

Arts&Life

SUNDAY, JUNE 26, 2016 | SECTION D | CLEVELAND.COM/ENTERTAINMENT



Theater

Voices of the invisible

Young students bring their own words to Tamir Rice tragedy

ANDREA SIMAKIS | asimakis@plaind.com

Sometimes, as director Terrence Spivey puts it, actors have the power to change your mind. ¶ That's what happened on a stuffy Tuesday night in North Collinwood earlier this month during the first round of auditions for "Objectively/Reasonable," a new documentary play that seeks to mine community reactions to the killing of 12-year-old Tamir Rice by Cleveland police. ¶ Commissioned by Playwrights Local 4181, the only theater in the Cleveland area devoted entirely to locally written works,

the production will premiere in August at Creative Space at Waterloo Arts, a black box on East 156th Street, a few blocks from the Slovenian Workmen's Home, where the tryouts were held. ¶ Although Spivey and David Todd, artistic director of the playwright-driven company, weren't looking for child actors as they assembled their cast — at least not middle-schoolers and even younger — they showed up anyway, armed with short monologues they'd learned by heart, some they'd even written themselves.

SEE VOICES | D5

ABOVE LEFT: Kali Hatten, 14, a student at Cleveland School of the Arts, was the oldest actor auditioning on the first night.

ABOVE RIGHT: Samone Cummings, 9, delivers a powerful soliloquy about being a bully as she auditions for "Objectively/Reasonable."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNN ISCHAY / THE PLAIN DEALER



Director Terrence Spivey takes a selfie with the enthusiastic students who showed up to the first night of open auditions for "Objectively/Reasonable." PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNN ISCHAY / THE PLAIN DEALER

VOICES

FROM DI

Most were from Cleveland's Dike School of the Arts and heard about the project from their drama teacher, India Nicole Burton.

Burton, an actress, learned of the open-call auditions from Spivey, the former artistic director of Karamu Theatre, who had cast her in numerous productions. And she's working on another project with Michael Oatman, one of the six playwrights crafting a series of monologues, distilled from interviews with people in and around Cleveland, that will make up "Objectively/Reasonable."

Still a work in progress, its title is taken from a line in a report released by Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Timothy J. McGinty in November 2015. The report was the third expert opinion justifying the actions of Officer Timothy Loehmann, who opened fire on the boy holding what proved to be a toy gun at the Cudell Recreation Center, seconds after arriving on the scene five days before Thanksgiving, on Nov. 22, 2014.

"This unquestionably was a tragic loss of life, but to compound the tragedy by labeling the officer's conduct as anything but objectively reasonable would also be a tragedy, albeit not carrying with it the consequences of the loss of life, only the possibility of loss of career," W. Ken Katsaris, a Florida police consultant, wrote in the report.

Rice family attorneys publicly blasted the conclusions, writing that "Katsaris simply ignores the fact that there was no immediate threat requiring Loehmann to shoot..."

The play, said artistic director Todd, who conceptualized the project and is pulling all the monologues together, is an extended community response to that assessment and to the shooting itself.

'Hey, I see you. You're not invisible'

Before the auditions, Spivey reached out to Burton on Facebook. "Terrence asked me if I knew some older kids, between the ages of 15 and 18," Burton said. She told him she didn't, but suggested he consider some of her students.

"They're younger," she told him, "but they're very mature actors."

They proved it that Tuesday, as they waited, patient and poised, until their names were called.

One by one, they stepped to the center of the room and faced Spivey, Todd and stage manager Maya Jones, the trio seated at a long table, and delivered moving soliloquies, none more impressive than 9-year-old Samone Cummings.

In "Just One of Them," a



The young artists demonstrated their improvisational skills as part of their tryout before Spivey at the Slovenian Workmen's Home in Collinwood.



Kyndal Mickel, 12, was among the young people auditioning for the play, the work of six playwrights, which draws from interviews with people affected by Tamir Rice's death.



"I see what's going on, and it reminds me of the '60s when [playwrights] were responding to what was happening. And that's happening now."

Terrence Spivey, director of the documentary play "Objectively/Reasonable"

piece written by Burton, Samone took on the role of a bully, explaining her *raison d'être*.

"The reason I bully people is so they won't pick on me first," she said, crisply enunciating every word, her almond eyes alive with emotion.

"If people are afraid of you, they won't try to mess with you. They won't call you dusty because your mom can't give you good clothes, and they won't call you broke because your mom can't afford to keep your hair done like everyone else's is.

