a strategy.

VICTORIA. Soldier.

For real.

Who do you think you're arguing with?

SOLDIER. A fake.

A plant.

You ain't no student.

VICTORIA. ...

SOLDIER. Let me see your books.

VICTORIA. No.

SOLDIER. How come?

VICTORIA. Because you don't want to see my books. You just want to prove me wrong.

SOLDIER. …

Public health.

VICTORIA. …

SOLDIER. What's that got to do with me?

VICTORIA. …

SOLDIER. Before I met my wife, I used to stay down on Archer. What O.S.U. have to say about that?

VICTORIA. …

SOLDIER. I'd wake up in the morning. Walk out of my room. Step outside. Turn left. Walk half a block, and make a beeline for Williams' confectionary. I had a tab. Mrs. Williams didn't mind none. But one of her kids said something smart about it, so I paid in full and stayed away for a week. Had a mind to stay away for good but can't nobody else make a malt like them.

O.S.U. don't know nothing about that.

VICTORIA. Chocolate malt with a dash of cinnamon.

SOLDIER. …

(Accusatory.) Who you been talking to?

VICTORIA. …

You're my friend, Soldier.

…

Okay?

SOLDIER. …

*(***SOLDIER** *pretends to smoke his stick.)*

VICTORIA. Soldier.

…

My mother died.

She and I used to go to Wanda J's every other Saturday.

…

…

And she saw you outside one day when we were walking out. And she gave you a twenty dollar bill.

I don't know if you remember that.

(**SOLDIER** *pretends to smoke his stick.)*

When we got back to our car, I told her she didn't have to do that. She didn't have to give you twenty dollars. And she gave me this look.

SOLDIER. …

VICTORIA. My mother, when she wanted you to really hear something. She wouldn't say a word. She'd look at you. And she wouldn't say anything.

SOLDIER. …

Your mother died?

VICTORIA. …

Yes.

…

Two days ago.

…

Tomorrow morning I'm driving up to Sanders cemetery to bury her.

SOLDIER. Oh, okay.

You gonna go to Sanders. Alright.

VICTORIA. Yes.

And the homegoing is gonna be down in Summit.

SOLDIER. Summit. Your birthplace.

VICTORIA. Yes.

SOLDIER. You going up to Sanders, then you going over there to Summit. Alright, okay.

VICTORIA. That's where my mother's best friend lives. And she doesn't travel.

So we're going to her.

We're going up to Sanders and down to Summit.

And coming back home on Monday.

SOLDIER. …

VICTORIA. That's the trip I was talking about.

SOLDIER. …

VICTORIA. The trip I was hoping you'd take with me.

SOLDIER. …

You want me to go with you to your mother's funeral?

VICTORIA. Yes.

SOLDIER. …

I can't go to no funerals.

VICTORIA. …

Why is that?

SOLDIER. I can't go nowhere.

VICTORIA. …

SOLDIER. I'm waiting for my wife.

*(***SOLDIER** *pretends to smoke his stick.)*

(He withdraws into himself.)

(A long silence.)

*(***VICTORIA** *opens her backpack and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. She offers a cigarette to* **SOLDIER**.*)*

VICTORIA. Here you are, Soldier.

SOLDIER. Where'd you get that?

VICTORIA. I *got* it.

Don't you want it?

SOLDIER. Hell no. Someone's got a plan. Someone wants me smoking. And I ain't gonna do it. Tryna make me give up my position? You part of the Ontological Serial Ulceration. Don't pretend like you ain't.

VICTORIA. Don't talk to me like that.

SOLDIER. Tryna lure me down?

Telling me your mother died. That's propaganda.

I see all the way through that!

You're not no student, you're a cop. You're the home guards.

VICTORIA. ...

Why are you talking to me that way, Soldier?

SOLDIER. ...

VICTORIA. ...

My.

Mother.

Died.

...

Okay?

SOLDIER. I'm sorry to hear that.

VICTORIA. …

…

Thank you.

*(**VICTORIA** holds out her pack of cigarettes to **SOLDIER**.)*

SOLDIER. You might want to take a walk around the block and cool off.

VICTORIA. Alright.

Alright, we'll try again. I'll take a walk. I'll give myself a breather. And we'll try again.

*(**VICTORIA** exits.)*

*(**SOLDIER** turns his full attention to the tower.)*

SOLDIER. Drywall. False door. May 31st. 1921. Studies show that the ulceration burst May 31st. 1921. Eighteen hours. Eighteen hours unmitigated. The evening of May 31st into the morning of June 1st. 1921. Eighteen hours. 300 dead. Historians now estimate. 300 dead. Deadliest civic massacre in United States history. Historians now estimate. Deadlier than the draft riots of 1863, historians now estimate. Deadlier than the Red Summer of 1919, historians now estimate. May 31st 1921. They said at the time they killed twenty-six of us. How does twenty-six become 300? Know what I know? It was more than 300. It was more than 300 on May 31 and June 1 1921. They said twenty-six then, now they say 300. Greenwood District population, 1921 was what? Historians estimate 10,000. Census records indicate 10,000 or more. Eighteen hours. Looting. Shooting. Burning. Eighteen hours. Unmitigated. The Home Guards didn't stop it. The police didn't stop it. Burned down the whole district. They took pictures. We was running and dying. They was there with

