



Play brings back bad memories

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Bullets may be blind, but one fired from a dimly lit stage may find its way to the city's heart.

In *A Winter Tale*, gunfire erupts one winter evening. An errant missile kills a nine-year-old boy. The rest of Frances-Anne Solomon's latest production traces that bullet's wake, as six men from the black community begin meeting at a local Caribbean restaurant. Their road to redemption begins there — but for those who take in the performance at Alchemy Theatre during Black History Month, finding where it ends won't be easy.

Indeed, the play's the thing that just may catch the conscience of a city.

It's been more than a month since a real-life bullet found Jane Creba amid a Boxing Day throng of shoppers.

A group of thugs fired guns through milling shoppers near the Eaton Centre. Six passers-by were injured, and 15-year-old Creba was killed. The public shooting spree was an escalation of the gun violence, and murders, that has escalated within Toronto's black community.

Throughout, the city has struggled to find its own kind of redemption — to not only find the shooters, but get at the deeper roots of the problem within the community, and perhaps even absolve itself of a bitter stain.

Solomon never intended her play to parallel reality so closely. When she and her cousin Michéle Lonsdale Smith crafted the tale two years ago, it was a particularly bloody weekend with shootings reported across the city.

"We wanted to get behind the headlines and show another side of these human beings who are struggling with a crisis in the community," Solomon says.

The headlines are still catching up. In the play, there's a second shooting, this time outside a funeral home. Again, the event brings an eerie echo to last November's gun murder at a funeral at the Toronto West Seventh-day Adventist Church in Rexdale. Two holes in the church window later and 18-year-old Amon Beckles was dead.

"When the shooting happened at the funeral, I was like



RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR
Producer Frances-Anne Solomon oversees her new play *A Winter's Tale*.

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Notable individuals and accomplishments as we mark Black History Month:

1954 Bromley Armstrong leads a "March on Ottawa" to demand changes in Canada's immigration policy toward people from countries from the Caribbean to Africa.

1955 Herb Carnegie establishes the first hockey academy for boys. Carnegie himself was shut out of the NHLs.

1955 John Douglas Salmon completed a degree in medicine at U of T. He becomes Chief of

'Oh my God.' I almost felt like, 'Damn, they keep stealing our storyline,' " Solomon laughs.

The only thing more agonizing than a shooting, perhaps, is the silence that often follows in the community. Toronto Police are still hunting for the shooters involved.

Solomon, on the other hand, wanted to see what it would be like if people actually started talking.

"The myth is the black man doesn't like to talk. So I thought, why don't we get a group together and see what it looks like?"

During a recent rehearsal for *A Winter Tale*, it looked a lot like rage. For a story so fixated on conversation, it practically hurled itself across the tiny stage as characters careened against each other, verbally, physically and emotionally.

The performance features 15 actors — many from Toronto; others from across the country and even as far as Jamaica and Trinidad. "What happens when there's violence at that level is there's a lot of guilt, a lot of fear, a lot of suspicion that comes up for people, but you don't know really what to do about it," Solomon says.

The performance ends with a procession singing Bob Marley's "Redemption Song."

"I'm not sure that there is actually redemption," Solomon says. "We didn't want to offer any easy solutions — that everyone lives happily ever after."

But if there's any redemption, it may be in the search itself.

"I think that it's important to make the attempt," says Lonsdale Smith, who also directs the performance. "I think what we're trying to say with the piece is that we don't have any answers. All we know is that we have to start talking about it. And, at least in the attempt, doing something about it. Even if the doing doesn't come to a result that makes everyone happy.

"You just hope that people follow by example."

That message will reach more than just theatre-goers who take in performances throughout February. The production was originally intended for the screen. And, with sponsorship from CHUM and Telefilm Canada, the movie version begins filming in Parkdale this month.

"It became obvious this piece would work as well as a theatre play," Solomon explains. The live performance, she adds, will help actors get inside their roles.

"So that when we go to shoot the film, the piece would already be completely coherent."

But it's in the close confines of Alchemy Theatre where

General Surgery at the Scarborough Centenary Hospital in the 1990s.

1959 Lawrence McLarty becomes the first black police officer in Toronto.

1962 Dan Hill III becomes the first director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, established in 1961 to enforce the Ontario Human Rights Code.

1963 Leonard Braithwaite, Liberal MPP for Etobicoke, is elected to the Ontario Legislature.

1965 Dudley Laws serves as a community activist for youth empowerment, anti-racism, and police accountability. A founding member and director of the Black Action Defence Committee [BAD-C].

1970 Toronto performer, actor and singer Salome Bey releases her self-titled album.

1985 Alvin Curling, Liberal MPP, Scarborough, is appointed to cabinet as Ontario Minister of Housing.

1990 Zanana Akande, NDP MPP, St Andrews-St. Patrick, is appointed Minister of Community and Social Services.

1990 Professor Frederik Case is appointed principal of New College, University of Toronto.

1993 Jean Augustine becomes first black woman elected to the House of Commons for Etobicoke-Lakeshore riding. Appointed to cabinet in 2002 as Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and Women's Issues.

1996 Claire Alleyne becomes first Registrar of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at U of T.

1997 Joseph Halstead is named Commissioner of Economic Development, Culture and Tourism, City of Toronto.

2002 Toronto writer Austin Clarke wins the Giller Prize for Literature for his book *The Polished Hoe*.

2002 George Dei appointed chair

the performance pricks its audience. Characters fly from all parts of the theatre, their songs, their anguish seeming to surround.

"The good thing about the play is that the audience is right up close to the people," Solomon says. "Again, it's that bringing together, it's that journey of understanding. It's getting to know the people. There's a lot of emotion. I would be surprised if anyone comes away with dry eyes."

Which is precisely where Solomon and Lonsdale Smith have aimed their own missile.

"What you can do in theatre is tell stories about the truth in what is happening and the truth of the people," adds Solomon. "The more you know the more you can understand the more you can empathize with other people."

Christian Cotroneo

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of the Department of Sociology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

2002 Selwyn Pieters, a law student at Osgoode Hall Law School, agrees to a negotiated settlement in his racial profiling complaint against Canada Customs. The case results in changes to the way Customs conducts searches.

2004 Jay Hope is named Deputy Commissioner for the Ontario Provincial Police.

2005 Keith Forde is named Deputy Chief of Toronto Police Services.

2005 Michaëlle Jean is appointed Governor General.

— with files from Gary Pieters

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