



# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution



**Date: October 8, 2021**

**Review: Horizon Theatre tries to become more inclusive onstage and off By Rosalind Bentley, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution**

It is often true that if you don't set an intention for something you want to happen, it won't. It's also true that if you don't put dedicated action behind the intention, it certainly won't come to pass.

Take, for instance, Horizon Theatre Company's desire to expand its Black audience as well as produce more plays by Black playwrights. For nearly 20 years, the theater has tried to build both constituencies, first by showcasing one play each summer designed to appeal to Black audiences, particularly Black women. In a city such as Atlanta, with a significant and engaged Black cultural class, the move made sense even if it did give the appearance of earmarking one show a season as The Black Show. While Black people attended other productions throughout a season, and non-Black audiences

attended the summer show, the Black audience was underserved. Then, three or four years ago, the theater decided to add another play to its annual season schedules, again, aimed at Black or non-white audiences.

Despite the number of Black playwrights out there working, the Horizon found it often got out-bid by other local theaters for the rights to produce popular plays by Black artists. It also didn't have as many relationships as it wanted to with young, up-and-coming playwrights of color who would trust the theater with their work as they were trying to establish themselves as writers to watch.

"We are struggling every year to find things that we want to produce, that the audience wants to see," said Lisa Adler, co-founder and co-artistic producing director of the Horizon. "So we said, let's see if we can put a pipeline in place to make that happen."

The result is a new initiative called the "New Georgia Woman Project: Black Women Speak." Organized and led by Marguerite Hannah, Horizon's Associate Artistic producer, the project is designed to be an incubator for both established and newer playwrights. In an effort to make sure the resulting work resonates with its target audience, this summer the theater invited 170 Black women from across metro Atlanta — some Horizon patrons, some not — to participate in virtual "coffee chats."

In 21 chats held since July, the topics have ranged from parenting to traveling to health and religion, all through the experience of going through this life as a Black woman. The program's inaugural nine playwrights joined the chats, mostly to listen. It's from these candid conversations that the Horizon is hopeful their company will become more diverse, and writers of color will get a better shot at having their work produced.

"We're not a monolith and we're tired of the larger population thinking of us as a monolith," said Hannah. "It's all valid". Hannah said the theater did a national search for the playwrights but required them to either have a strong connection to the South or live in the South.

There are four established playwrights: Candrice Jones, AriDy Knox, A'ndrea J. Wilson, and Shay Youngblood. The emerging playwrights are: Tramaine Brathwaite, Amina McIntyre, Chiwuzo Ife Okwumabua, Kelundra Smith and Dana L. Stringer.

That the program is launching now is significant. Adler said the Horizon, along with other theaters across the country, have faced an onslaught of criticism since the killing of George Floyd by police forced a racial reckoning in many corners of American life. After the scathing manifesto, "We See You White American Theatre," was conceived and released by some of theater's most celebrated artists, directors and producers of color (and a few white allies) last summer, theaters around the country have been grappling with its mandate: do better with inclusion and diversity both onstage and off.

"We know that in the theater world, it is top of mind of every single conversation that I have," Adler said. "There is no conversation in which that is not at least part of the

subject matter of whatever meeting I'm in, and we've been in a lot of meetings nationally and locally."

The national conversations struck a nerve: At least seven new plays opening on Broadway this fall are by Black writers. According to a New York Times report, in the three years prior to the pandemic, there had only been three, total.

Adler said her theater — as well as others locally — has had its share of criticism as well. "We have not been immune," Adler said. "It's all valid and we try to do better."

The Horizon produced writer Shay Youngblood's early work in the late 1980s, in what was the start of the artist's long, prolific career. Youngblood has sat in on several of the coffee chats. So far about 70 of the invited women have joined at least one gathering. Youngblood said that while the conversations have been valuable to her as a Black woman, as a playwright she often works in isolation creating trajectories for imaginary Black lives that she's hopeful resonate with real women. The chats have created a community of other playwrights like her, she said, but they've also given her the chance to hear the unvarnished thoughts of Black women struggling with life but also rejoicing in it.

"What has grown out of the coffee chats has been unbelievable," Hannah said. "It has become like bridge clubs used to be in my mother's generation. At the end of it you hear women say, 'Wow. This was so good I don't need to go to therapy this week. We have common bonds. We're affirming each other, but honoring our diversity.'"

In a recent conversation about travel, there were stories of trips to far flung places pre-pandemic, but one woman confessed that travel wasn't a priority for her because of her family's finances. But the woman has come up with an alternative.

"She and some other friends get together and go out and just for a night they're not mommies," Youngblood said. "It gives them a chance to be themselves."

Another upcoming chat will be about the men in their lives. But even with such unfettered access to private thoughts, Youngblood said neither she nor any of the other writers are scripting plays directly based on what they hear or on any one person. Instead, the conversations are serving as catalysts for larger stories.

"I'm writing to and for Black women, but I'm not writing only for Black women," Youngblood said. "I want other people to come to the theater and hear these stories and perhaps be educated."

The established writers turn early drafts of their work in to Hannah in November and by late January or early February there will be public readings of some of the plays. The emerging writers will turn in drafts in spring. Then, some time in 2023 or perhaps even late 2022, some of those works will make it to the Horizon stage.



**Date: October 28, 2021**

**Review: Black Women Speak initiative aims to give voice to real stories seldom told in theater By Alexis Hauk**

Horizon Theatre Company kicks off an innovative initiative, the New Georgia Woman Project: Black Women Speak, this weekend. This “Fall First Look” at the project offers audiences, both in person and over Zoom, the opportunity to not only watch stories forged from real conversations but also the chance to meet and discuss the work with the artists driving it.

Black Women Speak is the brainchild of Horizon Associate Artistic Producer Marguerite Hannah, who said the idea grew out of the dramatic collision of different ideas accelerated by the events of 2020.

Horizon Theatre Associate Artistic Producer Marguerite Hannah had the seed of an idea that evolved into the New Georgia Woman Project: Black Women Speak.

Hannah, who serves on the boards for Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Alliance Theatre, Arena Stage and others, said she kept having conversations early in the pandemic with fellow arts professionals about whether the arts are essential. This fed into her gnawing concern about how the arts could possibly be so if art-makers no longer knew their own audiences and communities well, she said.