cameras taking pictures. Running the Negro out of Tulsa. Postcard. Trademark. 10,000 people. Many fled. Walked north up the road under the sun. 95 degrees no shade no shelter. Many dead. Historians now estimate 300. They sent dead bodies down the tracks. Loaded them into train cars. I heard that. A white man told me that. *I know something you don't know,* he said. *I know something you don't know*. He spilled the secret. Couldn't keep the ulceration to himself. 300 dead at least. Deadliest civic massacre in the history of the United States. No pictures please, no pictures! May 31 1921. Insurance companies decline all claims. City hall denies all aid. Know what I know? They couldn't keep the Negro out of Tulsa. They tried. Fire ordinance. Said y'all can't build. HAAAAA! 1930, we up and running. 1940, still running. 1950, 1960, still running. Know what did us in? The Ontological Serial Ulceration did us in. Historians now estimate it was the Ontological Serial Ulceration. Landgrab. Motherfucking landgrab. Rezone. Highway. O.S.U. Commercial only now, no residential. Highway. M.L.K. boulevard. Bus white kids into the school. Don't teach nobody shit. May 31st 1921, evening, June 1st 1921, morning and into the afternoon. They rolled a Gatling gun up here. No cover. Shot up the church. Shot up everybody. They still shooting. They shooting. Ain't gonna catch me with my guard down. Not this time! Not today!

*(***SOLDIER** *mimes firing a cannon at the tower.)*

Ssssss… BLAU!

You gonna be *DUST*! 'Cause that's all you *EVER BEEN*!

(A police siren.)

*(***SOLDIER** *hits the ground.)*

*(***SOLDIER** *army crawls behind the tower and takes cover.)*

2.

(Lights shift.)

(A **POLICE OFFICER** *stands onstage.)*

(Her name is **VICKY**.*)*

VICKY. Soldier!!

…

…

Soldier!

…

What's going on up here today, huh?!

…

I told you if I saw you up here I was gonna have to turn my siren on.

(Speaking into her radio.) 20-44, I'm at Standpipe. 10-97.

(The voice of the **DISPATCHER** *comes through the radio…)*

DISPATCHER. *(Voiceover.)* Dispatch. 10-5, please, 20-44.

VICKY. Looks like a 10-85. I'll talk to him.

DISPATCHER. *(Voiceover.)* 10-4. Do you need assistance?

VICKY. No, thank you.

DISPATCHER. *(Voiceover.)* We'll send a car your way ICOE.

VICKY. 10-4. Just nobody come up please, I don't want to escalate it.

DISPATCHER. *(Voiceover.)* 219 can you get that Code 2?

COP. *(Voiceover.)* Car 219, 36-22. 43-12 and I are on it.

DISPATCHER. *(Voiceover.)* 10-4.

VICKY. Soldier come out from behind there. I told you not to make me do it. I told you I had a lot on my plate at work this week and I didn't want to have to turn my siren on.

I told you don't make me use my siren and you made me use my siren. Why you wanna make me use my siren, Soldier?

*(**SOLDIER** peeks out from behind the tower.)*

SOLDIER. You the one blew the whistle! You blew it! You called the air raid!

VICKY. You can't be standing on this hill no more, Soldier.

SOLDIER. You feel that? Underneath your feet? You feel it?

VICKY. …

SOLDIER. That's Mary Parrish rolling in her grave.

She can't stand y'all.

VICKY. What you mean Mary Parrish can't stand me? Mary Parrish and me are tight.

SOLDIER. No y'all ain't.

VICKY. Mary Parrish was my mother's godmother's aunty. We cool, alright? Me and Mary are real cool.

SOLDIER. That's a line. That's all that is. You don't know the first thing about Mary Parrish.

*(**VICKY** unbuttons her collar and shows **SOLDIER** the necklace she is wearing.)*

VICKY. See this necklace?

After the disaster. Mary Parrish went around to everyone she could find. All the survivors. Took down their statements. This was a gift.

This necklace was hers. And she gave it away.

SOLDIER. To you?

VICKY. To someone in my godmother's family. And my godmother gave it to my mother. And my mother gave it to me.

So, yes.

Mary Parrish gave this to me.

SOLDIER. …

VICKY. After the disaster. Mary Parrish gave this to me.

SOLDIER. Most deadly civic massacre in United States history. Trademark.

She ain't give you no necklace.

VICKY. No?

Okay, we'll talk about it down on the sidewalk.

SOLDIER. Aint marching me down no sidewalk.

Ain't marching me downtown.

I ain't your P.O.W.

You ain't never gonna march me nowhere!

VICKY. …

SOLDIER. I knew you was a cop, Victoria.

VICKY. Soldier, you know my name ain't no Victoria.

SOLDIER. It is Victoria.

VICKY. V-I-C-K-Y. Vicky. My whole name is Vicky.

SOLDIER. That what it's gonna say on your death certificate?

VICKY. …

SOLDIER. On your death certificate it's gonna say Vicky?

VICKY. I'm being nice to you. Do not fucking play.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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