

**Jerome Weeks:** Just a word of warning before we start. This podcast contains sounds of gunfire and descriptions of violent death that some listeners may find disturbing.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** It's one of the most divisive issues in American society...

**Donald J. Trump:** "So let's talk about guns, shall we?" [loud cheers]

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Guns bond families together.

**Eric Mattly:** I grew up with them. My father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather, they all hunted and they all shot for just recreation.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** And guns rip families apart...

**Mark Barden:** "And then they gathered everybody in a room and they told us twenty, first-grade children had been shot. And that's when we knew our little Daniel was gone."

**Jerome Weeks:** That's one reason a group of teen actors from Dallas dove into America's raging arguments over gun rights and gun violence -- Arguments the country can't seem to escape.

**Cara Lawson:** "There's no way at this point to go into all the homes across America and take those guns out, y'know. We're like way too far in. But, you know, is that the kind of power that a civilian should wield?"

**Jerome Weeks:** I'm Jerome Weeks, arts reporter with KERA in North Texas.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** I'm Hady Mawajdeh, reporting fellow for Guns & America... And *this* is 'Gun Play.'

In this podcast, we'll follow these students as they work to put together a stage play about weapons, background checks, suicides, national politics –

**Jerome Weeks:** -- And the massacre of schoolkids . . . just like themselves.

**Amanda Johnson:** “I wish my mom didn’t have to live out the rest of her life knowing the instrument of my sister’s death came from under her mattress.”

*[Amanda’s voice drops beneath the narrators’ voices.]*

**Hady Mawajdeh:** We’re in a classroom at a community college in Dallas, Texas. It’s January, 2018. And there are about a dozen people in the room. Mostly teenagers. They’re all sitting next to each other in a circle. This is before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The teens are face-to-face with a woman named Amanda Johnson. She’s telling them about her sister Leslie’s suicide.

Johnson’s a volunteer with the Texas chapter of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. She tells the actors how back in 2011, the death of her 23-year-old sister took a devastating psychological toll.

**Amanda Johnson:** My mom’s never going to recover, ever. Aside from her relationship with me and my children and my brother’s kids, she’s just waiting to die. She’s never going to be okay again.

**Jerome Weeks:** After Leslie’s death, Amanda Johnson became an activist for gun violence prevention.

That’s why she’s here speaking to these young performers. Their theater company, Cry Havoc, is known for using the stage to tackle big messy issues like sexual identity or immigration. And they’d contacted her because they’d just started preparing for a new show. It’ll be their most ambitious to date.

**Cara Lawson:** We have a lot more freedom to do material that I think otherwise people might think is “too challenging” for somebody our age.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** That's Cara Lawson. She's one of the veteran members of the teen company. She says Cry Havoc's style of theater stands out because their work is current. It speaks to today's controversial issues.

The actors don't start with *any sort* of script. They start by gathering materials, doing research, and interviewing people like Amanda Johnson.

**Jerome Weeks:** This is called 'documentary' theater or verbatim theater and it asks a lot more of its actors than simply memorizing a role. Like Cara, Trinity Gordon is a longtime member of the company. And she loves exploring the world this way.

**Trinity Gordon:** Your mental health needs to be ready to go because there's so much thinking and planning that goes into it. And so, you just have to be ready to work, cause it's very, very, very exhausting. But it's worth it. It's really worth it.

**Jerome Weeks:** Cry Havoc's actors are starting what will be a seven-month-long journey to research and create a documentary play about America's heated gun debate. A play called "Babel."

The students will interview *more than 75 people* with different opinions about guns and gun rights. They'll travel to snowy Newtown, Connecticut to talk with survivors of the school shooting there. They'll meet with political leaders in Washington, D. C. And - they'll join the NRA.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** These kids aren't experts on these issues. Most have never even fired a gun. But that's why they do all of these interviews. They're here to learn.

**Jerome Weeks:** Cry Havoc's not planning to find some ultimate solution for dealing with guns in our heavily-armed, highly-divided society.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** What Cry Havoc does - is create theater.

**Jerome Weeks:** To hold the mirror up - as Hamlet says.

**Mara Richards Bim: Let's take a quick second to read her story. Somebody pick up with the first paragraph. And this is the Vogue article right here...** [reading continues under narration]

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Cry Havoc's actors always prepare before they hear testimony from people like suicide survivor and activist Amanda Johnson.

The company's director Mara Richards Bim helps them with their online research. *And* assigns articles for them to read.

Amanda Johnson has written about what she sees as the need for stricter gun laws. *And* she's written about her sister Leslie's suicide -- for publications like the Dallas Morning News and Vogue magazine.