And then there was the fact that not enough stories about Black women were being told on stage — something that Hannah had experienced firsthand for 35 years as an actor, producer and director.

“For me, it was important not only to expand the theatrical canon of plays about and by Black women but to hear from everyday Black women,” she said. “Right now, we are all in the shadow of our sisters that are at the forefront of changing the world or holding back the walls of the dams. But it was also, ‘What are women like me thinking? The ones that aren’t being written up and profiled on MSNBC. What are we thinking, what are we feeling?’

To develop the Black Women Speak plays, Horizon commissioned nine playwrights — four relatively established writers and five emerging talents — and gathered more than 150 Black women from metro Atlanta and across the South to join a series of small group conversations. Hannah said that this turned into 25-plus two-hour “Coffee Chats” over Zoom since the kickoff in June. The conversations would begin with prompts, with topics ranging from travel, voting, religion, or even more specific questions such as one about the fictional African country from Marvel Comics: “If Wakanda were a real place, what part of it would you want?”

Hannah carefully organized each session to keep them small and intimate, around six to 12 participants on average. The playwrights often would join, but also could watch the recordings afterwards. The space they fostered together throughout the process has been described as safe, open and inclusive. And at times, in ways that were sometimes surprising to Hannah, it sparked catharsis.

“At the end of the chat one night, this woman said, ‘This has been so good I don’t think I need to go to therapy,’” she recalled. “The conversations were able to celebrate who you are but also talk about traveling, taking a nap, having permission to say no.”

The four established playwrights who will have scenes showcased at the “First Look” are Candrice Jones (*The Golden Hours*), AriDy Nox (*Homegirls*), A’ndrea J. Wilson (*Lead Me Home*) and Shay Youngblood (*Boss Black Ladies* and *Tender-hearted Girls*).

“I was jazzed about the idea of creating a show in deep concert with Black women,” said New York playwright AriDy Nox. A New York City resident who grew up in Stone Mountain and earned her bachelor’s degree at Spelman College, Nox said that her ties to the South and specifically Atlanta continue to inform her work as a writer. That’s a factor in why she felt drawn to this project.

“The real insight that comes from listening to Black women within our particular social context has always been a huge underlying concept of my plays,” she said. “I was jazzed about the idea of creating a show in deep concert with Black women about what does it mean to return to our roots and for playwrights to be amplifiers and megaphones for the community.”

From these Coffee Chats, the nine playwrights are creating new scripts, featuring dynamic Black women characters, in a wide variety of genres and formats. The chats will continue into 2022 and, as part of the project,

Horizon will nurture the plays toward full-fledged production over the next five years.

Gravitating toward magical realism and science fiction, Nox has penned works including a “historical reimagining” of the life of Sally Hemmings, *Black Girl in Paris* (2020), and the “afrofuturist ecopocalypse musical” *Metropolis* (2019). “Weird is a good descriptor of most of the things I write,” said the Tisch School of the Performing Arts at NYU graduate.

Shay Youngblood, whose playwrighting credits include *Shaking the Mess Out of Misery*, *Talking Bones* and *Amazing Grace*, calls her *Boss Ladies* and *Tender-hearted Girls* a “love letter to all Black women.

“I want people to come to this play and walk away feeling new ways of looking at this present moment and the future,” Youngblood said. “I want them to laugh and laugh so hard, they cry. I want them to experience some of the emotions that these women inspired in me.”

The casts for each show include some newer performers along with Atlanta favorites, including Cynthia D. Barker and Enoch King. The writers will workshop their plays in November and December before moving into full readings in January and February.

Along with that initial core of four writers, Horizon also has formed an Emerging Playwrights Collective that includes five Atlanta-based playwrights, Tramaine Brathwaite, Amina McIntyre, Chiwuzo Ife Okwumabua, Kelundra Smith and Dana Stringer. These writers will have their plays read in summer 2022.

Both cohorts will have full readings next year for theaters that are members of the National New Play Network, with the aim of landing a full-scale production for each of the nine new plays.





# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution



**Date: June 28, 2021**

**Reviews 2020-21 Review: Horizon Theatre's Young Playwrights Festival takes off**

**By Rosalind Bentley, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution**

Held virtually this year, the festival showcases original work by up-and-coming playwrights.

It's much harder to write short than long, so the old saw goes, true for fiction, non-fiction, and, ahem, newspaper stories.

It is also true for scriptwriting, which Yazmeen Mayes learned recently when she and 21 other young playwrights tried to boil down the most complex of life's situations into five-minute plays. Five minutes, no more. That was the challenge laid down by the Horizon Theatre's New South Young Playwrights Festival, earlier this month in an intensive week-long training workshop for some of the country's most promising college-aged playwrights and storytellers. The workshop was to culminate in

professional actors performing the short plays, with each show streamed online by Horizon.

Mayes already knew what she wanted to write: a story set in a laundromat where two strangers begin a conversation. Simple enough, right? Until she actually sat down to write. Round after round, she went, each draft either too long or too complicated. Then she thought about some of her favorite movies, the “Toy Story” series and “Inside Out.” She needed characters, yes, but they really didn’t need to be people.

“So, I decided to use a coin and a washing machine,” Mayes, 21, said. “The coin is named Nicky, and the washing machine is named Maytag.” Nicky is mad that it’s stuck on the laundromat floor and not out seeing the world like other coins. Maytag continues to pine away for a particular shirt that it loved, “the one that got away,” said Mayes, a Kennesaw State music major. Her show is called “Cycles.”

Her final script hit the five minute mark but it also was emblematic of the kind of creativity the festival has tried to cultivate in students for the past 23 years that it has been held. While the festival is usually in person and students and mentors fly in from around the country, this summer it was held virtually, over Zoom, a space many theaters turned to for live and streamed performances while pandemic restrictions were at their height. Despite the virtual nature of the workshops, neither the mission nor the intensity changed, said Lisa Adler, Horizon’s co-artistic producing director.

“We say we’re going to treat you like a professional playwright and you’re going to have to write for the audience,” Adler said.

