

Turning on a Dime

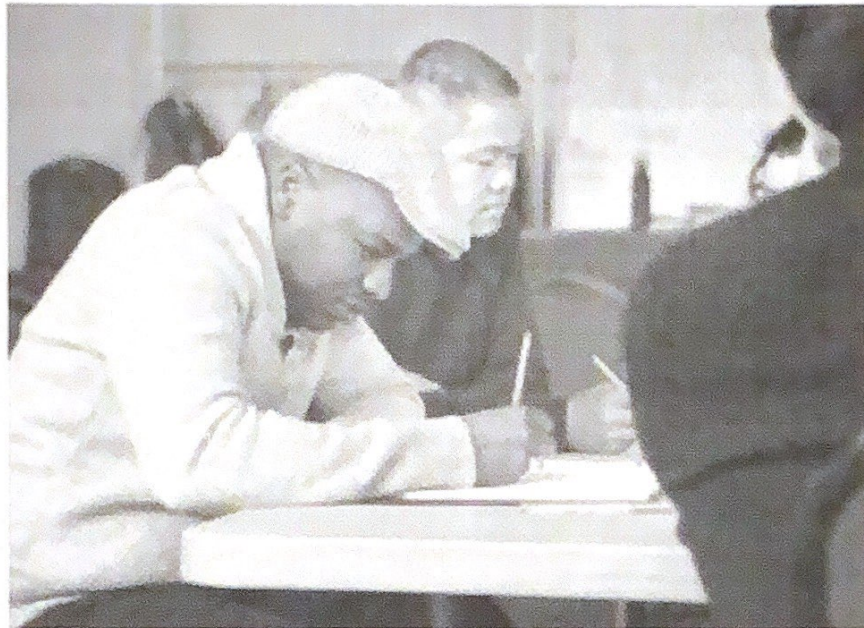
Victory Gardens Theatre shifts its schedule when playwright Marcus Gardley writes a new show in response to current events

by Robert Loerzel

Last fall, Marcus Gardley was supposed to be writing *A Wonder in My Soul*, a play revolving around a group of Chicago soul singers from the 1960s. It was scheduled to make its world premiere in April at Victory Gardens Theatre. But after writing a first draft, Gardley found himself thinking about a different story, one that was flashing across TV screens, Twitter, and the front pages of newspapers. "I was watching the news a lot," he says. "I became obsessed with it." ➤

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL COURIER

Turning on a Dime
continued from page 5



Above and Below: Playwright Marcus Gardley with Victor Garden's Artistic Director, Chay Yew, at a reading of *An Issue of Blood*.



Gardley was riveted by news stories about Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old African-American shot and killed by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown's death set off weeks of protests, and then more erupted when a grand jury failed to charge Wilson with any crime. Across the country, "black lives matter" became a rallying cry for people angry at what they saw as a pattern of police brutality toward African-Americans. Demonstrators filled the streets again when another grand jury decided against indicting a New York City officer in the death of Eric Garner, a black man who'd died after police put him in a chokehold. A video showed Garner saying, "I can't breathe," 11 times just before he died.

Gardley, a 37-year-old African-American playwright known for his poetic style, knows what it's like to face suspicion and the threat of violence from gun-wielding cops. Several

years ago, when officials in Berkeley, California, invited him to work on a community project there, police officers stopped him as he was walking down the street one night. "They came out of their cruiser with their guns drawn and had me on the ground," Gardley recalls. "It was very devastating. They said I fit the description of a serial rapist in the neighborhood." Gardley ended up getting apologies from Berkeley's mayor and a police official.

As Gardley watched the turmoil resulting from the recent events in Missouri and New York, his thoughts about these issues began intruding on the play he was writing. "It was disturbing the narrative structure and disturbing the themes," Gardley says. "I had a major block. I couldn't continue to write the play."

Gardley went to Victory Garden's artistic director, Chay Yew, who was getting ready to
continued on page 15

Turning on a Dime

continued from page 5

direct *A Wonder in My Soul*. "I know this is crazy," Gardley recalls saying, "but do you think I should take a stab at writing about what's going on in the country right now?" It was a bold request. Nine months earlier, Victory Gardens had announced *A Wonder in My Soul* as part of its season schedule. And now Gardley was talking about writing an entirely different play — and getting it up on the stage in just a few months. How did Yew react? "His eyes got really big," Gardley remembers. But Gardley says Yew quickly told him, "If that's what you have to do, you should just go for it. That's what it means to stand behind a writer." Yew now says he was just doing what theaters should do. "You follow the artists."

Victory Gardens announced in late January that *A Wonder in My Soul* had been scratched from the season schedule. In its place, Yew would direct a new play called *An Issue of Blood*. A press release explained that Gardley wrote this play "in response to recent events and social injustices." But *An Issue of Blood* isn't directly about the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner or the protests they sparked. "I wanted to look at history and get behind why these laws were made, laws that protected certain people but also made other people feel like they weren't protected at all. And so I started to read everything I could get my hands on about how laws were created in the United States, and what did this country look like before the Constitution."

