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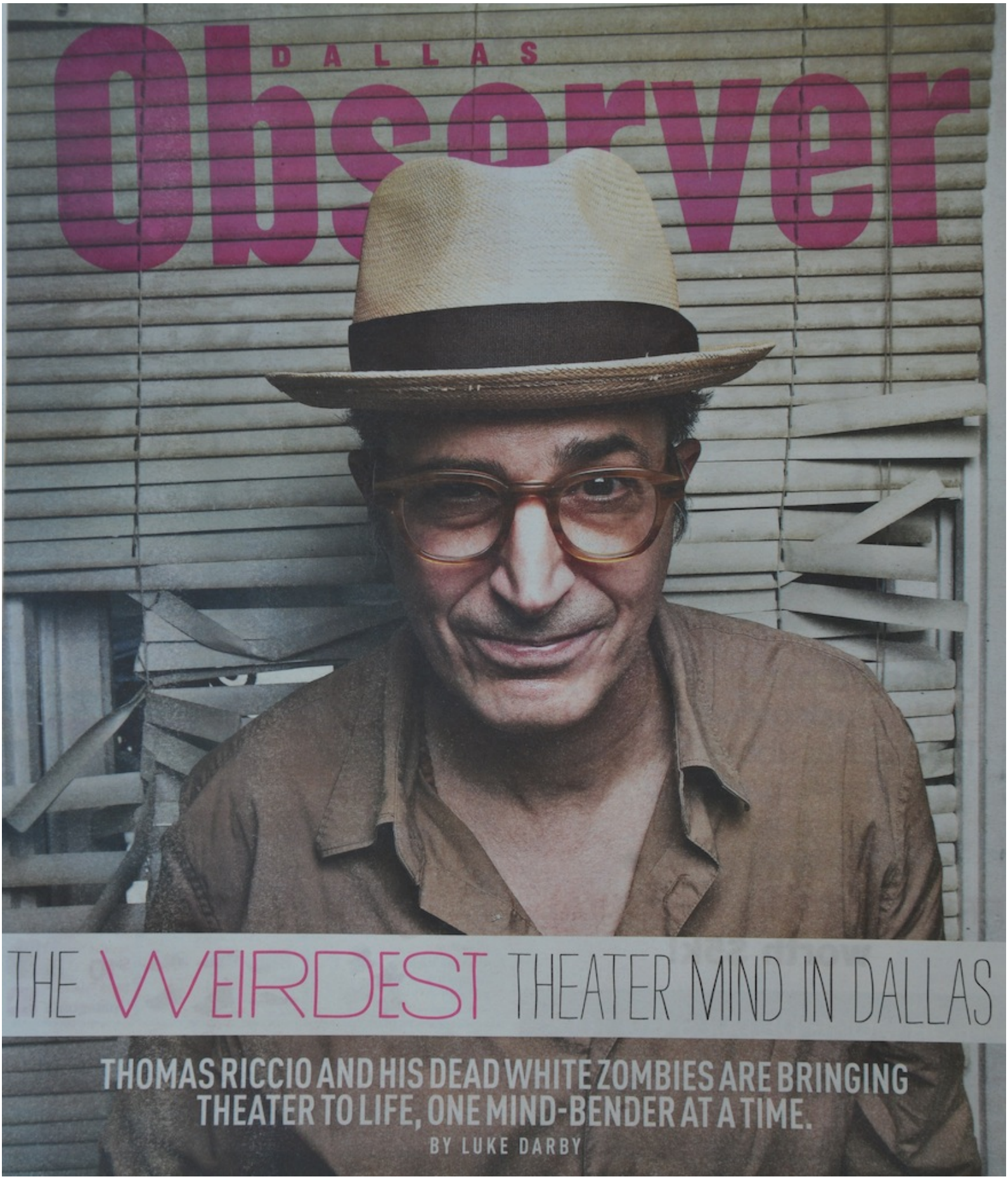

THE WEIRDEST THEATER MIND IN DALLAS

THOMAS RICCIO AND HIS DEAD WHITE ZOMBIES ARE BRINGING THEATER TO LIFE, ONE MIND-BENDER AT A TIME.

BY LUKE DARBY

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By Luke Darby *Thursday, Aug 8 2013*

Steven Visneau

It's the Monday after closing night, and the director is cleaning up the last set pieces from his performance space. There are video-game consoles stacked in the bathroom, disconnected security cameras hanging from the ceiling, and a pair of blank-loaded pistols that, thankfully, he just a moment earlier removed from the coffee table and boxed up.