But which audience? Theater audiences as well as the professional theater establishment has historically skewed overwhelmingly white in the United States. The business has been viewed as so exclusionary to people of color and women, that last year some of the nation’s top playwrights, directors, producers and actors of color drafted the manifesto “We See You White American Theatre.” It was a callout and prescription for change to make the industry from Broadway to local theater more equitable. In that way, Horizon’s class of young playwrights represented a diverse group of young creatives — race, gender, identity, ethnicity, experience — who say they plan to go on to write the kind of work they don’t see enough of onstage.

Chayton Pabich Danyla, 21, graduated Yale University with a theatre and performance degree in May. Even with its renowned school of drama, the university didn’t produce enough shows or even scripts Danyla could identify with, he said. Very few centered LGBTQ or Latino characters in ways that weren’t stereotypical, he said.

“There are few plays that are bilingual and all of the plays I write are bilingual,” said Danyla of Hiram.

For the festival he wrote “Sycamore Roots,” a show that has gay characters, but explores what it’s like to realize you’ve moved on from the people and the mindsets of



the place where you grew up. But boiling that down to five minutes and four characters was not easy.

“I tend to write long and this was a lot of cutting and rearranging” Danyla said. “The script itself was three pages and three pages of dialogue. It was a challenge, but it was an exciting challenge.”

Adler said that while many of the students may go on to write for stage, it’s also likely many will migrate to writing for television/streaming screens. For the last several years, the festival has used mentors who have been writers or show runners on television shows such as “Boardwalk Empire,” “The Walking Dead” and “Halston.” The reality is television can provide a more sustaining lifestyle for writers, she said, but it’s the skill of a playwright that is often in demand in Hollywood and, increasingly, Y’allywood, as well as gaming.

“They have a craft, they can create dialogue and metaphor,” Adler said. “If a showrunner is a playwright, they’ll pull in more playwrights.”

Kalani Washington, 18, is still figuring out which direction she’ll take. The Oconee High School graduate was among the youngest festival participants and her inspiration came from television rather than stage. Her play, “Therapy with Books,” is based on the concept of bibliotherapy, which uses poetry or book narratives as a method of healing. But it has a bit of a thriller twist, an homage to her favorite series, Rod Serling’s “The Twilight Zone.” She’d love to have her own thriller series one day, she said, and playwriting might lead her there.

“In playwriting, you come up with your own story and present that to the world,” Washington said. “You’re trying to answer questions and posing questions that society needs to face.”



# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution



**Date:** February 11, 2020

**Review:** Horizon's musical 'Once' totally rocks, here's why

**By Bert Osborne, Atlanta Journal-Constitution**

As terrific and utterly unique as the Alliance's large-scale, high-tech new musical "Maybe Happy Ending" is, there's also something to be said for the more intimate, no less resounding style and charm of Horizon Theatre's wonderful "Once" — the 2012 Broadway hit, featuring a script by Irish playwright Enda Walsh and songs by Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová, who co-starred in director John Carney's acclaimed 2007 indie movie musical on which the stage version is based.

The deceptively simple and straightforward story involves a struggling Dublin street singer, whose chance encounter with a Czech woman leads to a whirlwind relationship, if not exactly a conventional romance. Identified only as Guy and Girl, they become

soul mates of sorts as songwriting collaborators, but they aren't necessarily destined to live happily ever after, at least not with one another: Guy's still pining for his ex-girlfriend (who left him for New York), and Girl's waiting to reunite with her husband (who's back home in the Czech Republic).

The highly energetic show is directed by frequent Horizon artistic associate Heidi Cline McKerley ("Avenue Q").

For her purposes here, the theater's seating has been neatly reconfigured in-the-round, which enables the nine-member ensemble to spread out a bit, periodically roaming the aisles or perching atop platforms in different corners of the performance space, cleverly immersing the audience in several dazzling musical numbers.

Under the music direction of Ed Thrower (Serenbe's "Hair"), "Once" doesn't include the usual sequestered band or orchestra. Each actor in the cast plays an instrument, in addition to a character. As Guy, local musical-theater luminary Chase Peacock (Serenbe's "Miss Saigon," Georgia Ensemble's "Ghost") masters a mean guitar (as he did for Atlanta Lyric's "The Wedding Singer"). As Girl, relative newcomer Maggie Salley (Theatre Buford's "Footloose") does the same on piano.

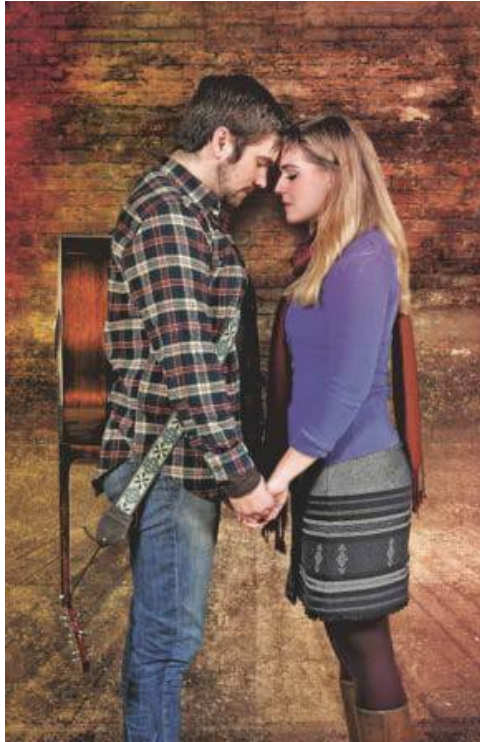
Among the most familiar tunes carried over from the film soundtrack: the Oscar-winning "Falling Slowly," beautifully delivered by Peacock and Salley; his impassioned solo "Say It to Me Now"; their other duets "When Your Mind's Made Up" and "If You Want Me" (accompanied by the rest of the ensemble); and a lovely a cappella company rendition of "Gold." Most sorely missed among the songs dropped from the movie is Guy's moving ballad "Lies."

Some of the plot points and character details are occasionally blurry. Whether as written, directed or portrayed, for example, at times Salley comes across a tad too gregariously for a woman who, at other times, describes herself as being so "serious" and "cold." For his part, however, Peacock acquits himself quite persuasively, giving one of his best performances to date as a good-hearted romantic frustrated by love and life.

