

## Eyeing Breakthrough, He Explores City's "B Side"

by PAUL BASS | Feb 25, 2015 9:11 am

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[Curtiss checks out Dixwell's Elephant In The Room gym.](#)

Curtiss Cook Jr. has an all-too-familiar story to tell New Haven, one he hopes the city will help him unpack: a story about a young African-American man, full of promise, shot dead in a senseless murder.

It's not Cook's story. It's "Tray's" story.

Tray is the title character in *brownsville song (b-side for tray)*, an unforgettable play by Kimber Lee that began rehearsals Tuesday at Long Wharf Theatre. It runs March 25 through April 19.

New Haven has had more Trays than people can remember — [young people like Javier Martinez](#), whose murders [shocked the community](#). That fact is not lost on Curtiss or on the people at Long Wharf, who have hopes for making *brownsville song* a springboard for

constructive soul-searching in town. Their efforts will test the proposition that a powerful play can have relevance beyond the stage on which it's performed — and that theater can bring different parts of New Haven together.


Cook plays the role of Tray. At 23, he has already known peers, from his Yonkers, N.Y. childhood, who have lost their lives to violence. The son of [a professional actor](#), Cook has been performing since third grade. He hopes his Long Wharf debut as Tray — his first on the regional stage — will, along with a title part in an upcoming independent film called [Naz & Maalik](#) (he's Maalik; former *Independent* intern Jay Dockendorf wrote and directed), prove a breakthrough role.

Not just for his career. But for the city where he's performing.



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“I want to know if we can get some kids in here. I want to get some people my age and Tray’s age [18] in,” Cook (second from left in above photo) remarked as he joined about 60 fellow cast members and Long Wharf support staff Tuesday for an icebreaker round — including (in video) memories of their first kiss.

The broader mission of connecting Long Wharf and its play to New Haven was a theme during Tuesday’s get-to-know-each-other session. “A lot of things that happen in this play,” remarked Elizabeth Nearing, Long Wharf’s literary manager (and “community engagement” point person), “happen in this town.” She said the play can “serve as a launching pad for a longer conversation” and “break down barriers.”

“This is also *Our Town*,” theater Managing Director Joshua Borenstein said, in a [reference to another play Long Wharf staged this 50th anniversary season](#).

So, in conjunction with *brownsville song*, Nearing, Borenstein, and company have organized six free events at New Haven libraries about the play and related issues of violence. ([Click here](#) to read about one of them, on the “Justice Imperative.”) Long Wharf and the Community Foundation are putting together a citywide convening on urban violence on April 6. Long Wharf and United Way are [hosting a “poverty simulation.”](#) The staff has been identifying grassroots “ambassadors” to distribute free tickets to New Haveners who otherwise wouldn’t have heard of the play or considered attending. (“People who feel they don’t belong in a theater,” as Nearing put it.) Long Wharf is also contacting community groups concerned with violence to connect them to the show.

The play might leave New Haven talking less about death and more about life, however, given the thrust of Kimber Lee’s script. Yes, the main character, Tray, is killed. We know that from the start. The murder is not the arc of the play. Instead, it follows Tray’s quest to tell his life story, alongside those of his younger sister, the grandmother raising them, and the stepmother who reenters their life. It becomes a quest to recognize the heroism of people battling everyday challenges. Imperfect people.

In many ways it’s a triumphant, or at least hopeful, tale. Lee unravels the tale in raw, salty, moving, and funny terms, at times heartwarming, at other times heartbreaking.

That all resonated with Curtiss Cook, Jr. That’s why he wanted to play the part of Tray.

“I like the language of it,” he said. “It’s authentic. A kid cursing out his grandmother — some people don’t understand that. I wouldn’t curse out my grandmother. But people do.”



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He first auditioned for the role [when brownsville song played Lincoln Center](#). He read the scene in which Tray's 9-year-old younger sister Devine tells him about playing the role of a tree in a dance production. (Cook is pictured at Tuesday's reading with 10-year-old Kaatje Welsh of Branford, who plays Devine in the Long Wharf show, and Director Eric Ting.)

"Hold up," Tray says. You gotta be a *tree* ... what the other kids ..."

"They the swans," Devine says.

"And you a tree.... That's fucked up man. Why you gotta be the tree."

After Devine's face falls, Tray realizes he has screwed up. He recovers, builds her up into believing "you gon be the flyest tree anybody ever did see."

"I know that feeling of saying the wrong thing to your sister, acting the damn fool," said Cook. He has three younger sisters plus a younger brother.

So when he auditioned for Lincoln Center, "I felt I went in there and killed it."

He didn't get the part. He jumped at the chance to audition again, for Long Wharf. "I really wanted to do this play. I thought it was a dope play." This time he snagged the part.



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This past weekend Cook moved into an apartment at Madison Towers, where he'll stay through the run of the play. He has started getting out around town. He wants to get to know the city better as part of preparing for the role.

The pizza has already impressed him, of course. So has another classic New Haven feature — the juxtaposition of poverty and wealth. He got his first taste of it when walking through the Broadway commercial district into Dixwell.

It reminded him of Detroit, where he visits family.

“I wouldn't say it's as bad as Detroit,” Cook said. He added that he still has lots more to see before forming conclusions. But “in just two blocks — it's like a Washington, D.C., feel. You have a White House here; you have this decrepit neighborhood [right past it]. The sidewalks not being kept up; I noticed that difference.”

Similarly, he noticed beautiful new school buildings in town in some case surrounded by blight: “It didn't match the vibration.”

“I want,” Cook said, before launching into the first group reading of the play, “to delve further.”

New Haven, meet Curtiss Cook, Jr. Curtiss Cook, Jr., meet New Haven.



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