



Activist and 'Tasha playwright Cat Brooks. Photo by Jean Melesaine

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'Out of a dream': Cat Brooks was guided by Natasha McKenna to tell slain woman's story

By LOU FANCHER FEBRUARY 23, 2023



There are many forces that will no longer prevent the powerful voice of women in the United States from sounding out and being heard in 2023. Not the historical inequities in the theatre industry that have in the past silenced playwrights in favor of men's voices. Nor the six bulked-up and hazmat-suit-clad prison guards and their fellow law enforcement agents in Fairfax, Virginia, who years ago felt it necessary to drag 37-year-

old Natasha McKenna from her cell and taser her tiny, barely-five-foot, 100-pounds-when-dripping-wet body.

And definitely, not a horrid case of food poisoning suffered by Black playwright and former Oakland mayoral candidate Cat Brooks, who valiantly soldiers through a phone interview about her newest work *'Tasha*, slated to open on Fri/24 as part of 3Girls Theatre's New Works Festival (and which **runs through** March 18 at Z Space.)

The **3GT collective** was founded in 2011 by AJ Baker to develop, promote, and present new plays by the Bay Area's women and AFAB playwrights. Geared towards increasing performance opportunities for such auteurs, the organization serves theatre artists ranging in age from 11 to over 90, and is especially focused on the work of BIPOC and LGBTQI+ playwrights.

3Girls Theatre Company (l-r): Tanya Telson, Zach Kopciak, Pamela Hollings, Cat Brooks, Tina D'Elia, and Zoe Chien. Photo by Bekah Lynn Photography

This year's New Works Festival features nine new semi or fully-staged works. Among them is Brooks' one-woman play, based on the life and death of McKenna.

Brooks developed *'Tasha* with Dr. Ayodele Nzinga, Oakland's first poet laureate, who served as Brook's creative partner, as well as the production's director. She says Nzinga figures among other Black artists whose work influences her own: Lorraine Hansberry,

James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka, and Ntozake Shange, who wrote the seminal theatrical piece *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*.

Brooks recalls their first encounter, years ago. “The very first play I auditioned for was in [Nzinga’s] living room. She thought I was a snob and I thought she was mean. I think we were both a little of both. She’s my friend, my dramaturg, my confidant. She’s who I walk this path with. If it wasn’t for her, *Tasha* would never have been written. She pushed me, forced me. When it was good, she said it was good. When it was trash, she said it was trash and challenged me to make it better. We write together and work together and we’ll continue to tell stories nobody is willing to tell.”

Based on a true story, *Tasha* became the theatrical production it is today through an ongoing and unusual six-year process sourced through dreams. “I never conducted interviews with Natasha, because she was already dead. With *Tasha*, I really just free wrote about her. All the interviews were conducted later, with her attorney,” says Brooks. “Most of *Tasha* comes from what I’ve read, videos I’ve watched, and what she said to me at two in the morning when she called me out of a dream.”

Tasha actress Jeunée Simon, *winner of a 2022 Best of the Bay Editors' Pick*

Brooks thought she was going to write about several Black women and the incarceration of Black bodies. "And then Natasha McKenna woke me up at 2am and I was up for seven hours, writing until it was done. It was one imagined monologue. I thought it was going to be only that, but then it kept going." The play wound up including the voices of Natasha's mother, a Fairfax sheriff, and others. "I feel like I'm in a cycle of ancestor worship with her, if I'm honest," Brooks continues. "I pay homage, I ask questions, and she responds. Six years later, and here we are."

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Poetry laces itself into Brooks' background, writing, and her work as an organizer and activist, which includes co-founding the [Anti Police-Terror Project](#) and serving as the executive director of The Justice Teams Network, among other activities.

“My mom was a poet so it was always a piece of my life,” she says. “*Now We Are Six*, by A. A. Milne. Folks think about Winnie the Pooh, but that book, *Now We Are Six*, is what my mom and grandmother read to me and it was how I went to bed at night. As I got older, I was introduced to Black revolutionary poets and poems about Black bodies. Then I started to write poetry when I was 11. I thought it was all I would ever do and really, I never took myself seriously as a writer until I met Ayodele, AJ, and others.”

About the many roles she pursues, Brooks says, “I’m one Black woman in America and it just comes out in different ways. Sometimes I express myself as an artist, sometimes as an activist, and sometimes in how I parent my kid. But I’m just one person.”

McKenna was also “just one person,” and her story, so horrifically abbreviated will now find breath, movement, and new life in Brooks’ play.

“What will surprise people?” Brooks repeats a question asked, musing and gathering her energy for one last response. “People will be surprised at how little she was. Literally. She was five foot tall and under 100 pounds. Why should it surprise people? Because when you see the video and six huge grown men in hazmat suits go to yank her out of her cell, it should surprise you. That they felt that that amount of force was needed in order to pull out an unarmed, teeny woman they had locked in the dungeon of their cell? It should surprise and wake up everyone.”

‘TASHA runs Fri/24 through March 18. Z Space, SF. Tickets and more info [here](#).

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