Actors Trinity Gordon and Cara Lawson have read the articles. Now they're wondering what to ask Johnson.

**Trinity Gordon:** Now I kind of want to know, like, if you could sit down with your sister, like one last time, what would you ask her?

**Cara Lawson:** How much do you think we should address her sister? And in what ways do you want us to? They can pass on a question?

**Mara Richards Bim:** So one of the things we'll say is that she can, if -- and this is for everybody -- if they don't want to answer a question then they can say 'pass.'

**Jerome Weeks:** The student actors *aren't* professional journalists; many have never done interviews before. Still, Cry Havoc's director wants them considering sensitive areas of discussion...

And she wants them asking questions that'll pay off with answers they can use in their script.

**Amanda Johnson:** So the first thing I want to do is give you guys some statistics because they're pretty shocking.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Johnson's a pro when it comes to talking about gun-violence prevention. She's got a PowerPoint presentation stuffed with graphs, charts and loads of figures about gun violence in America. She doesn't rely on notes. She's got her script down pat.

**Amanda Johnson:** So Americans are 25 times more likely to be shot and killed with a gun than people in other developed countries.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Johnson explains to the Cry Havoc actors that young people like themselves - people under twenty-six - are now being killed more often by firearms than cars.

And because of her sister's death, Johnson wants the students to

understand just how serious suicide rates are. They outnumber gun homicides *and* mass shootings. When suicides are included in the tally, ninety-six Americans are killed with guns per day, says Johnson.

**Amanda Johnson:** So that includes suicides -- some people argue that suicides should not be counted. Suicides are two-thirds of all of our gun deaths - so about 61. As a survivor of a gun suicide, I will tell you, damn straight they should be counted. Yes.

**Jerome Weeks:** Adolescent suicide is a huge deal -- the numbers reached an all-time high in 2017. Several of Cry Havoc's dozen actors personally know a classmate or friend who shot themselves. And with adolescent suicides, depression is often a major factor.

**Jerome Weeks:** Depression, Johnson says, was a long-time issue with her sister Leslie as well -- but --

**Amanda Johnson:** No doctor ever said, 'Lock up your frigging guns.' It was never put to us in that manner. And the fact that it wasn't an obvious move for us to make is horrendous. Hindsight is 20/20 and you can't see the forest through the trees and when you're really close to someone you just live in a certain level of denial that it's not that bad. And I honestly feel like had that gun not been there.

But I wish I didn't have to wonder...

**Mara Richards Bim:** So emotions, feelings? If you had to put a word to it other than tired . . .

**Hady Mawajdeh:** So - it's *after* Cry Havoc Theater's interview with Amanda Johnson. Director Mara Richards Bim gives the actors a chance to unload. They debrief like this after *every* interview.

Understandably, many of Cry Havoc's young actors have turned somber and quiet in the face of Johnson's story. Mary Bandi is a very earnest, 17-year-old junior from W.T. White High School.

**Mary Bandi:** I mean, everything seemed to have, like, a really large impact. Cuz she, she registered that some things are just presented as *numbers*. And when you really take into account these are *people* and they had thoughts and opinions, and they had lives and they were lost because

of this issue -- it makes this issue seem a lot larger, and this world seem a lot smaller.

**Jerome Weeks:** These debriefs are integral to Cry Havoc's process. They're partly to share any insights the students have. But if any actors become upset, Mara Richards Bim has also made it clear, she has professional counselors available.

So - for these young actors, Cry Havoc's creative process -- from the interview questions to the final curtain call -- it's like one-part student journalism, one-part high school theater, one-part civics lesson -- and one-part group therapy.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** This isn't the first 'documentary theater' project Cry Havoc's done on gun violence.

**Archival recording:** Dallas Police shooting

**Hady Mawajdeh:** The first one was inspired by one horrible outburst.

**NPR Newscast:** And we begin this morning with grim news out of Dallas. At least five police officers there are dead and six others, at least, are wounded after snipers opened fire after a demonstration in the city's downtown.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** The show was called "Shots Fired," and it debuted within weeks of the 2016 Dallas police shooting.

This was years before the killing of George Floyd and our current uproar over police violence and racial injustice. Even so, back in 2016, there were several police shootings of unarmed black men caught on tape. Protests erupted in cities across the country. And in July 2016, in Dallas, during a mostly peaceful march, a single shooter sought revenge. He killed five officers and wounded nine, plus two civilians.