"... Maybe I want the people I pick on to tell on me so I get some sort of attention ... calling out for someone to say, 'Hey, I see you. You're not invisible. And you're beautiful, without all those fancy clothes ...'"

Later, stage manager Jones asked Samone and the others to "Tell us your feelings" about Tamir.

"Just relax," she added gently.

The responses were spontaneous and unscripted and raw, all qualities Todd encouraged Oatman and the other playwrights grappling with the Tamir Rice shooting to preserve in their finished monologues.

Joining Oatman, recipient of the Cleveland Arts Prize, are playwrights Mike Geither, Tom Hayes, Lisa Langford, Mary E. Weems (also an Arts Prize winner) and Todd.

Ste-Vee Lang, 11, tiny gold pineapples glinting in her earlobes, put herself in the dead boy's shoes.

"Even though I wasn't there to witness that moment, I felt like I could feel it, too," she began. "As if I was him, walking to a rec center and I didn't have a

weapon — it was a toy gun — and the police came. They didn't ask what I had, they just shot me, and that was the day I died."

Deana Johnson, a 12-year-old who runs track, her sleeveless T-shirt imprinted with a single, joyful word, DANCE, in neon peach letters, had thought a lot about what happened.

"The police ... they're supposed to be here to help our community, but they're making it worse," she said. "They're supposed to be stopping gun violence, but they're engaging in it themselves."

KaLyn Fagan tried to imagine what the police might have been thinking that day.

"I kinda understand why they thought it was a real gun, cuz it looked like a real gun," she said. "But I would have at least asked him to put it down ... and I'm pretty sure he would have put it down, if he had a mentality like me."

At age 12, she stands about 6 feet tall and, just looking at her from a distance, you'd guess her to be much older, as prosecutors say Tamir looked to the officers responding to the 911 call of someone brandishing a weapon at the West Side park. That's until she turns and you see her sweet, girlish face.

Kali Hatten, the oldest of the group at 14, is a gifted young actor from the Cleveland School of the Arts who appeared in Spivey's production of August Wilson's "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" at Karamu in 2015. As he stood and gave his assessment, it was all the more devastating for his soft-spoken delivery.

"I wasn't really that surprised that an African-American had been killed by police," he said, citing the cases of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City, black men who'd died at the hands of police in the summer of 2014, months before Tamir was shot.

"I was 12 years old when this happened. That could've been me."

After the kids left to make way for the adult candidates, Spivey and Todd were silent for a beat.

Then Spivey captured the feeling in the room: Those kids, he said, were "magnetic." Maybe they should consider adding a monologue or two to capture younger voices in the community.

Todd agreed. "We should have been recording it!" he said.

"It was amazing, wasn't it?" he continued. "Off the top of their heads, they had so much to say — it wasn't spun and nobody had proofed it."

And, much like the voices captured in the play's monologues, "they haven't been

out there," Todd continued. "They haven't been heard and digested and absorbed. We felt like that was really important."

Inspired by experience

Capturing the innocence of youth, Spivey said, is just as crucial as hearing from adults in and around the Cudell neighborhood, where the playwrights started conducting interviews some six months ago.

"We were looking for someone maybe 16, 17, but, hell, this young man [Rice] was 12. We should have somebody who's 9 or 10 to 14."

One of the additional monologues will likely be inspired by the experience of Spivey's son Cinque, stopped by police on his way to Cleveland Heights High School one morning in his junior year.

Were you running through the back of somebody's yard? the officer demanded. "No sir," Spivey said his son answered.

Three or four police cruisers squealed up to the scene. He showed them his school ID. Finally, when they realized he didn't match the description of the person they were looking for, they let him go. "No apology," said Spivey.

When he heard about Tamir, he thought about Cinque "automatically," Spivey said quietly. "That was very quick."

From Emmett Till to Tamir Rice

He also "remembered so many others, from the men in Ferguson and New York City to Emmett Till — that's how far back I go," Spivey said.

"They almost resemble each other a bit," he added, meaning Tamir and the 14-year-old murdered in 1955 by two white men for whistling at a white woman in a grocery store in Money, Mississippi.

An all-white, all-male jury acquitted both killers, but the murder and the trial horrified the nation and the world, the case often cited as the spark that helped ignite the civil rights movement.

Today, Spivey sees artists across the country reacting to the Black Lives Matter movement, spurred largely by the high-profile killings of young black men by police.

"I see what's going on, and it reminds me of the '60s when [playwrights] were responding to what was happening. And that's happening now," he said.

"The more work like this I see, the more I think about what my mentor said back at Prairie View [A&M University], the historically black college in Texas.

"Art, he said, is going to be the savior of society."