

“For real change to be made, you’ve gotta change hearts.”

A new show at Steppenwolf presents the real stories of Chicago youths affected by violence. By **Kris Vire**
Photograph by **Dave Rentauskas**

When I go out at night, it’s like walking through Baghdad or something. You don’t know when somebody might pop out or shoot at you.”

This harrowing account of a Chicago neighborhood is spoken onstage by an actor in the latest production by Steppenwolf for Young Adults. But it isn’t fiction—it was first spoken by a young West Side resident describing daily life in a city with more youth homicides than any other in America.

The young man is one of several Chicagoans represented in *How Long Will I Cry? Voices of Youth Violence*, an interview-based accounting of the city’s epidemic of youth violence. The play, which opens at Steppenwolf Theatre Company February 26 and will subsequently tour Chicago Public Library branches around the city, is compiled by journalist Miles Harvey from a variety of primary sources, including court transcripts, police documents and interviews with about 70 individuals conducted by Harvey and his creative-nonfiction students at DePaul University, where he’s an assistant professor in the English department.

“For the past two years, my students have been going all over the city to interview people directly affected by youth violence,” Harvey says on a gray January day at Steppenwolf, a few hours after President Obama laid out his administration’s plan to address gun violence. “We talked to a lot of kids: kids in gangs, kids on the borderline of gangs and kids out. We talked to victims’ parents, we talked to cops, we talked to funeral-home directors, we talked to the [then] county coroner. Just anyone who’s got a really direct stake in this.”

“Going through some of those [interviews] is devastating,” adds Edward Torres, the production’s director. “We really don’t want to sugarcoat anything.”

The play was born out of conversations between Harvey and his friend Hallie Gordon, the artistic and educational director of the Steppenwolf for Young Adults program. “The Derrion Albert murder had happened, and the

viral video was out,” Harvey says, recalling the 2009 beating death of the Fenger Academy High School student that was captured on cell-phone video and posted to the Internet, riling the city.

“She said, ‘I have this idea for a piece of documentary theater, à la *The Laramie Project*, about youth-violence issues in Chicago. But I could never pull that off. We don’t have the resources at Steppenwolf for getting people out to do interviews,’” Harvey says. “And I said, ‘I think I could supply the troops for that.’”

Harvey teaches oral-history techniques to his graduate and undergraduate classes “because I think it’s a really great way to get students thinking about storytelling,” he says. The youth-violence project offered a real-world application. “For a lot of them, it was a stretch; they were seeing parts of the city they’d never seen before, because we wanted them to go to people’s neighborhoods, not have people come to DePaul for a sit-down in a nice, safe conference room.”

Among the main characters depicted in *How Long Will I Cry?* are youths from Humboldt Park, Jefferson Park and North Lawndale, along with public figures like Diane Latiker, the founder of the Roseland antiviolence nonprofit Kids Off the Block, and Pastor Corey Brooks of Woodlawn’s New Beginnings Church, who camped out on the roof of an abandoned motel near his church at 66th Street and King Drive over a year ago in an effort to raise money to demolish the motel and build a community center as a safe space for kids in high-crime neighborhoods (see page 14). Brooks provides the play’s title, from the Old Testament Book of Habakkuk: “O Lord, how long will I cry, and you will not hear? I cry out to you ‘Violence!’ and will you not save?”

“I asked [Brooks], what have you learned?” Harvey says. “He said, ‘One of the things I’ve learned is that you can change laws all you want, and I still want laws to change. But for real change to be made, you’ve gotta change hearts. That’s the tricky kind of change.’”

Another major figure in the play was never interviewed by Harvey or his students. DePaul student Francisco “Frankie” Valencia was shot to



CROWD SOURCED Journalist Miles Harvey, shown here with the cast of *How Long Will I Cry?* (including director Edward Torres, right side, fourth from right, and artistic consultant Kelli Simpkins, right side, seated, front), compiled the play’s stories from court transcripts, police documents and interviews conducted by his DePaul University students.

death by alleged gang members outside a Halloween party in Humboldt Park in 2009. The bright, ambitious 21-year-old is represented via writings and videos he left behind, as well as the recollections of his mother, Joy McCormack, and his friend Daisy Camacho, who was injured in the shooting. All three are portrayed onstage.

Harvey, a first-time dramatist, got assistance in paring down the more than 4,000 pages of transcripts from Kelli Simpkins, one of the original creators of *The Laramie Project* as a member of Tectonic Theater Project. She’s also collaborated on other “verbatim theater” pieces, including the Jonestown chronicle *The People’s Temple*, seen at American Theater Company in 2008.

“I came in and we started doing workshops with Hallie, Miles and a few of his graduate



students who were really in-depth working on this project. We got in a room and just started hearing the material,” Simpkins says. “I asked a lot of questions—anything that might help him to engage the material in a certain way, find a way to organize it and find out what characters in the room really created a *whew!* kind of moment.”

“Her experience with this sort of documentary-style theater has been so invaluable in making sure the stories being told are honest and direct and hopefully will affect people—get people to really listen,” Torres says.

“We talked to a nurse at Stroger Hospital in the trauma unit, who just—his perspective on things was so interesting and amazing, dealing with shot-up kids all the time,” Harvey says. “The county coroner talking about how hard it is to push a

scalpel through skin, just physically, the first time—but also emotionally, like, you’re violating this body. A lot of these kids just talked really openly about their fears—their terror of both being in the gang and getting out of the gang.”

Harvey and his students sometimes experienced resistance in the communities they entered. “I wasn’t always well received. Some people said, ‘White man, why are you stealing our stories? You’ve got no business coming here and taking our stories,’” Harvey says. “The second part, what I heard from some of the same people was, ‘Why isn’t anyone paying attention to these stories?’ The thing I always tell my students is, people want to be heard. Most people, if you approach them the right way, want to tell their stories.”

Only a fraction of those stories could be used in the play, so Harvey and his students are producing a companion book to contain additional interviews, tentatively scheduled for publication this spring; it’ll be distributed free to community groups and educators.

“We are well aware that we’re not pioneers in this effort,” Harvey says. “But one thing I always tell my students is I believe in the power of bearing witness. What we’re really trying to do is take a measure of the cost, the human cost of this violence.”

Public performances of How Long Will I Cry? are March 2, 4, 9, 18 and 23 at Steppenwolf. Visit steppenwolf.org for the schedule of Chicago Public Library performances.

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