**Jerome Weeks:** The very next day, Mara Richards Bim got some of her Cry Havoc actors together and started developing a stage drama about the ambush. She and the actors interviewed police officers, protestors, family members and a trauma surgeon.

**Mara Richards Bim:** You know, when we do these documentary pieces, each interview is about an hour long. Which means we have hours and hours and hours of audio, and we create a two-hour show. So there is a lot that doesn't end up in the production. And] something that kept coming up in the interviews for "Shots Fired" was around gun violence. It was around Second Amendment rights. It was around the conversation they're now creating for this one.

**Jerome Weeks:** This documentary approach to theater is not new. And it's not new to controversy. "The Laramie Project" is probably the best-known example. It's a play about Matthew Shepard, a gay man who was savagely beaten and left to die in Laramie, Wyoming. It's one of the most-acclaimed American plays of the past two decades. It's been performed -- and protested against -- around the country.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** But gathering these actors from schools across Dallas and then letting them loose on the kinds of contentious, disturbing issues even adults are wary of --

**Jerome Weeks:** Yeah, all that's pretty unusual. But Mara Richards Bim says that's why she created Cry Havoc. With teenage actors in mind.

**Mara Richards Bim:** You know, their ideas are exciting and I love creating theater with them. I love seeing how far I can push them. You know, a lot of theater programs with young people, they do Disney or they, y'know, tell really sweet, sentimental stories. And there is absolutely a place for that. But there's also a place for pushing them to do more challenging work and take on really difficult topics that sometimes adults don't even want to take on.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Earlier, we pointed out that most of the Cry Havoc's actors have never fired a gun. But that doesn't mean some haven't had personal experiences with gun violence.

**Fabian Rodriguez:** Whenever I was three, my dad, he was actually killed by a gun. He got shot outside a club.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Fabian Rodriguez is 18-years-old. He's a senior at Seagoville High School, near Dallas. Normally, Fabian's a goofball. He's always ready with a joke, always the center of attention.

But when I ask Fabian about his thoughts on guns, he gets quiet and starts to talk about his father's death.

**Fabian Rodriguez:** He went with his friend, he didn't really want to go. And there was something happening inside, so they were leaving, and they all got in the car, and then the people came out and they shot up the car, and he was the only one that died.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** How old was he?

**Fabian Rodriguez:** I think he was 17.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Do you know what happened to the individual who shot your father?

**Fabian Rodriguez:** My mom said they never, they never found him. They never... yeah.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** If you could tell him something – that person – what would you tell him?

**Fabian Rodriguez:** Hmm? Just - how would he feel if he had something taken away from him like that? He can't see his son grow up.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Because of his father's death, Fabian tells us he's never really been interested in guns.

**Jerome Weeks:** But -- the Cry Havoc actors are all different. They differ economically, racially, politically. Most don't really have deeply held judgments about Second Amendment rights or the need to own a gun. But they're curious, they're eager -- and they're wary.

**Trinity Gordon:** I'm not opposed to people owning guns. I just don't think we should have AK-47s walking down the street. You know?

**Jerome Weeks:** Trinity Gordon is Black. She's bright and talented but also a bit of a clown. Skyline High is Dallas' largest high school. And its student population is overwhelmingly Hispanic and Black. It's in a struggling, working-class neighborhood. Trinity tells us a student has died to gun violence every year she's been at Skyline.

**Trinity Gordon:** I definitely want to learn how to use a gun safely and just know how to, you know, shoot correctly. But would I own a gun or carry one on me? I think I'm just too anxious for that.

**Angie Hogue:** I am pretty terrified of guns actually. I don't have any desire to shoot one.

**Jerome Weeks:** Angie Hogue is a 16-year-old sophomore. She's white and she attends Booker T. Washington Arts Magnet High School in downtown Dallas. It's one of the best arts-focused high schools in the country.

**Angie Hogue:** I'm very terrified of mass shootings. I go to concerts and I'm looking at the exits. And if anybody made a movement, like, my heart would start beating and everybody around me was fine (laughs). So I don't like open carry. I don't like concealed carry. Just seeing somebody around me with a gun makes me really, really uncomfortable.

**Sue Loncar:** We stayed up talking to her until about 3 a.m. And then we went to bed. And then I think she just – and she Googled. My son looked on the computer. she didn't know how to load the gun, and she Googled how to load the gun.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Months after the actors spoke with Amanda Johnson about her sister's death, they speak with another person touched by suicide. Her name's Sue Loncar... she lost her sixteen-year-old daughter, Grace.

