



21 Chump Street by Lin Manuel-Miranda
Dramaturgy Packet by Kenjiro Lee (NTI-AP '20)

“Justin had planned to go into the Air Force after high school. He said he wanted to make something out of his life. And now, with a felony conviction, the Armed Forces, any part of it, was off the table. Justin is applying to community college.

He says now the whole thing seems kind of unbelievable. He was an honor roll student, a first time offender with no criminal record. And of all the high schools in all the towns in all the world, she walked into his.”

–Robbie Brown, “21 Chump Street”, *This American Life*

Background Information **About the Playwright**



Lin-Manuel Miranda (January 16, 1980-present) needs little introduction. He created and starred in the Broadway musicals *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*, and has been the recipient of a Pulitzer Prize, three Tony Awards, three Grammy Awards, a MacArthur Fellowship, and a Kennedy Center Honor. He is of Puerto Rican descent and was raised in the neighborhood of Inwood. He has also contributed music to *The Electric Company*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, and *Moana*.

About the Musical

21 Chump Street is adapted from a true story, originally reported on Episode 457 “What I Did For Love” of the public radio series *This American Life*. Originally reported by Robbie Brown of the NY Times, “21 Chump Street” was the story of a Palm Beach high school honor roll student named Justin Laboy who was coerced into selling drugs to an undercover cop whom he had a crush on. Laboy was arrested as part of an overall undercover drug sting at his high school, called “Operation D Minus,” which resulted in over 31 arrests.

Production History

- Original production, directed by Michael Mayer at Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) on June 7, 2014. Cast includes Lin-Manuel Miranda, Anthony Ramos, Lindsay Mendez, Gerard Canonico, Alex Boniello, and Antwaun Holley. Filmed as part of *This American Life* and released for free on YouTube.
- London production, directed by Lizzy Connolly at the Courtyard theatre, September 14-16, 2018. Cast includes Tyrone Huntley, Melissa James, Cedric Neal, Matthew Caputo, Shiv Rabheru, and Miles Barrow.

21 Chump Street is available for licensing from Concord Theatricals, and has been performed worldwide.

Synopsis

21 Chump Street is the story of Justin Laboy, an 18-year old honor roll student at Park Vista Community High School in Palm Beach, Florida. During the last semester of his senior year he meets a girl named Naomi Rodriguez, who is in two classes with him, and becomes smitten with her. He spend much of that semester trying to figure out ways to impress her, including asking her to prom (**“What the Heck I Gotta Do?”**).

Unbeknownst to Laboy, “Naomi” is actually a 25-year old undercover police officer participating in “Operation D Minus,” which is trying to find and arrest students dealing drugs in Palm Beach high schools. “Naomi” asks Justin if he smokes—he didn’t, but in his desire to impress her he offers to find her drugs (**“One School At A Time”**).

He calls up a cousin who starts a cycle of various cousins trying to get him some marijuana, while they question if they should really be doing this—he insists that it is for love, so they agree and get him a bag of marijuana pellets (**“Everybody’s Got A Cousin”**). At school, Justin gives Naomi the marijuana and she tries to pay him, as she can only bust him if there is a monetary transaction. Eventually she kisses him and shoves the money into his hands, and he is unable to return it (**“The Money”**).

In May, the police arrest Justin, and he learns because he is over 18 and did the exchange on school grounds, he will lose in court if he tries to fight it and has to take a plea deal which ruins his future prospects. Naomi insists she did the right thing and kids like Justin need to learn the consequences of their actions, but is left conflicted by her experience with Justin. A weary Justin spends a week in jail wondering about his actions, but particularly those of Naomi’s (**“Epilogue”**).

Timeline

Prior to the Play:

- September 2010: “Operation D Minus,” an undercover drug sting across the Palm Beach County school district, begins.

The Play:

- January 2011: Justin Laboy meets “Naomi Rodriguez,” one of the undercover officers, in his classes. They seem to form a friendship. Justin even asks her to prom, although she does not give him a necessarily affirmative answer—the two disagree on how she actually responded.
- April 2011: Naomi asks Justin if he smokes. He does not but offers to get her something if she wants.
- A few days later: Justin gives Naomi a baggie of marijuana. She tells him to take money for it.
- May 2 and 3, 2011: Police go into school and arrest 31 students, including Justin. He spends a week in jail, and is given a plea deal as he cannot provide evidence that she entrapped him.

