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A Winter Tale of our city

By [SHERRI WOOD](#)

As I woke up yesterday morning to the news of a triple shooting in Toronto's west end and a drive-by shooting in the east end, I had to wonder whether I was still dreaming as the lines between art and reality sadly, and so unbelievably, blurred.

The night before, I attended the opening of *A Winter Tale*. The city's latest artistic attempt to address the ongoing issue of homegrown gun violence was held at the shabby Alchemy Theatre.

Written by Michele Lonsdale Smith (who also directed the play) and Frances-Anne Solomon, founder and artistic director of the not-for-profit multimedia company Caribbean Tales, the play rings strikingly timely even though it has been in the making for more than two years.

It's a story filled with crime and confusion, desperation and gunshots -- and the brutal truth. An inner-city mentor/social worker/basketball coach named Gene, played by Peter Williams, tries to steer local gang-involved kid DX, played by Michael Miller, away from the street life.

As Gene becomes more discouraged by what he sees in his neighbourhood, tensions continue to build around him. When a 9-year-old boy is killed by a bullet intended for an off-turf drug dealer, the social worker tries desperately to get the black men in the community to talk.

What ensues is a series of meetings at Miss G's Canadian-Caribbean Restaurant between Gene, DX and a group of disenfranchised men, including the murdered child's grandfather, a meek TTC driver, a trustless local businessman and a mysterious African visitor.

All are outraged and left feeling hopeless by the latest murder, but each has his own idea of an answer. When one man suggests "an eye for an eye," another retorts with a poignant discussion on the never-ending cycle of black men killing each other -- in turn, endangering themselves and their culture.

"We're black dinosaurs right now, man," he says. "When does the cycle end?"

Stellar performances from a broad and eclectic cast carry this multi-scened story with full momentum right to the very end. The overall effect, from the authentic street vernacular to the fearless peek into the lives of teen parents, drug dealers and frustrated mothers, is one of honesty and realness.

The theatre is dark and dingy and perfectly suited to the intimate tale.

Much of the effectiveness of the play can be attributed to the extraordinary sound production -- from friendly Caribbean music to chilling gunshots to the subtle sounds of street noise, beer pouring and cell phones ringing. The music and sound from Mauri Hall renders the play strikingly realistic.

The only downfall of this ambitious offering is what's sporadically left unsaid, leaving the audience to fill in the blanks, and with a story like this you want the message to be clear.

It's a small, independent production with a big, boldfaced point.

At times angering, at times humourous and always moving, *A Winter Tale* takes a raw, brave approach and forces us to face the realities of the breeding grounds for gun violence. My hope is that it will be seen by as many as possible.

A recently announced extended run will bring the play to the Masaryk Cowan Community Centre in Parkdale Feb. 11 and 12 with 100 tickets available free of charge to Parkdale residents (call 416-392-6928 for more info). To purchase tickets for the Alchemy Theatre engagement, visit ledaserene.com. *A Winter Tale* is also slated to be made into a feature-length film with the same cast, to be shot in Parkdale and released sometime this year.

A WINTER TALE

Director: Michele Lonsdale Smith

Starring: Ensemble

Sun Rating: 3 1/2 out of 5