**Sue Loncar:** Almost all of the suicides that I've heard about, other than my daughter's. I mean, my brother's best friend committed suicide, one of my best friends committed suicide – they're all guns. ... And I think there's no way that can be good, I mean that that's a good thing. That they're so accessible. I mean, I think it should be harder than that.

**Jerome Weeks:** Audio recordings of the interviews Cry Havoc does are transcribed and Mara Richards Bim edits the material into a script. And

then the young actors meet for what's known as a 'table read.' It's their first run-through of the script. And that's when they find out about casting, who gets to play what role.

**Cara Lawson:** It wasn't until I, like, walked into the reading and saw, like, my name on the paper that I was like, 'What?!'

**Hady Mawajdeh:** That's Cara Lawson. She's the veteran Cry Havoc actor who said the acting company challenges high school students like her - more than most teen theaters do. Lawson's an eighteen-year-old senior at Booker T Washington. And she was stunned to learn that she'd be portraying the mother -- of a dead friend. Cara and Grace Loncar were classmates -- both theater students at Booker T.

**Jerome Weeks:** What made Cara's discovery even more uncomfortable was learning she'd be performing the scene when she, as Sue Loncar, discovers Grace Loncar's body.

**Cara Lawson:** This is a lot. It was a lot to deal with. It was a lot to take in.

**Jerome Weeks:** In fact ... months later, in rehearsing their script, Cara has to tell and retell that scene -- until ...

**Cara Lawson:** We went into her room the next morning and her bed had not been touched. We stayed up talking to her till 'bout 3 AM, and then I think we -- (sigh) -- and then I -- (deep breath before she starts crying) -- we went into her room that morning and her bed had not been touched. (crying begins again) And then we went to bed. Then I think she, she just googled, (snort) my son looked on the computer (cries) and she didn't know how to load, (cries) she didn't know how to load the gun and she Googled how to load the gun ...

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Normally, Cara's feisty. She's quick witted and determined. But right now, she's struggling.

**Jerome Weeks:** And that's why Cry Havoc's acting coach, Lisa Cotie, halts the rehearsal.

**Lisa Cotie:** Okay, guys, I wanna talk to you for a second right here. This is the danger of what we're doing. OK? You have to get here without costing yourself these emotions. And that's super-hard as an actor, K? It's one of the super-hardest things to do. But if you do this every night, yes, your audience will be with you. But what's it going to cost you, right? You're going to Heath Ledger it in a hotel room one day. We're not doing that, OK? [laughter]

Hold on to it, people.

**Jerome Weeks:** We're going to spend some time on this moment, on Grace Loncar's suicide -- peeling back not just what it says about the causes and damage of gun violence but also what it means for theater, for the young actors involved.

Cara Lawson was struggling just to act, to pretend to be Sue Loncar, the mother of a friend who shot herself. It turns out acting can be a potent way to learn what gun violence entails.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Here's Sue Loncar again, recalling how her daughter, Grace, suffered from depression. She explains that, like many suicides, Grace ultimately may have just acted on impulse.

**Sue Loncar:** I don't think she was planning on taking her life. She had a party she was going to that Saturday night. But she got in trouble that night. And a lot of research shows that after a family altercation or argument, kids will in a fit of rage just react. And I think she didn't think it through... I think she was just really mad. She had gotten into a big argument with her dad that night. And I think she just thought, 'I'll show them'-- because her dad had said, 'You can't threaten suicide to get out of trouble.' And I think she thought, 'Oh?' -- because she was very strong-willed ... I won't just threaten it. I'll do it.'

**Hady Mawajdeh:** When Grace died, the story made waves across Texas. Grace was also a student at Booker T Washington. Her mother had run a local theater company. And Grace's father was a well-known lawyer who starred in his own TV commercials.

**TV ad:** I'm attorney Brian Loncar, The Strong Arm. When you need help and need it fast, call me. Call me now and we'll be there before you know it.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** The immediate aftermath got even more tragic. Brian Loncar died of a cocaine overdose.

**Archival Newscast:** Tonight, a Dallas family is coping with two horrible losses all within just a matter of days. Prominent attorney Brian Loncar, known for his Strong Arm commercials, was found dead in his car this morning. Less than two weeks ago, his daughter took her own life. Her funeral was just this past Friday.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Loncar was a hunter, and that previous weekend, he'd left his guns at home – which he didn't do normally. Sue Loncar believes her daughter's suicide might not have happened otherwise --

**Jerome Weeks:** -- because, remember, Grace even had to *Google* how to load the gun.

**Sue Loncar:** I can still picture when we found her feet. It was like if I could just will her back to life, even though it was obvious she was gone, I tried to sit her up. I still – one of the images is looking at her feet. It was like the most shocking sight ever just seeing her laying there on the floor. Your mind can't even take it in. And you know if just a couple people are saved, because there wasn't a gun in the house, it's worth it. I mean, maybe everybody won't be, but somebody will be.