Rounding out the troupe of multitalented actor-musicians-in various bit parts, and on everything from banjos and fiddles to upright bass and even accordion-are Skyler Brown, Daniel Burns, Chris Damiano, Jessica De Maria, Paul Glaze, Hayden Rowe and Sophia Saponov. There's nary a false note among them, and Glaze's comic turn as a bank manager is especially memorable (singing "Abandoned in Bandon", or one of a few new songs to the show.)

Still, there's no mistaking the bittersweet chemistry the two co-stars share. Or the elevating power generated by the music they make together, with such an invaluable assist from their glorified back-up band at large. Or the plain fact that, in its many musical moments, Horizon's "Once" is undeniably and simply sensational

# Atlanta **INTOWN**



**Date: February 14, 2020**

## **Theatre Review: 'Once' at Horizon Theatre by Manning Harris, Atlanta InTown**

Horizon Theatre is presenting the first Atlanta-produced version of the award-winning musical "Once," directed by Heidi Cline McKerley, running through March 8.

The show is based on the 2007 film written and directed by John Carney. Then it premiered at New York Theatre Workshop (where "Rent," among others, began); it opened on Broadway in 2012, won eight Tonys, including Best Musical, and ran until January 2015. The book is by Enda Walsh, music and lyrics by Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglova.

Co-Artistic Director Lisa Adler saw the show on Broadway and has been waiting for the chance to bring it to Atlanta and Horizon. Director McKerley says, "At some point in our lives we've all felt stopped," and the two main characters "each start in a place where they feel stuck, and they each find a way to restart their lives." Sounds good to me; who can't identify with this situation?



I'd like to say up front that scenic and projection designers Isabel and Moriah Curley-Clay have outdone themselves by transforming the Horizon into an in-the-round theatre and it works brilliantly. One of the theatre's biggest assets is its intimacy (seating under 200), and now it's even better. I love it.

The carefully chosen supporting cast (Sophia Saponov, Hayden Rowe, Skyler Brown, Paul Glaze, Daniel Burns, Jessica De Maria, Chris Damiano, and Violet Montague) also play instruments, and they are quite marvelous—as actors, singers, and instrumentalists. They are perched in front of you and all over the room: You begin to feel enveloped by music, love, longing, humor—life. It's hard to describe; you'll have to experience it. Kudos to Music Director Ed Thrower—he knows his stuff.

Chase Peacock contributes a performance that will win your heart; his singing, acting, and presence are what make matinee idols. Maggie Salley is a revelation; hitherto unknown to me, she makes *Girl* fascinating and compelling. She, too, has presence; you can't take your eyes off her.

Director McKerley has wrapped this gift carefully and with zest and compassion. The same is true of "Once"; it creates community and seduces you before you know it; don't miss.



## ONCE – DUBLINSONG

**By Brad Rudy for Theatre Buzz Atlanta**

A busker on a Dublin street corner rips out a piece of his soul with song. Passers-by ignore him. It's time to abandon his dream of music and embrace his dull day-to-day as a Hoover repairman.

An immigrant from the Czech Republic, a single mother abandoned by her husband, hears a busker and is touched by his musical heart.

From such small beginnings rise a friendship, a collaboration, a force of nature whose arc (whose ART) cannot be denied.

In 2007, a plucky Indie movie musical called *Once* told the story of the meeting and collaboration between a Dubliner (played by Glen Hansard) and a Czech immigrant (played by Markéta Irglová). Since Hansard and Irglová also wrote the songs (and formed a group together), hints of autobiography are encouraged; indeed, the screenplay was tweaked to suggest their personal friendship. The movie was a major hit and even garnered an Academy Award for the song “Falling Slowly.”

In 2011, the screenplay was adapted by Dublin playwright Enda Walsh for the musical stage, and *Once: A Musical*, became the hit of the 2012 Tony Awards.

“Girl” (they are not named in the movie or here) recognizes that “Guy’s” songs are rooted in love and loss, a loss and love he does not acknowledge. She recognizes his connection to his lost love and resists any deeper connection, especially since she has dreams of her own husband joining her (and their daughter) in Dublin.

Dublin, which, like Joyce’s Ireland, eats its own artistic farrow – music is canned and wafer-thin (Enya aside), literature and poetry have died with Joyce and Yeats and Shaw and Wilde (and even Joyce and Wilde lived mostly in exile). Buskers, even those with soul-stirring Broadway-belt voices are lepers, reduced to being “Broken Hearted Hoover Fixer Sucker Guys.” Still, Girl and Guy build a band of misfits and record a demo that will get him to New York and his wayward love.

That’s not to deny the attraction building – music does stimulate the heart after all; when he asks if she still loves her husband, she can only replay “Miluji tebe” (Czech for “I love you”).

Horizon Theatre is the first Atlanta venue to stage a professional production, and it is gloriously rapturous, capturing an energy, a love for music, that is positively enthralling. This is my favorite production of the year to date; there are many reasons for that.

Firstly, director Heidi Cline McKerley has chosen to stage it “in the round”, giving the whole thing an intimacy, and immediacy that draw you in from beginning to end.

Secondly, the script encourages, nay DEMANDS, the “back-up” musicians to be a part of the cast playing all the supporting roles, constantly on stage, a “chorus of Dubliners, naive and immigrant.” They start out in the preshow with traditional Irish pub songs showering the audience with joie de vivre (or should I say “aoibhneas maireachtála”?) that is positively infectious. Ms. McKerley blocks (and choreographs) them in complex patterns that dazzle without sacrificing sight-lines or energy. All are on stage for practically the entire show, playing from all corners of the theatre.

Thirdly, this is an extraordinarily talented cast that absolutely bowled me over. Chase Peacock added another Suzi-worthy performance as Guy, opening the show with “Leave,” a painfully sincere ballad that is like a raw nerve newly exposed. Maggie Salley, so memorable in last year’s *Song for a New World*, is even more memorable here, giving girl a depth, an honesty, a heart that appeals to everyone she encounters, especially us.



The ensemble is as impressive as ensembles can possibly be. Daniel Burns plays Billy (and guitar), a music store owner who befriends girl. Paul Glaze plays a bank manager (and a cello – even while walking) who provides the “stake” for their recording session. Skyler Brown, Chris Damiano, Jessica De Maria, Hayden Rowe, and Sophia Saprionov play several characters, most notably Girl’s Czech roommates and family (and percussion, mandolin, ukulele, accordion, violin, and more guitars). Young Violet Montague has a cameo as Girl’s daughter and adds some delightful “color” to the immigrant scenes.