There's a pounding at the door now and the director answers it, thinking it's his production manager coming back to retrieve something he forgot.

It's not.

It's seven Dallas police officers. Three of them have guns drawn. And they appear very confused that standing there in the doorway of a notorious West Dallas crack house is not the just-as-notorious drug dealer they were hoping to find but a confused-looking theater director, wondering what's happening.
"Hi," the director says calmly. "What can I do for you?"

"Y'all can go on in and wander around. The show will start soon," Lori McCarty, the producing director of *T.N.B.*, says to the crowd as she opens the twin glass doors. The audience shuffles from the patio into the dining room. From there they move either into the den, where a white man in a ski mask stands in the corner working a small DJ table, or the kitchen, where a black woman is tidying up and tending to a Crock-Pot of greens. Every room has a projector streaming footage from the security cameras in the other three rooms. An audience member is sitting on a stool when a black man in a ski mask slams the door next to her open and shut, and then falls against it sobbing. She freezes mid-squat with her eyes wide and lips pulled down, in a what-the-hell-am-I-supposed-to-be-doing frown. The man runs past her to the window, slipping on the carpet, and crushes open the venetian blinds.

That's Spooky. He's our hero.

Spooky starts yelling at Roosevelt, the white man in the other room. We quickly learn that they are twin brothers.

The brothers yell back and forth, and where Spooky is angry, Roosevelt is cartoony. He flops around the rooms like Cosmo Brown in *Singin' in the Rain* and calls Spooky "Paula Deen" whenever he says "nigga." The crowd doesn't know yet why Spooky is so angry or what he fled before he ran into this house, but they're all clutching beer bottles or plastic cups of wine and staring either at him or his image on the screen, and occasionally each other.
While everyone tries to figure out what the hell is going on, a tall, graying 58-year-old man twists through the scene, taking pictures of the crowd and actors, smiling. This is Thomas Riccio, the director of *T.N.B.*, this play-within-a-crack-house by Dallas' most experimental

theater group, Dead White Zombies. He's careful to stay out of the actors' way as they race to the backyard, where Roosevelt has costume-changed into a redneck interrogator and is electrocuting Spooky, who's now talking like either Amos or Andy. Apparently a liquor store has been robbed. Then Spooky asks, "Which way to Mexico?" and the whole crew runs into the house, shaking maracas.

The week after the last show of *T.N.B.*, I arrive at Riccio's Richardson home, a ranch-style house a few blocks from the University of Texas at Dallas, where he's taught since 2003. Before long he offers me full, tight bunches of tiny grapes. The fruit came from his well-kept backyard, where grapevines cover a trellis made from a metal panel he salvaged at a scrap yard where he hunts for set pieces. The house, which he shares with his girlfriend and collaborator McCarty, is filled with natural light and furnished with wood salvaged from a burned church and more industrial metal in the kitchen. Mementos from across Asia, Africa and Alaska fill his study.

Riccio grew up in an Italian neighborhood in Cleveland. His family grew their own grapes, and as a child he helped work a press to crush them into wine. His second cousins lived across the street, and down the block were other people from the same Italian village as his extended family. Neighborhood women would hang out of windows, reminding kids walking down the street that they were watching them. Those women were Riccio's first audience.

After getting his MFA at Boston University, Riccio worked as the assistant literary director at theAmerican Repertory Theater at Harvard, the artistic director at the Organic Theater in Chicago, and a theater professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He's headed performance projects in Boston, St. Petersburg, Addis Ababa, the Korean National Institute of the Arts, the University of Pondicherry, the University of Dar Es Salaam, Tribuvan University in Nepal and the Sakha National Theater in Siberia. And he's worked with indigenous groups in China, South Africa,Ethiopia, Nambia and Zambia.
He landed in Dallas in 2003, and in 2011 he launched Dead White Zombies, the theater troupe he enlisted to stomp around that west-side drug house. The name is a tongue-in-cheek effort to capitalize on the pop-culture fascination with the undead, but it's also a reference to changing epochs. There's a phrase used to describe Western culture's emphasis on the role that Caucasian men have played in history: "Dead white men." As in, they're the only thing you'll read about in school.

"I feel that we're at the end of one historical cycle — that is the Western cultural cycle," Riccio says. "We're now migrating, evolving into another historical moment."