**Jerome Weeks:** This is what documentary theater does: Convey a very real, very human moment onstage. So ... we have this whole wretched tragedy that Cry Havoc hears directly from Sue Loncar. And it foregrounds some of the gun-related issues the cast is looking into.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Like - teen suicide. Or securing your firearms at home. Or the fact that if people have access to a gun, they're more likely to attempt suicide. And if they attempt suicide with a gun, they're much more likely to die.

**Jerome Weeks:** So -- from out of this interview, Cry Havoc ends up, months later, rehearsing the script – and that scene we heard, where Cara is in tears, repeating the moment Sue Loncar found her dead daughter.

**Cara Lawson:** We stayed up talking to her till 'bout 3 AM, and then I think we – (sigh) – and then I – (deep breath before she starts crying) – we went into her room that morning and her bed had not been touched.” (crying begins again)

**Hady Mawajdeh:** OK. So – this leads me to some basic questions about what Cry Havoc is doing here. This is called “documentary” theater. Those are Sue Loncar’s actual words. But they’ve been edited and that’s a teenage actor trying to speak them. So how much of this should theatergoers accept as credible? Are these students supposed to impersonate these people?

**Jerome Weeks:** Actually, we accept the need for TV and movie documentaries to re-enact scenes all the time. We’re perfectly aware they’re not quote-unquote ‘real.’ But with all these formats -- onstage, onscreen -- the point is, provided the writing and the actorings are good enough, credible enough, everything else drops away. We get caught up in what we’re seeing and hearing - and feeling.

Of course, audience members certainly come with their own agendas and beliefs and ultimately may not be convinced of anything.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** So why do a play like this at all?

**Jerome Weeks:** Here’s one answer from director Mara Richards Bim:

**Mara Richards Bim:** When an adult audience hears those teenagers reflect on these hot-button issues that the adults are screaming at each other about, I think [it] forces the adults to take a minute and reflect on the issues and how they’re navigating them. I just think that it, hearing that from the young people, it just does something to us different as an audience...

**Jerome Weeks:** So Hady, let’s return to the question you posed, because it’s worth asking: What kind of credibility are Cry Havoc’s actors aiming for?

**Hady Mawajdeh:** I put that question to Cara - about playing Sue Loncar, the mother of her dead friend.

**Cara Lawson:** Well, I definitely didn’t, like, try to, like, just impersonate her because that’s not the point of it. I mean, I think the main part of the

character that I was getting at is just that she's a mother. And it's really hard to wrap your mind around how severe it is to feel like something that's such a deep part of you get ripped from you? And I was just - it was a lot to take in, and it was a lot to process what it feels like. So I feel like, first and foremost, to show her as a mother.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** So that's how this journey will go. The students interview people in person -- on a gun range, in a U.S. Senate Office building, at the NRA's annual meeting. And then they'll perform those stories. As odd as all that may seem, acting out another person's experience may be a better way to convey it - instead of simply telling it or reading about it.

**Jerome Weeks:** It also may be a better way for the students to learn things, it's not just scrolling through websites. A live drama can certainly move those of us in the audience. But performing one can also give actors some powerful, painful insights.

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Putting themselves in the shoes of others. It lets these students possibly grasp what it means to *be* these people, whichever side of these arguments they're on.

**Jerome Weeks:** And they may grasp what it means -- to be on either end of a gun.

**Jerome Weeks:** Next time, on 'Gun Play' -- the gun range.

**David Prince:** You're gonna want to lean against the table. Step forward and lean against that table. There you go. You okay? You got 20 rounds in there, right? Go ahead and pull the trigger. Don't let go whenever it's time, alright? (Gun fire)

**Hady Mawajdeh:** Gun Play was created by Hady Mawajdeh and Jerome Weeks. AC Valdez edited the series. Micaela Rodriguez produced it. Anne Bothwell is KERA's Vice President of Arts. Delta Spirit let us use their song "Hold My End Up" as our theme and Joe Kozera provided additional music. Special thanks to the members of Cry Havoc Theatre Company. Gun Play is a production of KERA and Guns & America. Guns And America is supported by a grant from The Kendeda Fund.

**Jerome Weeks:** If you or someone you know is struggling with thoughts of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention hotline 1-800-273-8255 or go online to [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)