

## FINDING POWER IN

A response to Tamir Rice's killing, as told by those who felt it most

## THEIR WORDS



A child is shot in this scene from “Objectively/Reasonable: A Community Response to the Shooting of Tamir Rice,” written by Playwrights Local and conceived by David Todd. From left, Ashley Aquilla, Kali Hatten, Samone Cummings and Ananais Dixon. The play premiered Thursday, at Creative Space at Waterloo Arts.

STORY BY ANDREA SIMAKIS | [asimakis@plaind.com](mailto:asimakis@plaind.com)  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNN ISCHAY | [lischay@plaind.com](mailto:lischay@plaind.com)

On a tropical Wednesday in August, one week and a day before the world premiere of “Objectively/Reasonable,” a documentary play about the community response to the police shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, the forces of nature seem to be rallying against the show going on. Stage manager and assistant director Maya Jones, a tireless 20-something with the build of a

jockey and the lungs of an opera diva, is positioning electric tea lights throughout a darkening room inside the Slovenian Workmen’s Home in Slavic Village. The night before, a storm had knocked out the power in the old brick building on Waterloo Road. An electrician has come and gone, telling David Todd, the preternaturally calm and bespectacled artistic director of

Playwrights Local, a theater devoted to producing locally written works, that the juice might be restored by 10 p.m. It was just after 6. Kaila Benford and Jameka Terri, 24 and 23 respectively, are the first actors to arrive for the rehearsal, and stand at the door, peering cautiously into the gloom. “Come on in!” Jones says, deploying her last little luminary.

“You thought I was just performing a seance? They’re for the show.” Even late in the day, the humidity had yet to break; it’s like breathing through a damp towel. As long as the blackout lasts, no electric fans would agitate the soupy air. There won’t be overhead light either, bad news for those still memorizing their parts. Benford and Terri head to the

relatively brighter, airier lobby to go over lines before the run-through, Jones’ shouted mantra following the women down the stairs: “A paragraph a day gets us off-book, hey-hey!” “A paragraph a day keeps the stage manager away,” quips director Terrence Spivey, entering on cue.

SEE TAMIR | **D5**

### Renaissance

## Cleveland’s authentic Asian flavor

Markets, festivals, restaurants revive ethnic enclave

LAURA DEMARCO  
[ldemarco@plaind.com](mailto:ldemarco@plaind.com)

Families, teenagers and grandparents with toddlers strolled the street, nibbling on steamed buns, eating rice with chopsticks and carrying squid-on-a-stick. They sipped bubble teas and watched classical dancers and stilt-walkers. They browsed homemade leather goods and soaps while vendors hawked their wares. This is Cleveland? This is Cleveland.

Although it may look and sound, and taste, like Taipei, this is Rockwell Avenue, the heart of Old Chinatown on the near East Side. The old center of the city’s bustling AsiaTown is transformed every final Friday of the month in the summer into a scene straight out of Taiwan thanks to the growing night markets. “We had 20,000 people come to the last Night Market,” says Brendan Trewella, one of the creators of the Friday event. “We began with 5,000 people for the

first one last year. There’s nothing like it in Cleveland.” The next Night Market takes place Friday from 5 to 11 p.m. The final market for the year will be Sept. 30. Night Market, now in its second summer, is modeled on traditional Taiwanese night markets, but with a Cleveland twist. “When we were starting Night Market we asked ourselves ‘how do we do something that’s Asian but also Cleveland?’” says Trewella.

SEE ASIATOWN | **D5**



JOHN PETKOVIC | PD  
WCPN’s Dee Perry is retiring after 40 years on the Cleveland airwaves.

### New chapter

## Radio’s Perry to trade listening for doing

JOHN PETKOVIC  
[jpstkovic@plaind.com](mailto:jpstkovic@plaind.com)

The radio queen with the smooth-as-honey voice and a disposition even sweeter is signing off. Dee Perry is retiring after 40 years on the Cleveland airwaves. The final day for the WCPN FM/90.3 broadcast journalist will be Friday. “It’s just time to go,” says Perry, sitting on a couch on Thursday after finishing her acclaimed “Sound of Applause” program. “We’ve been doing this show for ...”

