

# The New York Times

---

THEATER

## The Pen and the Trigger Finger: Examining Gun Violence Onstage

By LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES APRIL 26, 2017

The day of a recent school shooting in San Bernardino, Calif., the superintendent of the local school district offered parents guidance on how to talk with their children about the incident, in which a teacher, an 8-year-old student and the gunman all died.

“Be willing to listen to their story and be willing to listen to their story multiple times,” the superintendent said. “Reassure them that the danger that they faced has passed.”

It was kind and sensible advice, and if I hadn’t read it in a news story on my way home from seeing “Church & State,” an Off Broadway play that takes forceful exception to the pervasive gun violence in the United States, the words might not have struck me the way they did. As it was, I couldn’t help thinking that the broader danger had not at all passed, and that there’s no assuaging the generalized dread that courses through our culture with every fresh headline-grabbing slaughter, and in between.

“I for one am tired of being afraid,” a Southern senator says in the play, reversing his stance on gun control after a massacre at his children’s school.

On stage after stage lately, playwrights have been confronting such fears about gun violence, adding their works to a genre that has blossomed like a furious bruise in recent years.

No single work encompasses the enormous scope of the issue. Yet together they tell a story that demands our willingness to listen, and to listen again.

### No Screen to Separate Us

Cite the numbers, and the problem instantly becomes too vast to grasp: More than 33,000 people killed and upward of 78,000 wounded by firearms each year in the United States, according to the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. Most of those aren’t going to make the news, and unless they are especially heinous or close to home, aren’t we a little inured to the ones that do?

This is where the stealthy power of theater has an advantage, at least theoretically. There are dramas involving shootings in schools (“Punk Rock,” “The Faculty Room,” “The Library”) and workplaces (“Gloria”); attacks spurred by politics (“The Events”), racism (“Mother Emanuel”) or mental illness (“Holden”).

There are plays focused on bystanders for whom gun killings are an everyday trauma (“Pass Over”) or a surreal aberration (“When It’s You”). Other shows are some combination of the above (“On the Exhale,” “Church & State,” “The Assignment”).

News reports arrive after the fact, but theater can meddle with time and dimension, showing us the before, the during, the yet to come — as in Nathan Yunkerberg’s “Esai’s Table,” which trails three black teenagers just past the threshold of the afterlife, where we come to understand what their needless, unwilling absence from the world will mean.

Plays can put us in the room or on the street corner to eavesdrop on unguarded moments, on music and laughter — as in Rajendra Ramoon Maharaj, Adam Mace and Christian Lee Branch’s “Mother Emanuel,” a gospel-music celebration of the people gunned down at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C.

There is intimacy to that, because there is no glowing screen to separate us from the grief and devastation. The experience is visceral and enveloping in a way that the news is not. We may even forget that we are safe.

In Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's musical "Assassins" (1990), about murderers and would-be murderers of United States presidents, there is a famous moment when Charles Guiteau, the killer of President James A. Garfield, trains his gun on the audience.

Mr. Sondheim wrote in his book "Look, I Made a Hat": "In every production I've seen, as his affability froze and he slowly panned over the crowd, not missing a patron, there has been a hush more chilling than at any moment in 'Sweeney Todd.' Facing the barrel of a gun, even when it's just in a musical, is the kind of shock that can exist only in live theater."

This is true, and it worked precisely as intended the night I saw "Assassins" this spring at Yale Repertory Theater. The show itself, which gets at the congenial nature of this nation's gun love, has a contemporary resonance that has only grown with the years.

But it catapulted me backward, too, in an unexpected way: A scent wafted from the stage that reminded me of the cap guns my childhood best friend and his brothers used to play with. One of them, in young adulthood, would be murdered by a stranger with a gun.

## Startled Into Awareness

I've known three people who have died at the barrel of a gun, two from suicide. That feels like a high number to me, but Antoinette Nwandu's urgent, poetic "Pass Over" — which I saw a year ago in a Cherry Lane Theater Mentor Project showcase, and which Steppenwolf Theater Company in Chicago will stage in June — persuades me that this perception is relative. In her play, two young black men in a bullet-riddled neighborhood of an unidentified American city are listing the people they've known who've been killed.