Riccio believes we're moving into a period that's more aligned with indigenous practices around the world. The old era, the one of dead white men, is still staggering around, stiff-kneed and unaware that it's dead.

"It's not New Age-y," Ben Miro, a former student of Riccio's and a Dead White Zombie himself, says of Riccio's approach to theater, which does sound incredibly New Age-y. "It might be perceived that way but it's more geared toward indigenous people and bringing indigenous performance rituals into Western context."
Riccio calls himself a "performance anthropologist." His interest in anthropology colors his views of the world, his approach to theater and even how he interacts with people while working. To him, culture and society are just a series of roles and performances, from office life to rituals.

In the early 1990s, he was working with members of the Zulu tribe in South Africa. One day, a man Riccio had gotten close to took off his shirt. His back was latticed in welts and scars.

"What happened, man?" Riccio asked.

The man's face turned stony.

He pulled his shirt back on. "It's nothing."

Riccio persisted. The man refused to talk, but he later approached Riccio, after the group had improvised an interpretation of a Zulu myth where they dismembered a cow representing the Zulu men and then reassembled it.

"Now I will tell you," the man said. To the whole group, he shared a story from when he was 14, when he accidentally got between the police and a group of demonstrators. The police arrested him and held him for two weeks. They caned him. They wanted to leave marks on his massive body as a warning to others that no matter how strong they were, the police were stronger.

"My mother came and hugged me," he said, after he got out. And she cried.

"And your father?" Riccio asked.

"He didn't cry, but he hugged me."

"Did you tell them what happened?"

"No," he said, "I never told anyone."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because I'm a Zulu. I'm a warrior. There are others who died."

Riccio looked around the group. Apartheid had just ended. He asked how many others had similar stories, had been brutalized by police. All but a couple women raised their hands. Almost all had some kind of scarring on their bodies.

"That's a text right there," Riccio says now. "That's a text that will tell you volumes."

Between their formation in 2011 and early this year, the Zombies did four site-specific, you-really-had-to-be-there productions, each straying further from tradition than the last. The first was called*blahblah*, which follows a young Dallas couple as they accidentally drive into their own dreams. Then came *Flesh World*, about a lost soul looking for reincarnation while dealing with her own alter egos, including a creepy third-grader representing her innocence. Then, late last year, came*(w)hole*, which is a sort of retelling of the Odyssey, with all the scenes happening at once and Penelope hanging from the ceiling.

Flesh World and *(w)hole* were performed in a warehouse on Singleton Avenue, a cavernous space that looks like a movie serial killer's hideout. The huge interior is all rusted metal and unending flurries of leaves and insulation debris blown in by the wind. They rented it from Butch McGregor, one of the managing partners for Trinity Groves, the new West Dallas development at the foot of the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge.

For their next production, Riccio wanted to do a show about whites appropriating black culture, and toy with role-playing. He'd been tinkering with a script and sent it to local actor David Jeremiah for feedback. As they sent notes back and forth, the script changed into a story that was more about being a black man in America.

Riccio also wanted a change of scenery, so he scoped out a house not far from the warehouse. It was perfect — too perfect, really. There were feces spread on the walls, and like all good

monuments of urban decay it had been gutted of its pipes and wiring. But getting running water and electricity in the house would have set the Zombies way back, so they found a nice fallback house on Poe Street, a notorious drug house that had abandoned but not yet ripped of all of its vital organs. McGregor told Riccio he would be happy to rent the house to the Zombies for a dollar a month.

"And I gave him the dollar," McGregor jokes.

"Look at you looking at me, you little fuck," a voice booms down into the living room. There's a ghost upstairs finally coming down, the massive Storm Crow dressed all in black. He walks into the den, implacable, amused, angry.

"This is life or death, motherfucker," Spooky shouts.

"Oh, death," Storm Crow yells back, slamming both palms on the table and swaying his head like a snake. Jonathan White, a local slam poet who goes by GNO, plays this ghost/conscience/reaper. Storm Crow is *T.N.B.*'s trickster, a character that Riccio loves to revisit. The name is a reference to ravens, the consummate tricksters in Alaskan folklore.
In 1988, Riccio left his job as an artistic director for a theater company in Chicago to work as a professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. But the more interesting work happened in native villages scattered throughout the state, where Riccio traveled at every opportunity, spending hours in four-seater planes over hundreds of miles of tundra and mountains, gently invading lives to learn about local customs and traditional performances.