She pauses before letting out that gentle laugh that has been her engaging trademark. “I never imagined this show would go on for 20 years,” says Perry, nodding her head back and breaking out in that big smile. “Especially when I think about how it started.” Rewind to 1996, when Perry launched the arts and culture show with producer Dave DeOreo. Back then, it was called “Around Noon.” SEE PERRY | **D4**





When the power went out at the Slovenian Workmen's Home, the cast of "Objectively/Reasonable" took their rehearsal into the parking lot.



India Nicole Barton plays a mother in the play.



A bit of rain doesn't stop actor Samone Cummings from dancing.

## TAMIR

FROM D1

Fear of the wrath of Jones aside, the suggestion that "Objectively/Reasonable" be consumed in small bites is a good one. Not only is the language in some of the 18 monologues that make up the play densely packed, it is, as Benford puts it, "emotionally dense."

"There's a lot to digest and process," she says. For actors and audience.

The title refers to a line in a report released by Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Timothy J. McGinty in November 2015 justifying the actions of Cleveland police officer Timothy Loehmann.

As those who have seen the grainy security footage know, Loehmann opened fire on Tamir Rice seconds after arriving at the Cudell Recreation Center on Nov. 22, 2014. A dispatcher had erroneously reported a man brandishing a weapon, not a kid with a pellet gun, a toy that looked like the real thing.

Like many of the high-profile killings that have sparked outrage and protests across the country — Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana — the victim, Tamir, was black; the officer who fired the fatal shots, white.

But Tamir's death was different in a significant way. Despite police reports that he was big for his age, he was the youngest casualty by far, years away from a driver's license, his first slow dance, a graduate's cap and gown.

The play grapples with the notion of how such a thing could be, as a prosecution expert claimed, "reasonable." And why Cleveland, in the words of one interviewee, didn't burn.

"When something like this happens, I think everyone has complicated responses to it," says Todd.

Every word audiences will hear was culled from

interviews conducted by Todd and an ensemble of playwrights over the last six months or so. They started the Q&As in the Cudell neighborhood, then branched out from there.

The sentiments of ordinary Clevelanders — a white grad student, a black cop and an Asian minister among them — echo through the 90-minute piece, mingling with the observations of figures with more intimate knowledge of the case. Those would include, most notably, Rice family attorney Subodh Chandra and, in a searing, penultimate monologue, Tamir's mother, Samaria Rice.

Director Spivey and his cast of 10 have built movement into the play to augment the words, stylized sequences including depictions of the slave trade and chain gangs designed to show, says Spivey, "how little things have changed."

But make no mistake: Ideas and emotion, and the language used to express them, are the headliners of this production.

As more actors wander into the room, Jones announces the schedule: They'll start at the top at 7:30.

"I know it's hot, and there's no electricity . . ."

"What?" says new arrival Nathan Tolliver, a 32-year-old Cleveland native wearing a "Yo! MTV Raps" T-shirt. Like the playwrights — Todd and Michael Oatman, Mike Geither, Tom Hayes and Lisa Langford — most of the cast, a mix of amateurs and pros, was born and raised in the city; others who weren't have lived here for years. Those roots have given them a greater emotional stake in the show. For them, it's personal.

"It's about to be dark," Jones continues, "so we might have to start at 7 . . ."

Aside from asking when the lights would be back on, nobody complains.

Tolliver breaks into song: "Eyes on the Prize," a folk standard used in "Objectively/Reasonable" that

became an anthem during the civil rights movement, recorded by everyone from Mavis Staples and Pete Seeger to Bruce Springsteen and Joss Stone.

"Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!"

Spivey surveys the deepening shadows glumly. Todd, he says, was trying to find out if they could move into their permanent theater around the corner a day early.

"Do you think we should try to do this in the parking lot?" Jones asks.

"What about the cars?" Spivey asks. Then again, Packy Malley's, the bar the Slovenian Home shares a lot with, isn't hopping yet.

Why not? After all, the piece is in the tradition of political street theater as practiced in New York City in the 1970s, said Spivey. Not to mention the protest plays performed at outdoor festivals by the Free Southern Theater company in the 1960s.