After the Play:

- February 10, 2012: Episode 457 “What I Did For Love” from *This American Life* airs on public radio, includes the segment “21 Chump Street” where NY Times reporter Robbie Brown tells Justin’s story, including interviews with Justin and the officer who played “Naomi.”
- June 7, 2014: Lin-Manuel Miranda’s musical adaptation of *21 Chump Street* premieres at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, presented by *This American Life* and featuring Anthony Ramos and Lindsay Mendez. Justin Laboy attends the performance. At the time, he lives in Wellington, Florida, and now has his own business detailing cars.

The True History



(The real Justin Laboy, center, with Anthony Ramos and Ira Glass at the premiere of *21 Chump Street*)

21 Chump Street the musical adds a decent amount of information about Naomi's background that serves to humanize her in the context of the story: most notably, a backstory of having grown up around drugs in her family and that kids like Justin need to learn a lesson. Although this may seem to be artistic license on Miranda's part, he actually confirms on Genius.com that he was given access to the unedited interviews with "Naomi Rodriguez", and he is quoting her *directly* when she says these things in the musical.

Why does Miranda take the time to humanize Naomi, whereas she is more of a faceless entity in the original *This American Life* interview? It is important to understand that while the *This American Life* segment "21 Chump Street" a piece of journalism, *21 Chump Street* the Musical is a piece of creative art. In the ideal world, journalism constructs an accurate picture of a true event based on evidence and testimony of those involved—except we only really have Justin's side of the story, with little insight into Naomi's motivations or view on the situation. What little she gave Robbie Brown wasn't helpful for his reporting, or would have made the short segment too long for *This American Life*. The easiest and quickest way to approach the musical was to give "Naomi" more of a motivation. That is to say, "Naomi" had to become more than a faceless villain in Justin's story.

Does doing so undermine Naomi's role in Justin's fate? Not necessarily: a key point of the original story (at least from Justin's perspective) was that Naomi clearly took advantage of Justin's crush on her to coerce him into selling drugs. Miranda makes this even more explicit in the script by having her initiate a kiss with him at the end of "Money," using the opportunity to make him take the money—it is clear his allegiances lie with Justin by adding this moment to "Naomi's" already egregious actions.

Entrapment

21 Chump Street is very much the story of an entrapment incident. Entrapment is the practice in which a law enforcement agent or agent of the state induces a person to commit a “crime” that the person would have otherwise been unlikely or unwilling to commit.

Under Florida Statute 777.201:

- (1) A law enforcement officer, a person engaged in cooperation with a law enforcement officer, or a person acting as an agent of a law enforcement officer perpetrates an entrapment if, for the purpose of obtaining evidence of the commission of a crime, he or she induces or encourages and, as a direct result, causes another person to engage in conduct constituting such crime by employing methods of persuasion or inducement which create a substantial risk that such crime will be committed by a person other than one who is ready to commit it.
- (2) A person prosecuted for a crime shall be acquitted if the person proves by a preponderance of the evidence that his or her criminal conduct occurred as a result of an entrapment. The issue of entrapment shall be tried by the trier of fact.

There are two potential defenses that can be offered in the case of entrapment, the subjective and the objective defense.

- Subjective defense: Law enforcement pressured defendant to commit the crime against his or her will.
- Objective defense: Law enforcement used tactics that would induce a *reasonable, law-abiding person* to commit the crime.

Hypothetically, Justin’s case fell under the objective defense, except he had no evidence that it was Naomi who proposed he sell her drugs—all he had were the text messages he sent to her proving he was getting her drugs. Likewise, if he were to take the case to court this was the word of a law enforcement officer against his, hence his lawyer told him to take a plea deal.

Undercover Drug Stings

Undercover drug stings are the practice of sending young-looking police officers into high schools or otherwise to find and arrest drug dealers within the student body. Ostensibly, the goal is to stop drug dealing that already exist, but recent history suggests the officers involved in these stings will target vulnerable students—those looking for friends—and coerce them into selling drugs, eventually leading to an arrest of these students who otherwise would not engage in any sort of drug dealing.