He quickly started working with Tuma Theatre, a Fairbanks-based Alaskan Native theater company. Riccio directed seven shows with Tuma, all of which played with local legend and addressed contemporary issues like substance abuse and suicide, both pervasive in Alaska Native culture. He got the attention of a Native named Melanie Brown.
Brown, a commercial salmon fisher, had never been involved in theater. But storytelling is in her bones. She's the granddaughter of Emily Ivanoff Brown, who transcribed an Alaskan epic titled*The Longest Story Ever Told: Qayaq the Magical Man*. When Brown heard Riccio was working on a script based on the story of Qayaq, she sought him out.
"I have to be involved in this," she told him.

"Oh. OK. Why?"

She explained her connection to the Qayaq story, and the work her grandmother did preserving it.

"Oh. OK. Rehearsal is at 7."

Brown performed in *Qayaq: The Magical Man* and stayed on with Tuma for several more productions, including the séance-based *Eagle's Gift and Utetmon*, based on a series of short legends. She was impressed with Riccio's effort to understand Alaska — not just its traditions and customs but also all the issues besieging the culture.
"Culture that is alive is not standing still. I think that native cultures sort of want to freeze where they're at. They feel like they're hanging on to something," Brown says. "But Tom had a way of referring to the knowledge and the experience of the native people of Alaska while still making it very much dynamic and alive for us."

Brown had never really acted when she came across Riccio, but that didn't matter: He likes the fresh and unexpected perspective of people totally new to theater, so he's drawn to using people like GNO or Brown.

GNO's only prior acting experience was as a preacher who slammed down a Bible and walked off-stage in a UT Dallas production while he was a student of Riccio's. But he delivers his Storm Crow lines with glee, even when he throws Spooky down on the table, screaming, "Do I not deserve some peace and comfort in my old age?"

Spooky's girlfriend Charleen eventually arrives. He's relentlessly trying to bed her — "I'm sick of working like a dog and not eating" — and she vacillates between not taking him seriously and probing him: "You think because you got sad eyes you're disabled?"

Spooky presses her to the wall and raises her up until her feet are off the ground. Two women who were checking their cell phones hold them in place now as though they're afraid to move, and the whole audience is the stillest it's been all night. No one circles the scene or walks between rooms or even fidgets as Spooky thrusts his hips against Charleen and she hits his back and cries, "You thought I wanted this?"

Whitney Houston is playing. Someone starts singing in the kitchen. It's Mama. Her role has been passive so far, following the other characters and tidying rooms behind them, offering greens and cornbread to anyone she catches in the kitchen. Now she's standing at the

kitchen sink singing "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" to drown out the sounds of the rape happening a room away.

Throughout production, Riccio says frequently that he isn't interested in seeing his actors act, preferring that they find and use real emotions. It sounds like pompous theater malarkey, but it makes some sense: Riccio is a believer in drama therapy, the idea that theater techniques can help people come to grips with personal and psychological problems.

Take Mama: She's played by Becki McDonald, a local director and another of Riccio's former students. During an early reading of Spooky and Mama's main scene together, she found herself thinking about her own mother, and crying. Confronted with real tears, most directors would have recognized that reality had intruded and told her to get some water and regroup, McDonald says. Riccio said nothing. They read right through it.
"It was him directly challenging me to be brave," she says. "And that was lovely. It was terrifying but lovely. It's nice to feel safe while feeling unsafe."

Not that his ways are easily understood: Long before she read that scene, McDonald had left UTD with no intention of ever working with him again.

"It's not really helpful when you're a young actor," says McDonald, "and you're just getting your bearings in the craft and learning how you work and there's this director taking apart one of your scenes saying, 'It didn't make sense but it would make sense if they rubbed meat on their bodies.' I remember going home and writing in my journal, 'This motherfucker wants me to have my actors rub meat on their bodies. What the fuck did I get into?'"

"We did a show in undergrad called *Kartasi*," she continues, "and to this day I don't know what it was about. There was a half-goat man. We were in a machine, and I was Lucy, the mother of the machine with this worm baby. There were so many times when I would say, 'Tom, I don't get this.' And he would say, 'Well, you're Lucy, the mother of the machine.' I think I should have been drunk during those rehearsals.
"He was trying to get me to start working outside of conventional theater teachings, and I didn't see that at the time. Now that I'm older it's fun to see I don't have to work that way."
When Riccio sent her the script for *T.N.B.*, he told her, "I'm not interested in doing traditional theater anymore. It has its place, it just bores me."
McDonald read it and had another Riccio-inspired what-the-fuck moment.

