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The church may be one of the least supportive environments for a gay man to come out in, since many denominations consider homosexuality to be an abominable sin.

But that's what Shemiya O'Bannon did. Shemiya, a transgender church choir drummer with a strong religious background, found herself shunned by a succession of congregations -- and even family members.

"In my childhood, we went to 10 different churches because I was never accepted and my family was never accepted," said O'Bannon, a 25-year-old nursing assistant who was born male. "All the sermons would be about homosexuality being wrong, that we were all going to hell. This was every Sunday, and every sermon felt like they were talking directly to me."

Her ordeal, including an attempted suicide that forced loved ones to reassess their beliefs, is the subject of "The Prodigal," a play written by her mother, Sheila, which premieres at the Kentucky Center on Saturday and will be presented on Sunday, too.

A departure for the urban-gospel theater standard of one-dimensional characters and melodramatic plots, "The Prodigal" is a serious drama about homosexuality and the church, written with life-and-death urgency and set to music.

"At first, it was therapy," Sheila O'Bannon, a private drama teacher, vocal coach and music minister in Jeffersonville, Ind., said about writing the play. "But different people read it and said, 'Oh my God, this should be seen!' It would educate the church about the lesbian, gay and transgender community.

"One line in the play asks, 'What is gay? What is transgender?' We believe that no matter what a person is, God wants us to love them. But the church shuts out the homosexual community, and parents who have children like this sometimes put them out on the street," she said.

The Rev. Jean Hawhurst, pastor of Fourth Avenue United Methodist Church whose members are involved in the production, said, "I am in prayer for the play. I have my tickets. As a minister of Jesus Christ, I believe that all people are welcome in the church. I believe that no matter what our doctrines are, Christ calls us to love all people and to me, that's the bottom line."

One section of the play invites audience members affected by its message to assemble onstage to pray.

"At that time, I do intend to move forward and join in prayer," Hawhurst said.

Sheila O'Bannon currently is a member of Peace Presbyterian Church. Pastor Wayne Steele said, "I've talked to sister O'Bannon about the experience she's going through, and how she still loves her son/daughter. Even in the midst of this, God still loves us, and as her pastor, I'm extremely supportive."

Shemiya, while still a Christian, currently doesn't attend church.

Born Aaron O'Bannon, the middle of three sons, he was seen as "different, early as 2 years old," his mother said, "but we didn't understand what it was."

Later, he grew long hair and enjoyed wearing women's clothes, though he attracted derision and ridicule.

"Being in a family of ministers, it was extremely hard because we had been taught all our lives in church that homosexuality was wrong," Sheila said.

Then, at 14, he attempted suicide, and even after doctors explained that Shemiya was transgender, it was difficult for the family to accept. At 19, he changed his name and appearance and began living openly as a woman in preparation for sex-change surgery scheduled for later this summer.

"When I was younger, it was a thing that I tried to hide," Shemiya said. "My close friends knew I was struggling. And after a while, I had to become who I was. I told my family that I am female, and if they couldn't accept that and love me, I couldn't be around them."

Sheila said the title of the play was inspired by the biblical story of the prodigal son, a message of homecoming and reconciliation; and the script, culled partly from Shemiya's diaries, shows a family in crisis weathering

'Prodigal' son is now a daughter at Kent...

tumultuous times through love and religious faith.

Initially uncomfortable with her personal suffering being chronicled on stage, Shemiya now has a featured role in the play.

"It's a story that needs to be told. My life could possibly help someone else," she said. "People who are different sometimes get into trouble because they're thrown out there and don't have anyone to love and accept them. God loves everybody, and everybody deserves a chance."

Reporter Larry Muhammad can be reached at (502) 582-7091.

'The Prodigal'

When: 8 p.m. Saturday and 7 p.m. Sunday

Where: Whitney Hall, The Kentucky Center, 501 W. Main St., Louisville

Admission: \$45 For tickets and information, go to www.isupporttheprodigal.com, www.kentuckycenter.org, or call (502) 584-7777





Information: Learn more about "The Prodigal" at www.sotheatricalproductionsinc.com

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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