

At Stetson, The Gloves Come Off

by LUCY GELLMAN | Mar 19, 2015 3:05 pm

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When [ConnCAT](#) founder Erik Clemons first heard selections from [brownsville song \(b-side for tray\)](#), he realized something very quickly: Even the smallest section of Kimber Lee's masterfully true-to-life script lent itself to hours of discussions he was waiting to have.

The same was true for youth worker Steve Driffin, who immediately seized on the importance of sharing the play's narrative — a young, precious and imperiled black life — with the

New Haven community as necessary and therapeutic.

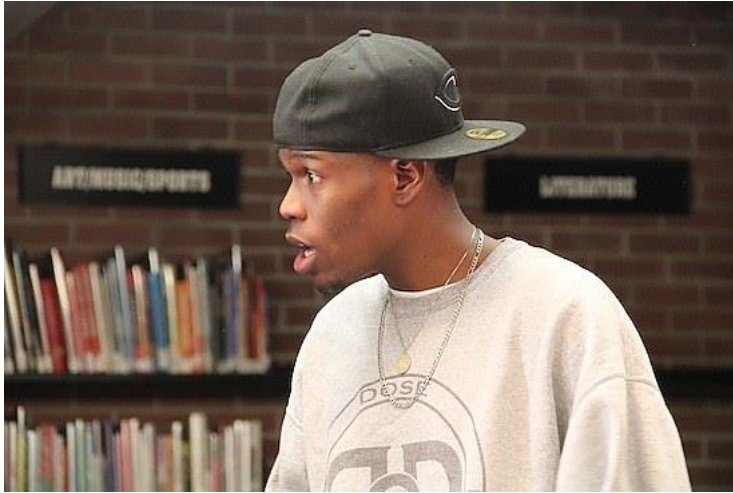
And for performer, community organizer, and educator [Hanan Hameen](#), who came to New Haven three years ago after 21 years of teaching in Brooklyn, the words of the play were even simpler as they hit close to home. Art imitated life and life art, and the story of a young man of color from Brownsville, Brooklyn reminded her of students lost to gun violence, gangs, and child molestation. It was a story that shook her to the core, and one she believed needed to be told over and over.

Attorney Clifton Graves nodded from the front of the room. "You talk about 'black lives matter.' Black lives should matter all the time."

These thoughts, part of a theatrical roundtable and community dialogue titled "A Dream Deferred," came spilling out of an audience of almost 40 Wednesday evening at the [Stetson branch](#) of the New Haven Free Public Library on Dixwell Avenue. There, community members had gathered for two short readings from *brownsville song* slated to begin its month-long run at the Long Wharf Theater (LWT) next Wednesday.

Based on the life and death of 18-year-old Tray Franklin in Brownsville, where crime and poverty rates remain high above Brooklyn's average, the play follows Tray, a young man and

aspiring boxer, as he navigates the increasingly complex webs — family, friends, school, and violence — in which he is enmeshed.



Curtiss Cook Jr., who [plays Tray](#) in LWT’s rendition of the play, explained on Wednesday how complex and exhausting the role has been for him. Free 2 Spit host and founder [Baub Bidon](#) asked if the script is ever “too painful” to perform.

“It is definitely a tough play to come in every day and keep doing,” Cook said. “But it’s worth it. This is definitely worth it. But we come in sometimes and at the end of the day ... we are drained, man, because of how much

we have to address these topics. And it’s only a tad bit, a little insight into what these actual families have to deal with.”

“This play is a chance for us to address a lot of things that are so present in our community,” added Elizabeth Nearing, literary manager with LWT. “Often, these things are headlines in the news, or a side note ... but these people [in the play] are interesting, wonderful, complicated human beings whose stories should be told. Theater can’t solve political problems, but what we can do is tell stories and tell stories that should be told. We want to use this as a platform to start conversation, and hopefully it’s a beginning.”

And in many ways, it was. As the library’s main room filled up, the day’s waning light stretching over audience members’ faces, actors from *brownsville song* not only performed scenes from the play — Tray and his grandmother bickering between two rooms of her house, he glued to his phone and she visibly frightened for his well being; Tray and his stepmother working through his college essay, and stumbling a bit with their familial relationship in the process; Tray texting, texting, texting. They also shared their experience with the play as a meaningful catalyst for discussion and even community reform.



“I think you know about the story of a young man named Justus ... I [met the mother](#) last week, and just had a powerful time with her,” said Catrina Ganey, who plays Tray’s grandmother Lena.

“Meeting her put a deeper level for me with the show ... I feel a deep responsibility with the role that I’m doing here because I feel like it represents so many of the women in this room ... I always feel this deep responsibility to bring truth to it. Our characters are not archetypes, they’re not caricatures ... these are real people. I carry that.”

“It’s ultimately a love story,” added Sung Yun Cho, who plays Tray’s stepmother.