### Good news/bad news

The troupe makes its way down a dim hall, following the red glow of an exit sign, and clamber down a fire escape.

As Jones blocks out a makeshift stage using her tea lights as borders, actors deliver their monologues over the beeping of horns and the roar of tailpipes.

"I'm loving it!" Spivey says.

Actress India Nicole Burton, her purple-tipped braids pulled back from her face for optimal coolness, perches on the fire escape and recites a passage from "A Cleveland Filter" with actress Ashley Aquilla, a scene between two mothers — one black, the other Latina.

"I think it has been confirmed that procedure was not followed as to Tamir Rice. And I think procedure would have been followed if it was a white neighborhood, certainly a more moneyed neighborhood . . ." Burton says.

Kwanza Brewer, the

mother of 14-year-old actor Kali Hatten pulls into the lot, nearly driving through the center of their alfresco performance space before Spivey waves her off.

Kali slides from the passenger seat. He so impressed Spivey and Todd during auditions in June that they asked him to craft his own monologue — a short, powerful piece called "A Lesson for Children" — and perform it in the show. After Tamir, he wrote, "I was afraid police would roll up on me and shoot me,

like a drive-by."

But the director can't stave off Mother Nature or her minions, menacing charcoal clouds bullying what little sun is left from the sky. Then comes the lightning. And the rain.

They scurry back into the sweat box, tea candles and all.

Todd meets them inside with the good news/bad news: They can move into Creative Space at Waterloo Arts as planned — but not until tomorrow.

The Cleveland Heights

native, whose work has been produced in New York City, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and outside the United States, conceived the play as a way for a group of artists to respond to the the shooting and its aftermath.

At first, fellow scribe Geither wasn't sold on a Tamir Rice play. Wasn't it too soon? Too close to home?

The answer, on both counts, was "yes," which was precisely, Todd argued, why they had to do the play and do it now — not five, 10 or 15 years from now.



From left, actors Brenton Lyles, Kali Hatten and Samone Cummings.



Cast members resemble automatons in this scene of the play.





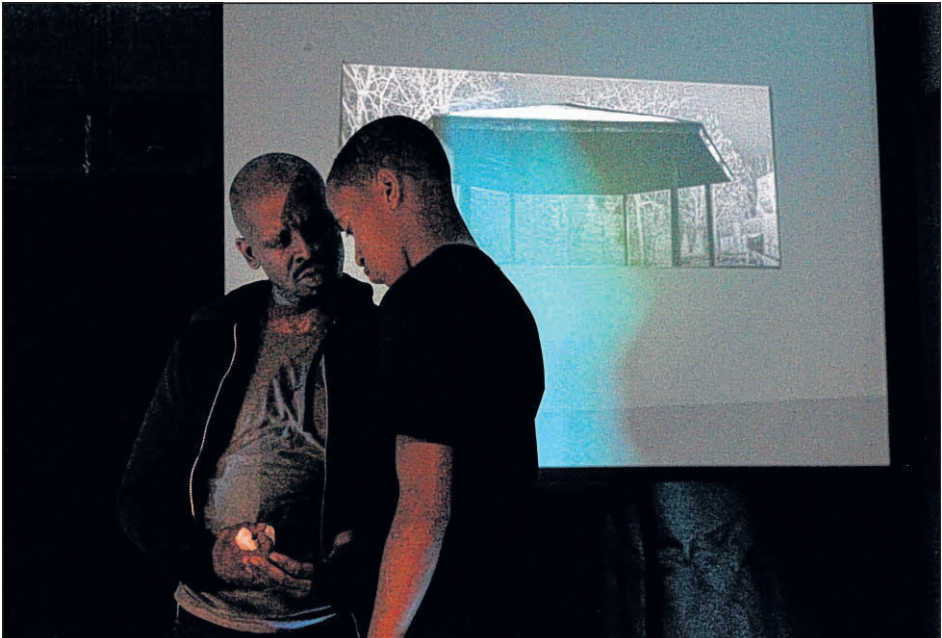
Terrence Spivey is the play's director.



