STRONG TO THE HOOP

by John Coy
stage adaptation by Jan Farquhar

Pre show: kids playing basketball, invite audience to participate, to warm up with them. Someone has a jam box. Clearly, we're on a court at a community bb center or park.

At performance time, lights flash and someone calls for the balls to be collected. They are set aside. Kids get in their starting places and light fades to black.

Scene: Lights up. Kids are in an informal circle at center court, dividing into teams.

[enter JAMES and NATE, JAMES THE STORYTELLER walks closely behind JAMES, at his shoulder

BOTH JAMES: (entering with NATE, bouncing imaginary ball) Wump, wump, wump.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: (to audience) The ball bounces as my big brother Nate and I walk into the park.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: At the court everybody shakes hands, and the guys split into two teams of four, Shirts and Skins.

JAMES: I wish I was big enough to play, but because I'm only ten I go to the side court. No other kids are here, so I practice my game.

JAMES: I dribble, aim for the hoop, shoot, get the ball, shoot, over and over.

[JAMES stops playing and watches the main court.]

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: (moving *closer* to the main court) Back on the main court, Zo glides down the lane, fakes a pass,

> [All freeze except for Zo who moves in slo-motion and JAMES who is watching in fascination]

then flips a finger roll with his left hand. So smooth.

JAMES: it looks like slow motion.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: (moving back to the side court) Now I imagine playing as an allstar.

JAMES: Tie game, nine seconds left.
I bounce the ball with my left hand. No one's open.
Six, five, four.
I drive left, spin right, and soar to the hoop.
EHNN!
The buzzer sounds.

LUKE: Oh no,

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Luke yells.

JAMES: He lies under the basket grabbing his ankle.

LUKE: I'm done. You need another player.

SLINKY: How about James?

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Slinky points to me.

SLINKY: You want to run?

JAMES: Yeah!

[JAMES throws ball down and runs onto court]

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: I race onto the court. Nate and the guys gather round me.

MARCUS: He's not big enough.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: says Marcus.

MARCUS: Someone else will show.

ZO: We're not waiting.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Zo picks up the ball.

ZO: C'mon James, you're a Skin.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: I peel off my shirt

JAMES: and think (*handing his shirt to the storyteller*) how skinny my body looks.

NATE: (*to JAMES*) You guard Marcus.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: says Nate.

NATE: Stick to him.

[Focus is on JAMES and MARCUS]

JAMES: I look up at Marcus

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: *(to audience)* who's a head taller.

(looking at MARCUS) His muscles push out his shirt.

JAMES: (*to STORYTELLER)* Maybe I'm not ready to be out here.

NATE: Three, three. Game's fifteen.

[ZO throws the ball in]

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Right away the ball goes to Marcus. I slip and fall to the asphalt as he goes to the hoop.

JAMES: (*impressed*) Out of nowhere, Slinky leaps to block the shot.

SLINKY: Get that out of here.

NATE: (*to JAMES)* Slide your feet.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Nate tells me.

JAMES: Slinky nods and flips a pass.

[SLINKY passes to JAMES]

JAMES: I feel the worn leather, bounce it twice, and pass to Zo.

ZO: Count it.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: He says as the ball leaves his hand.

JAMES: Someday I want to be able to shoot like that.

NATE: (*to JAMES*) Play back on Marcus

JAMES: Nate says.

NATE: Make him shoot outside.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: I move back, bending my knees and shuffling my feet. Marcus bounces the ball

JAMES: and looks right at me.

MARCUS: You can't guard me.

[MARCUS shoots; all eyes track the ball as it flies through the air to the hoop]

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: His shot rattles off the rim.

[ZO rebounds and all race downcourt]

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Zo rebounds, and we race the other way. I cut through the lane and bump into Marcus.

[All other motion calms to give JAMES and MARCUS the focus]

JAMES: It's like running into a rock.

MARCUS: You're too small. Get out of here or I'll push you out.

JAMES: (to self) I don't like his talking. Why can't he just shut up and play?

[transition]

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: At midcourt, Zo swats a loose ball and I have a wide open layup.

JAMES: Shoot it softly,

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: I remind myself.

