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## Riveting new S.F. play 'Tasha' shines spotlight on police killings



Katie Grubbs/3Girls Theatre

Jeunée Simon plays a variety of roles in 'Tasha,' about a woman killed by Virginia police in 2015



By **SAM HURWITT, CORRESPONDENT**

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When you enter the theater at Z Below, projected on the stage is a long montage of photos of smiling African American people just living their lives, each with their names and ages. Many but not all are young, some as young as 8. Many but not all are women. All were killed, most of them by police officers. And you're here to hear the story of one of them.

Written by activist and former Oakland mayoral candidate Cat Brooks, "Tasha" is a one-woman show about the 2015 death of 37-year-old Natasha McKenna, an African American woman who was tasered repeatedly by police in the Fairfax County jail in Alexandria, Virginia. It's directed by Dr. Ayodele Nzinga, Oakland poet laureate and artistic director of Lower Bottom Playaz.

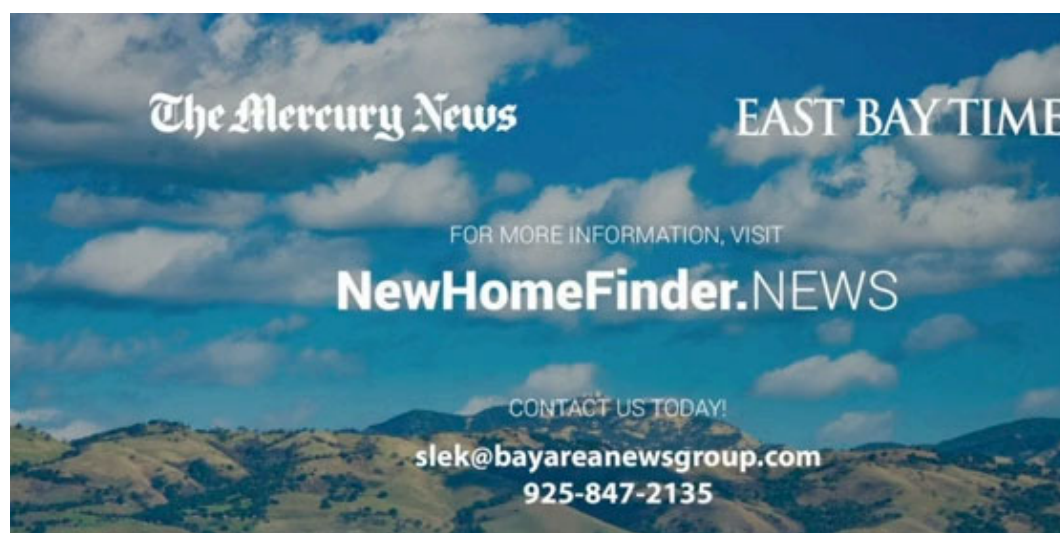
Presented by 3Girls Theatre Company and the Anti Police-Terror Project (an organization co-founded by Brooks), "Tasha" runs alongside 3Girls' New Works Festival, featuring new works by women playwrights. The festival's staged readings, also at Z Below, are free to attend.

An earlier version of "Tasha," performed by Brooks and also directed by Nzinga, was part of the 2017 San Francisco Fringe Festival. Its long-awaited official premiere takes the stage just weeks after Memphis police beat 29-year-old Tyre Nichols to death during a traffic stop.

In the current iteration, Jeunée Simon delivers a stunning performance in a variety of roles. She plays McKenna, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia, as a playful, giggling child and as a disoriented, and she plays McKenna's weary, mournful mother. She also plays a Caribbean-accented nurse from the jail, the sheriff offering mealy-mouthed platitudes in press conferences, a furious woman incensed by the endless series of police killing Black people in the U.S., and a swaggering, unrepentant police officer reciting the usual glib excuses with relish.

Just an hour long, "Tasha" is unrelentingly riveting in Nzinga's powerful staging. Elijah Collins' projections show snippets of newscasts, protest footage and excerpts of the wrenching jailhouse video of McKenna mobbed by police officers in biohazard suits holding her down and tasing her. Stephanie Johnson's lighting accentuates the melancholy mood, and Jules Indelicato's sound design contributes crowd and traffic sounds as well as haunting bits of Nina Simone singing "Brown Baby."

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Projected at the beginning is a quote from McKenna that she said just before the officers killed her: “You promised you wouldn’t kill me.” The play shows Tasha from an early age terrified that the police were going to come and kill her, giving the horrific sense that it was only a matter of time. “Bad enough she was Black,” says her mother with a terrible sense of resignation. “But Black and crazy? In Virginia? Now that was a problem.”

We know from the beginning what’s going to happen, but that doesn’t at all lessen the sense of terror that pervades the story. Even the endearing joy young Tasha takes in playing children’s games feels like ominous, heartbreaking foreshadowing in this context. There’s this overwhelming knowledge that any erratic behavior anywhere near a trigger-happy police officer (or, as it happened, a crowd of them) might get her killed, and Tasha is not someone who can help behaving erratically.

Just because she is who she is, and because the police are who they are, there’s a horrific sense of inevitability to what happens, even as we are reminded at every turn that there is nothing at all inevitable or acceptable about the fact that this keeps happening to Black people in this country again and again and again and again.

And you can’t just say, “Well, it’s Virginia.” Several of the people in the preshow montage were killed by police here in the Bay Area, and the unnamed enraged woman in the play is fuming about the BART police killing of Oscar Grant long before she learns what happened to Natasha McKenna.

By the end of this piece, you’d have to be made of stone not to share her fury and her resolution that this culture of police violence cannot continue to be accepted as just the way things are.

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## ‘TASHA’

By Cat Brooks, presented by 3Girls Theatre Company and the Anti Police-Terror Project

**Through:** March 18

**Where:** Z Below, 470 Florida St., San Francisco

**Running time:** One hour, no intermission

**Tickets:** \$12-\$40; [www.3girlstheatre.org](http://www.3girlstheatre.org)

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