But as nonsensical as it was before they discussed it, she was intrigued. She asked when he wanted her to audition.

"Nah," he told her. "Just come to rehearsal."

The whole cast is down in the dining room now. Roosevelt is circling the room and pointing a video camera at everyone as they talk. Spooky, Storm Crow and Charleen are sitting. Mama is serving them rifle bullets from a Crock-Pot, dropping them onto the plates with a pair of plastic tongs. She's already set a single shotgun shell on each plate.

By the last few performances of *T.N.B.* the cast has totally relaxed with each other. Justin Locklear, who plays Roosevelt, eats ribs from a Styrofoam container. GNO shows everyone his card trick, wherein he guarantees that the card he pulls from the deck is not the card you drew earlier. McDonald does her makeup in the bathroom mirror. She's brought a massive container of orange and cranberry mini-muffins that she made, but unlike the greens and cornbread, this is for the actors only.

"I'm gonna work in a Paula Deen reference tonight," Locklear says, putting aside an empty barbecue sauce-smeared container. The broad strokes of the show stay the same but the cast tweaks lines every night, so no one will be surprised when Locklear starts comparing Spooky to theFood Network's fallen idol.

GNO is mulling over something more disruptive. There's a moment in the play when Storm Crow opens his jacket to show his soul to Spooky. He's playing with a fistful of blinking lights he got out of some convenience-store toys, and he's weighing how much effort it would take to tuck them into his breast pockets, and how badly it would throw Jeremiah if instead of having to pantomime he suddenly had a flashing red, blue and green soul in his jacket.

It's all very domestic; they feel at home in their little crack house. You forget that they will soon be acting out electrocution and rape and other more subtle and corrosive abuses. And that sometime soon, they may be doing something even weirder in a setting even more foreign than this. Riccio is already planning his next productions. He's hoping to do an in-depth study of Dallas culture that's totally focused on shopping. He's also working with Hanson Robotics, a local robotics firm, to write a script for a one-man play to be performed by a robotic Philip K. Dick, the author of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the novel that became *Blade Runner*. The crack house has even been rented; once the Zombies are out and the place is vacuumed some new tenants will move in.

But for now they're still here, and it's still a crack house, which is why, a few days after the last production, those cops show up at the door.

"What's going on here?" one of the officers asks from the kitchen, a pot of live bullets in his hands.

Riccio struggles to explain to the cops what he's doing in the known stash house. It doesn't help that there are security cameras in every room, and that a hanging curtain is blocking off the upstairs, and that the group he keeps citing, Dead White Zombies, sounds like something you might find tattooed on a TV drug kingpin's neck. Despite his enthusiasm, they just don't seem interested in learning the definition of immersive performance.

They sweep the house, guns drawn. After they confirm that only microphones and costumes are upstairs, the cop in charge hands Riccio a glossy 8-by-10 of a man and asks if he'd ever seen him. Riccio tells them a few people came by asking for him early on. One man even said to Riccio, "My man's not here, what have you got?" But as far as Riccio knew, the guy was in jail.

He was apparently wrong.

"Is this a bad guy?" Riccio asks the cops.

"A really bad guy."

Satisfied, the cops file out. Riccio follows them outside, wishing they had shown up during a performance. From the porch he watches them pose with the chalk outline of Spooky's body on the concrete, taking pictures with their smartphones.

It's the same chalk outline that the audience followed Spooky to a few nights ago, in the final scene on the final night of the play's run. Spooky had just realized that he'd been shot holding up a liquor store. Roosevelt and Charleen were standing over the chalk outline while Mama banged a tambourine.

Spooky screamed and cursed before he pulled his mask down and followed Storm Crow down the street, away from the house and the crowd. The audience slowly drifted around the house to the backyard. The play was over but they remained quiet, afraid to break the silence in case the play wasn't over.

Finally, a woman broke the silence.

"How do we applaud?"

Alisa Levy

The audience and actors moved room to room throughout *T.N.B.*, which was set (and staged) in a West Dallas crack house.

Alisa Levy

Alisa Levy

Alisa Levy

The cast of *T.N.B.*, with Riccio.

Alisa Levy

Spooky eventually makes his way to a chalk outline outside. The audience follows.