And ALL the cast ably negotiate accents, Irish and Czech alike, thanks in no small part to Dialect Coach Carolyn Cook. Of course, not being of Irish or Czech myself, I’m not convinced I’m in a position to judge, but they convinced me, and their dialogue was as musical as their songs.

Set Designers Isabel and Mariah Curley-Clay have rebuilt the entire space, convincing us we’re in a Dublin pub (the sign “Howth Castle 6km” brought back college nightmares of Finnegans Wake), an extraordinary beautiful Celtic Cross design on the floor ever-reminding us where we are. It doesn’t hurt that Irish Beer and Irish Whiskey are both available at the concession stand. Once is a rapturous experience, joyful, dazzling, energetic, romantic, and above all, soaked with a love and a joy for music and for the complexities that rise from the human heart. And it is, without a doubt, a love song to Dublin and Ireland.

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## AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO COOKING ÁLA LALA



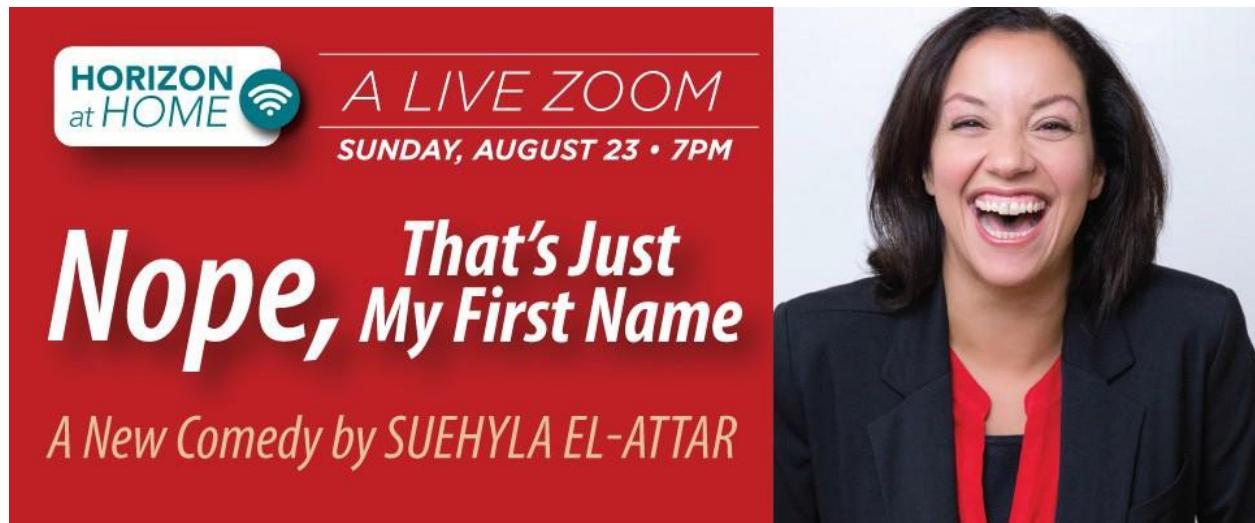
***"What a treat to stumble across your video!" – Audience Member***

***"Somebody get this lady on HGTV STAT!" – Audience Member***

***"LaLa is a born cooking instructor. Thank you Horizon and LaLa." – Audience Member***

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**AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO *NOPE. THAT'S JUST MY FIRST NAME* by Suehyla El-Attar writer of *THIRD COUNTRY***



***"This performance was wonderful! I could have listened to many more of her stories. When she performs again, I will tell my friends so they can tune in as well."* -- Audience Member**

***"I really loved Third Country and thought I would enjoy hearing Suehyla - --Little did I know how fabulous she would be!!! I am looking forward to part three and will be sharing information about it with friends and encouraging them to watch with me."* -- Audience Member**

***"The show was creative, fun, and interactive! I loved it! -Audience Member***

AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO *THE GHOSTS OF LITTLE FIVE POINTS: A VIRTUAL HALLOWEEN EXPERIENCE* by Talented Team of Atlanta Writers



*Photo: Gina Rickicki, Ghosts of Little Five Points Hostess with the Mostest!*

**"Spooky, hilarious, and interactive. So much fun! " –**

**Audience Member**



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**AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO A SHOT # A LOVE STORY  
INSPIRED BY BLACK LIVES MATTER by Gloria Bond Clunie  
writer of SWEET WATER TASTE**

**A Virtual Production**

**A SHOT**  
# A LOVE STORY INSPIRED  
BY BLACK LIVES MATTER  
BY GLORIA BOND CLUNIE

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***"I loved this performance. It was so encouraging to hear all of the many diverse voices sharing their unique views and encouraging us to get out and vote. Also, I loved Gloria's play SWEET WATER TASTE and was delighted by this production as well. Keep up the great work Horizon! "Audience Member***

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# Atlanta JEWISH TIMES

## Love and Science Collide in Horizon Theatre Production

‘Completeness’ is a romantic comedy with a distinct difference.

By Bob Bahar October 2, 2020



“Completeness” asks some important questions about the limitations of science in human relationships.

Love and romance and the utter unpredictability of human relationships gets a provocative examination in “Completeness”, a play by the playwright Itamar Moses that is getting a staged reading at the Horizon Theatre in Atlanta.

The drama examines how two young scientists, Elliot and Molly, attempt to figure out their budding love in terms of the science each is working on. The question the play



seeks to answer is whether Elliot's work in computer technology and Molly's research as a molecular biologist has anything to say about what turns them on to each other. How much, after all, can their romantic ups and downs be explained by the science they create?

Moses, the play's author, who grew up Jewish in Berkley, Calif., and now lives in Brooklyn, scored a big win at the 2018 Tony Awards for his dramatization for the Broadway musical, "The Band's Visit," which won a total of 10 Tony's. It was based on the 2007 Israeli film hit of the same name.

According to Horizon Theatre, Moses connects the idea for "Completeness" back to a college engineering course, where he learned about the traveling salesman problem.