One particularly egregious case in recent years was that of Jesse Snodgrass, a student with autism at Chaparral High School in California, who was tricked by one of these undercover officers into selling him drugs under the guise of being his friend. A judge later dismissed the charges and Jesse was able to graduate, but this is not an outcome that always occurs: usually students do not contest their arrest for fear of standing up to a district attorney.

In Justin Laboy’s case, it is important to point out that Operation D Minus was supposed to identify current drug dealers, but “Naomi” targeted a BIPOC honor roll student who had no prior

history with drugs, and knowingly turned him into a drug dealer in order to get an arrest. This is in context of the broader problem of the War on Drugs in the United States: *that it overwhelmingly targets people of color, particularly black people, and punishes/imprisons them for low-level offenses that are otherwise ignored.* The defense she makes (that he needs to know there are consequences to his actions) is not wrong, but it is severely undercut by her role in entrapping Justin.

Perhaps in reaction to the negative attention that cases like Justin's and Jesse Snodgrass' brought to the practice, undercover drug stings have significantly decreased in occurrence in recent years, with no majorly publicized cases in the past five years. Reports on their ineffectiveness, as well as criticism that these stings actually *induce* "crime" more than stop it, may also play a role.

Further Reading

News Channel 5 report on Operation D-Minus, from December 16, 2011:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVMzLBjhWVw>

The original "21 Chump Street" story, by Robbie Brown, from February 10, 2012:

<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/457/what-i-did-for-love/act-two>

21 Chump Street presented at Brooklyn Academy of Music live, starring Anthony Ramos, Lindsay Mendez, and Lin-Manuel Miranda: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELBGa6-uOhc>

Interview with Justin Laboy after *21 Chump Street* musical came out:

<https://www.palmbeachpost.com/article/20150616/NEWS/812059949>

Criminal Law, Entrapment: <https://open.lib.umn.edu/criminallaw/chapter/6-3-entrapment/>

Information on Florida Entrapment Law: <https://www.husseinandwebber.com/case-work/criminal-defense-articles/entrapment-defense-florida/#:~:text=In%20Florida%2C%20entrapment%20is%20an,conduct%20in%20the%20first%20place.>

"The Entrapment of Jesse Snodgrass": A *Rolling Stone* article about how an undercover LAPD officer tricked a student with autism into selling him drugs.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/the-entrapment-of-jesse-snodgrass-116008/>

Further information on undercover drug stings.

<https://edsources.org/2015/judge-rules-school-district-not-liable-in-arrest-of-special-ed-student-in-drug-sting/91180>

Drug Policy Alliance's critique on undercover sting operations: <https://drugpolicy.org/blog/we-cannot-let-undercover-cops-trick-students-selling-marijuana>

Genius Annotated Lyrics on *21 Chump Street*; includes some input from Miranda himself.

<https://genius.com/albums/Lin-manuel-miranda/21-chump-street-the-musical>

Glossary

The title, “21 Chump Street” is a pun on the 1980s-90s police procedural *21 Jump Street*, which was about young-looking police officers going undercover at high school or college. It starred a young Johnny Depp and later inspired the 2012 film of the same name, starring Channing Tatum and Jonah Hill.

A “chump” is an easily deceived or foolish person.

- Operation D Minus (1-1): The actual name of the undercover drug sting at Park Vista Community High School, located in Lake Worth, Florida.
- “New York/Where dreams are made” (1-2): A musical sampling of “Empire State of Mind” by Jay-Z ft. Alicia Keys.
- “I can’t tell you my real name” (2-5): A Genius annotator alleges “Naomi” was actually Noemi Perez, who now has a side job as a women’s lifestyle coach who sells “mood boosters.” An uncited claim, but a rather cruel irony of this situation if true.
- “I hand my cousin twenty-five ducats” (3-9): Slang for “dollars” or “bucks.” Ducats were a gold or silver coin used in Europe from the late Middle Ages to the 20th century.
- “Some little green nuggets” (3-9): As in marijuana pellets.
- “I am doing my job, I am doing it right” (5-12): Note Naomi’s changed her mantra from the first time she sang this refrain. Previously it was “*If* I’m doing my job and I’m doing it right...”
- “In May, the police arrested...” (5-12): This occurred on either May 2 or 3, 2011, so either Monday or Tuesday. Incidentally, May 2, 2011 was the day Osama bin Laden was killed.