"Andre," Kitch says, 15 names in.

"Which Andre?" his friend Moses asks.

"Both," says Kitch, who has many more names to add.

The play, which transports the audience to the block that Kitch and Moses are eager to leave for a better life, captures in a way I have never encountered elsewhere the paralyzing effect of constant violence. Fearful of being shot by the police ("You heard they picked off Ed, though, right?" Kitch asks), these tough and likable guys repeatedly flinch at the sound — or, sometimes, in anticipation of the sound — of gunfire.

The most haunting such play that I've seen, "Pass Over" requires no prop guns or fake blood. It relies on suggestion, and it is terrifying: both the physical danger and the existential despair. The knot that will need untangling if anything is ever truly to change for Kitch and Moses is viciously snarled.

Getting us to look at that and comprehend it, to take us outside our own experience and alter us somehow by the time we leave the theater: That's part of the charge for an artist wrestling with an issue as momentous as this. Yet the genre is still waiting for its great works. Too often there is a sense of preaching, perhaps angrily, to the choir, unspooling dramas whose reliably infuriating outlines we already know from the news.

The graphic representation of carnage — in plays like Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's "Gloria" and Simon Stephens's "Punk Rock," both of which are less about a particular instance of violence than the events surrounding it — can be a way of startling us into awareness, making witnesses out of observers. Yet such special effects often threaten to overwhelm a play, becoming its gory centerpiece, the thing that everyone talks about (or, in the case of "Gloria," is asked not to, so as not to ruin the surprise).

There is a macabre fascination to seeing blood spilled onstage. But does it take us any further in our understanding than an

article in the newspaper, or the bystanders' videos that can show us, online at any moment of any day, some person we've never met being shot to death? Where theater excels is in activating our imaginations and our empathy — coaxing us into picturing vivid scenarios inside our own heads. We can't avert our gaze from those.

## The Potential to Persuade

Sensationalism, self-righteousness, sentimentality — there are plenty of traps lying in wait for playwrights examining gun violence.

Jason Odell Williams's "Church & State" leads awkwardly with comedy, then begins to preach as its politician protagonist decides that action, not prayer, is the sensible response in the wake of horror. William Electric Black's "The Faculty Room," set in a high school and running through April 30 at Theater for the New City, is indeed didactic, instructing the audience about the nexus of the Second Amendment and urban ills.

Camilo Almonacid's "The Assignment," staged by Houses on the Moon Theater Company through May 7 at A.R.T./New York Theaters, struggles to make a mother's long-ago loss of her son to gun violence as sympathetic as the bumbling efforts of a sweet ex-con (memorably played by Erick Betancourt) to forge a new life nearly 20 years after he pulled the trigger on someone.

Among the most harrowing stage moments involving a firearm that I've seen lately, in fact, wasn't in a gun play. It was in Stephan Wolfert's autobiographical military monologue "Cry Havoc!" for the theater company Bedlam, when he re-enacted a suicidal impulse, miming the sawed-off shotgun he jammed up against his jaw. Clearly he didn't go through with it, but I couldn't get the worry out of my head: Does he still own guns? After the show, because I know him as a reporter, I did the intrusive thing and asked. My whole body relaxed when he said no.

Last Sunday night, I saw another Houses on the Moon production called "Gun Country," which continues through May 3 at A.R.T./New York Theaters. Directed by Jenna Worsham, it is a program not of plays but of stories told by people whose lives have been touched by guns, sometimes in positive ways. One of the most potent tales is Ms. Worsham's own, which begins with a warm recollection of her teenage Southern self getting the 12-gauge Beretta semiautomatic she'd longed for.

Ms. Worsham is a Manhattanite now, and her views on gun control have evolved. But she understands people who regard regulation as "a dirty word," as she puts it. She looks at the people she's known all her life who hold views that she abhors, and she loves them anyway — an extraordinary ability in this riven culture of ours.

A version of this article appears in print on April 30, 2017, on Page AR1 of the New York edition with the headline: The Pen and the Trigger Finger.