"I remember liking how simple the problem was and that it had this evocative, conscience-sounding name," Moses said. "The traveling salesman problem...is essentially a problem of choice-making when there are too many possibilities, and it suddenly occurred to me that it was a good metaphor for choosing a life partner. I immediately saw the seeds of a romantic comedy about someone working on the problem who also sees it manifest in his personal life, and my protagonist, Elliot, was born."

Audiences for the Oct. 2-3 performances will have a chance to discuss their own ideas about how much science can say about life's complex questions. Horizon Theatre has partnered with Science ATL to facilitate conversations after each performance. The public events coordinator for the science organization, Kellie final, has invited local researches to participate.

"I've invited scientists with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences within the fields of computer science and molecular biology. I think the unique combinations of expertise and experiences will make for a lively discussion."

The play's title is derived from the scientific theory of completeness that examines whether science is complete and unitary. While there have been any theories about the question, science has been unable to put forward and explanation of life as a seamless whole.

Daniel Matt, the noted scholar of mystical Judaism and the translator of the any books of the Zohar of Kabbalah, discussed the issue when he spoke at Temple Sinai in Sandy Springs in 2018.

In his book "God & The Big Bang," he writes about the limitations of science in explaining the more profound questions of life.

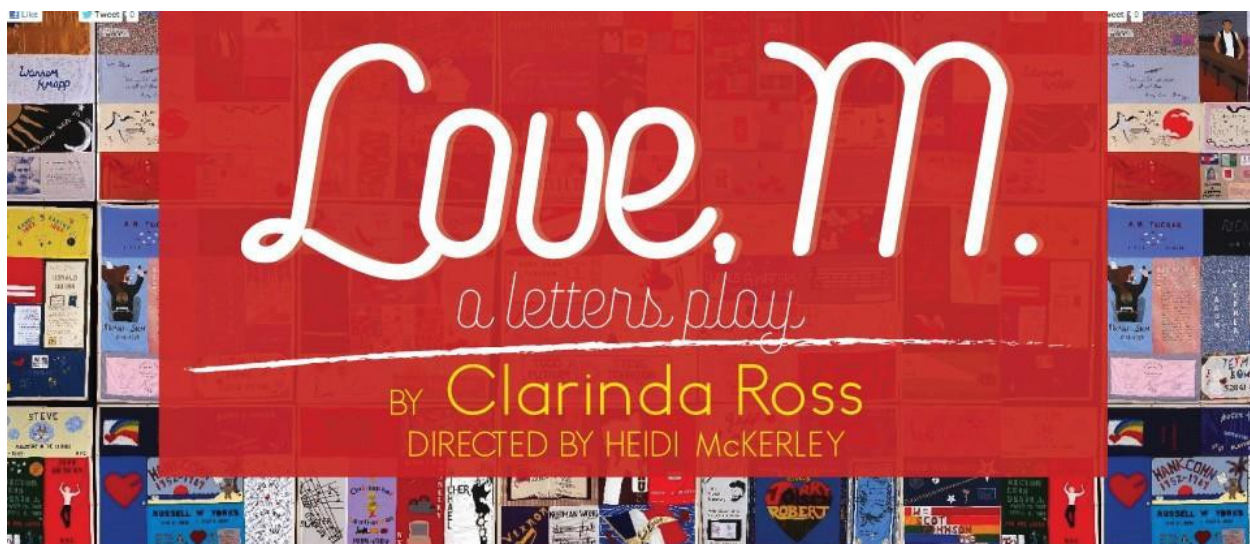
"We are part of something greater: a vast web of existence constantly expanding and evolving. When we gaze at the nighttime sky, we can ponder that we are made of elements forged within stars, out of particles born in the big bang...But neither god nor the Big Bang are that far away."

One of Britain's leading scientists, Colin Humphrey's, a professor of material science at Cambridge University, is described in The Guardian newspaper in 2003 as a believer in the power of science to explain the physical world, but he is also a believer in religion.

"I thin you can explain the universe without invoking God at all. And you can explain humans without invoking God at all, I think. But where I differ from the people who say, OK, the universe started with a big bang-if it did, it's not too sure, but let's say it did-and everything else was a chance event, then I would say that Good is the God of chance and He had His plan and purpose, which is working out very subtly, but through these chance events."

The Horizon's production of "Completeness" owes much to present-day technology. Each of the actors in the staged reading will be performing from their own home and connected through virtual computer programs. It is part of the Horizon at Home series, which has sought to keep alive interest in theatrical works while the theaters themselves are dark because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Staying at hoe is changing the way we see the arts world, especially theater," according to the Horizon's video and sound designer Amy Levin. "We want to make sure everyone still has access to plays, so it's become a matter of translating something written specifically for one medium and adapting it to another."



Based on interviews with Mothers, Sons, and AIDS Activists

PREMIERING ON WORLD AIDS DAY, **DEC 1, 2020**

-- Brad Rudy (BK @bk\_rudy #LoveM #HorizonheatreAHome) 12/26/2020 LOVE, M. (A LETTERS PLAY) Horizon Theatre at Home

**“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

Two Mothers. Two Sons. AIDS. Ten Years of American History.

On World AIDS Day 2020, December 1, Horizon Theatre at Home premiered a remarkable new play by actor/writer Clarinda Ross, *Love, M.* To my regret, I’ve been delaying watching the On-Demand recording of the play until now, a week before it disappears from YouTube. But just two days ago, I wrote a review of the Alliance’s *A Very Terry Christmas*, which was more of a love letter to Terry Burrell than a review. Since Ms. Burrell plays one of the mothers in *Love, M.*, I was finally motivated to watch.

We start in the mid-1980's. Deborah (played by playwright Clarinda Ross) is a doting mother whose son, Chris, (Chris Hecke) is in an MFA acting program in San Francisco. After a Thanksgiving visit to see his show, she and her husband learn the truth – Chris is gay and has fully embraced San Francisco “gay culture”. Deborah does not approve, and things escalate when Chris quits school to work for the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt foundation. At the same time, Myrtle (Ms. Burrell) is a devout Southern Baptist, and her letters to her son Timothy (Lamman Rucker from TV's *Greenleaf*), an Atlanta lawyer, are filled with echoes of fire and brimstone and Bible verses condemning his “choice” to be gay. It matters not that Timothy and his partner are in a devoted monogamous relationship, and that his job takes him to the Middle East as a peacemaker among divergent faiths and cultures. Yes, she is proud of the attention the hometown paper gives Timothy and dutifully saves all the clippings, but she coldly condemns him and his partner.