MARCUS: Miss

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Marcus yells from behind.

JAMES: and the ball bangs off the rim.

JAMES: I feel everyone's eyes on me and want to crawl off the court.

NATE: Go strong to the hoop

JAMES: says Nate

ZO: We gotta have those

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: says Zo.

JAMES: I know. I shouldn't be out here if I miss a shot like that.

[Time lapse. Lights intensify as the day gets hotter. Kids pick up water bottles, wipe off sweat, etc.]

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Up and down we go.

JAMES: I bang against legs and hips to stay with Marcus.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: An elbow hits my head,

JAMES: but I keep my feet.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: I'm breathing so hard my lungs feel on fire,

JAMES: and my mouth is so dry I can't spit.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: I dive for a ball that's going out of bounds and make the save.

NATE: You okay?

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Nate asks.

JAMES: I feel the burn on my knee and see blood,

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: but I know what to say.

JAMES IN CHARACTER: Yeah, I'm fine.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: We sprint down court.

Marcus makes a move and I grab him.

BOTH JAMES PLUS MARCUS: **Trchh.**

MARCUS: What are you doing?

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: he yells.

MARCUS: You ripped my shirt.

JAMES: Call the foul then.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: I'm sorry about the shirt but sick of his talking.

MARCUS: Foul. And keep your hands off me.

JAMES: I see the guys watching and I'm surprised to hear my voice.

JAMES: Then keep your hands off me at the other end.

MARCUS: What? I don't need to hold you.

JAMES: Marcus says.

SLINKY: Okay you two

JAMES: Slinky says.

SLINKY: Let's play ball.

[Music up slowly, subtly]

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: A crowd has gathered around the court and someone's turned on music.

JAMES THE STORYTELLER: "Finish it off, Marcus," a tall kid shouts.
"We've got winners."

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER : Marcus leans forward and makes a move. I slide my feet and the ball hits his leg and skips out of bounds.

JAMES: He glares at me but doesn't say a thing.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: I zoom down court, ferocious like a lion. I bounce pass to Slinky, who scoresoff the board.

[action occurs as is narrated]

SLINKY: Nice look.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: He hits my hand.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: "The kid can hoop," a man in dark glasses says as I hurry back on defense.

MARCUS: Okay kid.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Marcus sneers.

MARCUS: You and me.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: He pushes off me and hits a jumper.

JAMES: My legs feel heavy now as the sun bakes the asphalt.

ZO: Fourteen, fourteen. Game point.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Zo bounces the ball like a yo-yo between his legs.

ZO: This is it.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: The team that wins keeps playing

JAMES: and I feel my heart beating.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: I wipe my hands on my shorts,

JAMES: but right away they're sweaty again.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Zo zips a pass to Nate.

JAMES: I bump my shoulder against Marcus.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Nate passes back to Zo, and Marcus rushes to a double team.

JAMES: Zo passes to me.

ZO: SHOOT IT.

[everyone freeze, except JAMES]

JAMES: I turn

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: and shoot

BOTH JAMES: in one smooth motion.

[unfreeze, move]

NATE: Yes!

JAMES THE STORYTELLER: yells Nate.

NATE: Game point by James.

[NATE AND SLINKY lift JAMES]

JAMES: He and Slinky lift me up and I grin a championship smile.

ZO: (*coolly, to the other team)* That was our plan

JAMES THE STORYTELLER: says Zo.

ZO: *(explaining* coolly) Go to James for the game. You guys couldn't stop him.

MARCUS: Good game, James.

[MARCUS slaps JAMES' hand]

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: Marcus slaps my hand.

JAMES: Good game, Marcus.

JAMES: *(to self*) I'm happy as the last day of school.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: At the hoop, four new players are warming up.

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: "You need one?" someone shouts.

NATE: No

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: says Nate

NATE: We've got our four.

JAMES: I can't believe I'm on the main court with these guys. I feel strong enough to run all afternoon.

[JAMES, THE STORYTELLER bounce-passes real ball to JAMES]

JAMES: Zero, zero. Going to fifteen

JAMES, THE STORYTELLER: I call.

JAMES: Ball's in.

[JAMES puts real ball into play]

END