To that, Cook had one more comment to add before he rushed off to rehearsal:



“This is a play about life. This is a certain situation that doesn’t always directly hit everybody, but it always hits everybody at the

same time. It affects all of us. One person is lost in your community, that makes a difference in your community whether you were with them on a daily basis or not. It always makes a difference. One person leaves the earth, it always makes a difference in some type of way. I saw myself in this play ... it’s been about building my inner strength up to be like ‘no. This is not normal, this is not how it’s supposed to be. And you yourself can do something to make it better.”

The Community Talks: “We Failed Them. We *Failed* Them.”

A little past 7 p.m., Ganey, Cook, and Cho packed up, explaining they needed to rush back to rehearsal. It was then, keeping with the play’s theme of a young boxer, that the gloves fully came off.

LUCY GELLMAN PHOTO

“How do we find hope in the hopelessness? How do you feel hope, foster hope, in the squalor?” asked Graves, moderating the discussion.

The question hung heavy in the air for a moment. And then, hands shot up. People leaned forward.

“You have to be able to convince folks that there is something greater beyond what they see every day ... We do that through the demonstration of our character and integrity ... I would model what I would want to see in other people. You gotta do it one person at a time ... you have to convince people every day that there is something greater than what they see, than the conditions that they live in, beyond the suffering that they experience,” offered Clemons (at center in photo).

“Showing them [students] what lies beyond themselves in a real world context ... our historical background ... we’ll be able to bridge that gap. Our youth are looking for real concrete answers,” added Malcolm Welfare, Youth Leadership Coordinator for New Haven Public Schools and co-director of [The Lineage Group](#).



Some participants sought to delve deeper.

“I want to make two points,” came a voice from the back.

“When we talk about this generation and the last few generations that are really struggling ... we failed them. We *failed* them.”

It was Diane Brown, Stetson branch manager.

“I come to work every day because I feel like I failed too,” she continued. “You should never forget ... there’s too many of us here that have to give back. And those of us that are giving back get burnt out! And I’m going to say it — I always say what other people don’t — black on black crime, that’s a ‘me’ problem. That’s not anyone that looks like her [pointing to this reporter] or any other white person ... That’s not their problem. That’s my problem. When we commit black on black crime, that’s an us issue.

“We have to begin to deal with ourselves as a community. Now you can get out here and run up and down the street if you want to picket and riot ... but when a brother gets killed right here in this neighborhood, nobody does a damn thing. Everyone sits around and says ... we say ‘don’t snitch, don’t talk.’ We say the police officers have a blue code and they stick together. We do the same thing. I’m saying as a community, we have to take some responsibility for what we do, and how we act. We need to start learning how to take better care of ourselves as a community. It starts at home. Too many children are dying at the hands of children that look like them.”

Brown blew the discussion open. Suddenly, everyone had more to say. Driffin talked about the phenomenon of [self-hate](#). Clemons argued for better support of culture in the black community. Sandra Clark, a veteran teacher who had been silent for most of the evening, shared her story about a student's history award, and why her family missed the ceremony.



The lights flickered. It was almost 8 p.m.

Nearing began to pack up.

"Let's continue this. Please?" she said.

brownsville song (b-side for tray) begins March 25 and runs through April 19. For ticket information, click [here](#). To find out more about events connected with the play, including an April 9 forum on violence in New Haven, visit Long Wharf Theater's [website](#).

Previous coverage related to "brownsville song (b-side for tray)":

- [Justus's Mom Brings Leading Lady To Tears](#)
- [Eyeing Breakthrough, He Explores City's "B Side"](#)
- [Can "Second-Chance Society" Compete With Big \(Prison\) Business?](#)
- [The Organic Truth, From Trayvon To "Tray"](#)

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Comments

posted by: HewNaven on March 19, 2015 3:36pm

This sounds like it was an amazing dialogue! And, I keep hearing amazing things about “Brownsville (b-side for Tray)” - I need to see it!

I hope this story gets as much attention as some of the others on the site. It deserves it.

posted by: Threefifths on March 19, 2015 8:10pm

And I’m going to say it — I always say what other people don’t — black on black crime, that’s a ‘me’ problem. That’s not anyone that looks like her [pointing to this reporter] or any other white person ... That’s not their problem. That’s my problem. When we commit black on black crime, that’s an us issue.

American’s plague of violence is clear—it strikes all communities—and people cannot make up their own facts. We don’t have only a problem of Black violence in America—we have a problem of male violence—and thus white male violence and Latino male violence. I will write it again: 90% of the perpetrators of homicide are men. White men, as well as Black men commit murder in this country in a way not seen in nearly any other developed nation.

Khary Lazarre-White

White on White crime more prevalent than Black on Black

Kush Azrael | 8/16/2013

Should we blame gangster rap with the gun-toting rappers? If so, why can’t we blame a White man with a pistol being used to symbolize Second Amendment rights?

<http://callandpost.com/news/2013/aug/16/white-white-crime-more-prevalent-black-black/>