Both mothers are devoted to their sons, but neither can make that love unconditional, neither can fully accept their sons' homosexuality. Throughout the next ten years, the letters keep coming, but they are too often ignored. One mother is widowed, the other divorced. One of the sons gets AIDS, the other works with AIDS victims. Both mothers eventually take that final step to acceptance, but, in both cases, it's too little too late. The stories even begin to mingle, as Deborah eventually becomes a hospice volunteer (and friend to Timothy).

There are so many moments of genuine love coming through the letters, even in the midst of recrimination and judgmentalism. Chris and his mother always sign off with “XXX Three Kisses” even when they are farthest apart. There are also many moments that go right to your emotional core – Chris dying alone in a city his mother refuses to visit, Myrtle reprimanding her preacher for his “gospel of hate,” Deborah reading her final letter to be included in Chris's quilt panel (which, of course, ends with “XXX, Love, M.”). These are balanced with moments of sheer joy – Chris giddy with excitement at his acting career, Myrtle bonding with Timothy's partner over cooking, Deborah succeeding in finding donors for an AIDS care facility.

Written and performed as a series of letters (and phone calls) between Mothers and Sons, it is especially effective in a “socially isolated” video format and I found it to be a powerful and effective piece from start to finish.

These four characters are written and performed with boundless empathy and respect, and their stories and letters reveal a full range of aspects: pettiness, self-righteousness, quick anger, regret, atonement. In essence, they all show a bottomless depth of humanity. These are four characters I was thrilled to meet, whose stories moved me in ways I was not expecting.

The performances are spot on, as is the direction by Heidi Cline McKerley, and the design and editing by Amy L. Levin. We see not only the “sender” reading each letter, but the recipient reacting to the words as they are spoken. It's a concept that makes this so much more interesting to watch than a simple “talking heads” Zoom Play, a concept that lets the actors show the depths of their ability to express subtext, to

have their faces show the honest response that their words tend to hide.

As the post-show discussion made clear, there is still a lot of stigma attached to AIDS. One statistic cited was that perhaps half of all Black victims of AIDS are undiagnosed, as the stigma discourages so many from being tested. The fact that an HIV diagnosis is no longer a death sentence does nothing to change hearts and minds cast in stone. And though we have come a long way since the 1980's in acceptance of alternative lifestyles, many parents still cannot, will not accept their sons and their daughters "as they are." Hopefully, this play will start conversations that may, in time, lead to that acceptance.

Seeing this play at the end of the year is a nice 2020 "bookend" to the January production at Out of Box Theatre of Gina Femia's *We Are a Masterpiece*, another play set at the dawn of the AIDS pandemic. Both plays are powerful indictments of misinformation and prejudice, of religious justification for hate. Both are fervent pleas to find the humanity in the "other."

And, as a fan of epistolary literature, I really appreciate Ms. Ross's apparent joy in letter writing. *Love M* is not only a moving meditation on AIDS and mothers and sons, it is if you'll forgive me, a theatrical love letter to the art of letter-writing.

*"More than kisses, letters mingle souls."* -- John Donne

-- Brad Rudy (BK @bk\_rudy #LoveM #HorizonheatreAHome)

This production was co-sponsored by several organizations working with AIDS patients and offering free testing and care. For more information and to donate, please go to their websites:

### **AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF)**

<https://www.aidshealth.org/>

is AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) is a global nonprofit organization providing cutting edge medicine and advocacy to over 1.5 million people in 43 countries. They are currently the largest provider of HIV/AIDS medical care in the U.S.

### **Black Leadership AIDS Crisis Coalition (BLACC)**

<https://blacc.net/>

Black Leadership AIDS Crisis Coalition (BLACC), formerly known as the AHF Black AIDS Crisis Taskforce, is an initiative of AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) developed to create a coalition of African-American cultural influencers and health advocates who will promote sexual health and revolutionize outreach to the African-American community on the HIV/AIDS epidemic. For more information visit: [aidshealth.org/affinity](https://aidshealth.org/affinity)

## **RollingOut Health IQ**

<https://rollingout.com/>

A Black publisher for over 20 years, rolling out is the go-to urban lifestyle news source in entertainment, politics, and entrepreneurship. rolling out Health IQ is a collaborative show of professionals in the healthcare industry, educators, non-profits, and healthcare service delivery members that inform and educate the community while addressing the current healthcare disparities across the nation.

## **National AIDS Memorial Quilt**

<https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt>

ABOUT THE NATIONAL AIDS MEMORIAL HEALING, HOPE, REMEMBRANCE, AND HISTORY ABOUT THE AIDS EPIDEMIC IN AMERICA

By sharing the story of the struggle against HIV/AIDS, we remember, in perpetuity, the lives lost, we offer healing and hope to survivors, and we inspire new generations of activists in the fight against stigma, denial, and hate, for a just future.



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# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Play Marks WORLD AIDS DAY

HORIZON THEATRE PREMIERES “LOVE, M.” About 2 mothers, sons

**By Rosalind Bentley**



Actor/Playwright Clarinda Ross (lower left) interviewed the now elderly parents and close relatives of men who died from AIDS in the early days of the epidemic. In “Love, M” Lamman Rucker (top left) plays son Timothy; Broadway actor Terry Burrell (top right) plays Myrtle, mother of Timothy; and Chris Hecker (lower right) portrays Chris, Deborah’s son. Photos courtesy of Clarinda Ross

With all the HIV drug treatment commercials these days featuring happy, engaged, otherwise healthy people, it’s hard to remember a time when the disease wasn’t depicted as a manageable chronic illness. In 30-second television spots, people walk their dogs, paddle canoes or go on romantic dates with loving partners. This is the

hopeful, and for many, true face of HIV in 2020. With the help of a pill, life goes on, and there is a long, hearty future to plan for.

The dark days when couples tearfully danced in clubs to Janet Jackson's AIDS tribute, "Together Again," are part of a seemingly distant past. So, too, are the early, hopeless days when a diagnosis surely meant a premature death.