Stage manager Maya Jones helps other actors with their dialogue.



Kaila Benford, 24, rehearses a scene with Samone Cummings, who is 10.



Actors LaShawn Little, Kali Hatten; the gazebo where Tamir Rice was killed.



India Nicole Barton rehearses a powerful soliloquy in the dark.

“A lot of these pieces are done about the past ... they're kind of historical, so there's a degree of distance that this one didn't have,” Todd said.

“But in my mind, it's not supposed to be something that you can judge from a super safe historical distance.”

Of course, even distance doesn't inoculate against controversy. One of the greatest Broadway snubs in recent memory concerned the 2010 Kander and Ebb musical “The Scottsboro

Boys,” a show based on the infamous trials and erroneous convictions of nine African American teens accused of raping two white women in the Depression-era Deep South. Boasting 12 Tony nominations, it didn't win a single one.

Still, Todd and the others chose to take a page from jazz great Nina Simone. Isn't it the job of the artist to produce work that reflects and synthesizes the times?

“Every reason I had ... why we shouldn't do it made it a better reason to

do it,” said Geither.

### A community awaits

For some, it will always be too soon.

When they decamp to the theater on East 156th Street, they'll be two doors down from fashion designer Dru Christine. She supports the arts — she's an artist herself — but she told Amy Callahan, executive director of Waterloo Arts, the organization donating the space to the young company, that she won't be buying a ticket.

**FYI**

**Objectively/Reasonable: A Community Response to the Shooting of Tamir Rice, 11/22/14**

**What:** A Playwrights Local production of the world premiere play by Mike Geither, Tom Hayes, Lisa Langford, Michael Oatman and David Todd. Conception and dramaturgy by Todd. Directed by Terrence Spivey.

**When:** Running Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sunday, through Sept. 4. (No performance on Friday, Sept. 2.)

**Where:** Creative Space at Waterloo Arts, 397 East 156th St., Cleveland.

**Tickets:** \$10-\$15. Go to [playwrightslocal.org](http://playwrightslocal.org) or call 216-302-8856.

**Approximate running time:** 1 hour and 30 minutes, with no intermission.

“No, I'm good,” she said, palms up, as though trying to stop a car from crushing her bumper.

She has a son about as old as Tamir was; same build, too, big for his age.

“I got one, Lord, just one. He's 11. He always wants to have a water gun.” She never liked the idea. “And now, I'm like, ‘Hell no!’ ”

Others though, are clamoring the see the work — the show has already sold out the first two performances of the run.

But before the ensemble can toast the opening, they have to get through the play — all the way through it — on this cursed Wednesday

night in August.

“Five minutes to start!” Jones shouts. “Let's not waste our daylight!”

Men strip off their shirts — “Yo! MTV Raps” sits in a wet pile on a church pew — and women fanned themselves with their bound copies of the play. Only 10-year-old Samone Cummings, a student of Burton's at Cleveland's Dike School of the Arts, remains fresh and unfazed, lip-syncing the gospel tunes playing at full volume in her earbuds, rocking out as though she were listening to Beyonce.

It's can't-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face dark when Aquilla walks to the center

of the room. Others light her way with their cellphones.

Her shadow, crowned by a mane of curly hair, rises tall against a far wall.

“You know, Tamir and Tajai's dad wasn't that much involved, so basically it would just be me with them,” she began.

“It felt like 365 days of the year. I would get a break maybe here or there, you know what I'm sayin', but when you have two children that are very attached ... clingy is the word ... you have to give them a lot of love and affection. And you know, Tamir was a very loving and affectionate child ...

“He needed to be with his mommy a lot of the time.”

The monologue was a late addition, and like the actress's shadow, the presence of Samaria Rice looms large over the play.

Burton gently touches Samone's arm and presses her finger to her lips. The girl stops singing to listen.

Later the cast gathers outside, no one making a move to go home.

“I want to thank you,” Spivey says. “To do this in sweltering heat, in the dark — it shows you're a team.” As they laugh and congratulate each other, the lights on a chandelier in the lobby flicker to life.



Actor India Nicole Barton. Ideas and emotion, and the language used to express them, are the headliners of the production.