As those difficult moments pass, so too do the mothers and fathers whose sons died in the initial years of the AIDS epidemic. About 10 years ago, playwright Clarinda Ross began interviewing some of those parents. Throughout her stage and television career, she'd lost friends to the disease, but for each death there was the story of a parent who'd buried a child. "I thought, 'Who am I to write an AIDS play?'" said Ross. "Tony Kushner had already done it. Larry Kramer had already done it. But I can write from the perspective of the mothers."

On December 1, World AIDS Day, Ross's play, "Love, M." has its virtual premiere at 7pm through the Horizon Theatre Company. Directed by Heidi McKerley, the show runs on-demand through December 31. It tells the story of two mothers and two sons in the early days of the devastation, Lamman Rucker, a star of the OWN network show "Greenleaf" and Broadway veteran Terry Burrell, portray one son/mother pair, Ross and actor Chris Hecke portray the other.

Told primarily through a series of letters and voicemails (remember those?), it is a reminder of how the closet trapped not just sons but entire families in fear at the dawn of the AIDS crisis. There were often tremendous social consequences to coming out as gay, and the specter of a then untreatable disease mad that choice even more difficult. Even if a family remained quiet, they were often ensconced in a culture that portrayed being gay as wrong or deviant. "For the mothers, their neighbors, their churches, their friends were telling them their sons were bad." Ross said.

Those parents are in their 80's and older now. Ross, who began her early career at the Alliance Theatre, spoke with about 30 parents, siblings, and close relatives of men from around the country who had succumbed to the disease. She also interviewed 20 sons who lived through the era, as well as one of the early founders of the AIDS memorial quilt, Gert McMullin.

Claudia Lukes, of Redondo Beach, California, was the first mother Ross interviewed. Ross had been friends with her son and said Lukes' candor "lit a fire in me to push forward with this project," when Ross was unsure where she could do it. The encouragement would prove necessary for the obstacles ahead.

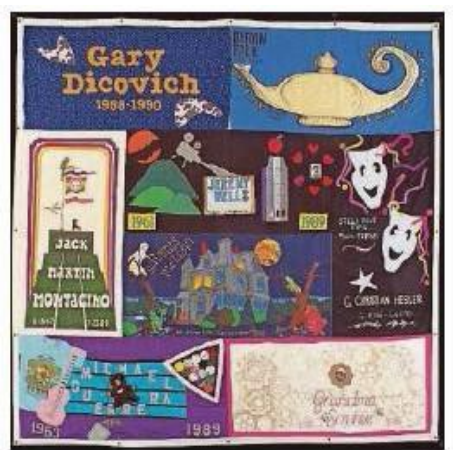


*To research her play, "Love, M" playwright Clarinda Ross interviewed dozens of parents and relatives of men who died early in the AIDS epidemic, as well as those who survived. One of those she interviewed was Claudia Lukes, whose son died from complications from AIDS.*

What struck Ross was that even though decades had passed, many parents were still reticent to speak about their sons. They often requested anonymity. More than half of the families said they still worried what fellow church members or friends might say if the true nature of their sons' illnesses were somehow revealed.

Then, there were the sons who freely spoke with Ross about being gay, and living through the worst of the crisis, until asked if their mothers were willing to be interviewed. "I'd talk to all these successful guys, and I'd say, "Can I talk to your mommy? And they'd say, "Of, no! Mommy doesn't talk about it. She knows I'm gay. She knows he's not my roommate, but we don't talk about it," Ross said. "Shame was and is such a big deal."

It's an emotion Gert McMullin encountered unceasingly in the mid 1980's as the AIDS memorial Quilt was in its infancy in San Francisco. At the time, at just under 2,000 panels, the quilt would grow to become the largest folk art project in the nation's history. It now has more than 48,000 panels representing lives lost to the disease.



*In November 1985, longtime San Francisco gay rights activist Cleve Jones came up with an idea that became the AIDS memorial Quilt. Cleve created the first panel for the quilt in memory of his friend Marvin Feldman. Jones, Mike Smith, Gert McMullin and several others organized the NAMES Project Foundation in 1987, which supported the now iconic quilt project. These are a few panels from the quilt.*

One of the characters in the play is based on McMullin and bears her name – Gert. She moved to Atlanta when the administration of the quilt under the NAMES Project, moved to the city in 2000, because of the disproportionate impact of the disease on Black people. The project recently returned to San Francisco,. The Gert character is friends with the son, Christ, portrayed by Hecke, Chris is from Atlanta but living and coming out in San Francisco. He corresponds with his mother, Deborah, who still lives in Buckhead. But the relationship quickly becomes fraught.

McMullin said the Chris character is inspired by a real-life, early member of the quilt project who was from Georgia. After the man came out to his parents, they disowned him in a letter, McMullin said. He gave me the letter, and it was really odd when he gave it to me.” McMullin said. “I put it with all the other letters I had. His family didn’t want to talk about him being gay.”

Themes of faith and shame are strong threads in the play, particularly between the characters Timothy and his mother Myrtle. They are black and from rural North Carolina, though the Timothy character has moved to Atlanta is working form the Carter Center. He is out. Myrtle is a deeply religious woman who constantly quotes Bible verses to her son and wants him to repent what she views as the “sin” of being gay.

Burrell, who portrays, Myrtle, remembers the first friend of hers who developed AIDS. He was a makeup artist and hairstylist for a cabaret sh0w, and Burrell performed with her sister, Debye, in New York City in the early 1980’s. “He had this unexplainable fever, and he’d go to the hospital, but they couldn’t figure out what was wrong.” Burrell said. “He would sign himself out of the hospital and come do our hair and makeup then sign himself back in after he did our shows.” Burrell said he battled for about five years before he passed away. The memory still feels fresh.

“The play feels so present with me because he was the person I had the most contact with.” Burrell said. “I was there in his hospital room. I would crawl into his bed, and we’d hug and talk nonsense and tell stories. “After his death, Burrell found herself attending many memorial services. “I went to memorial services, and I realized I kind of knew about their lives but not all the details, “Burrell said. “Through brothers and sisters, cousins, classmates telling these stories, they became three-dimensional. You came to know who they fully were.”

“Love, M” makes the plea not to wait until it’s too late to get to know the truth of a person’s life and to show them acceptance. “If you are a conscious human being, these things challenge you to be kind.” Burrell said