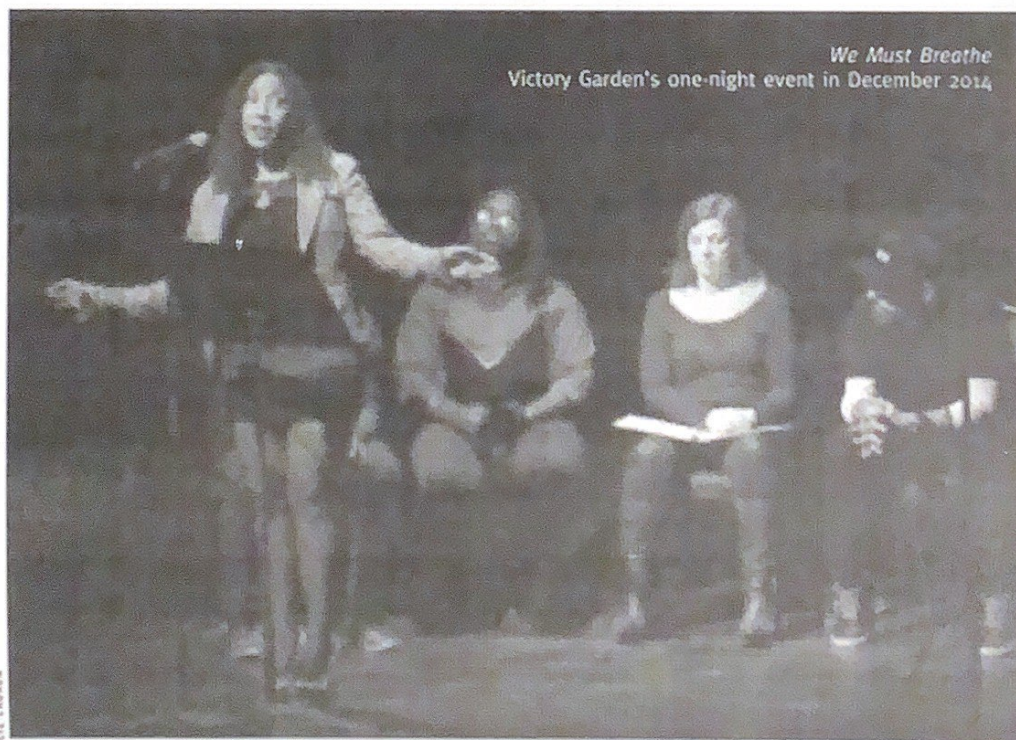
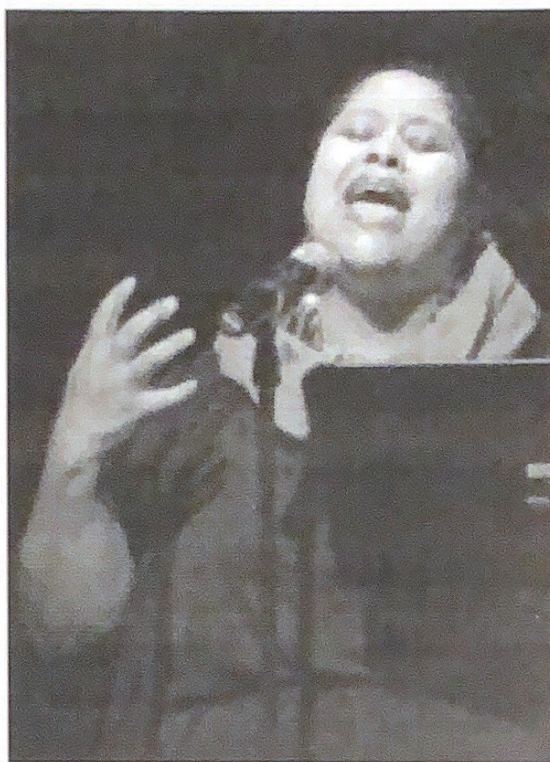
Gardley looked at books about the colonial era, including Anthony S. Parent Jr.'s *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740*, where he found the true story of the first blacks who were brought to America — as indentured servants, not outright slaves. "What most people don't know is that there was a large contingent of Irish slaves," Gardley notes. "They joined forces with the African-Americans

continued on page 16

Turning on a Dime

and they raised a revolt. They rebelled because the laws were changing." Black indentured servants, who'd thought they would gain freedom and a piece of land after seven years of service, were told that they were now going to be slaves for the rest of their lives. "There were other laws changing — that you could kill an African-American person without any penalty," Gardley says.

Those facts inspired Gardley's script, which he describes as a mix of history, myth and African-American music from the colonial era. He thinks audiences will connect the dots between these events from almost 400 years ago and today's controversies. "It's so crystal-clear, it's shocking," he says. *An Issue of Blood* focuses on a free black woman in the colony of Virginia who plans to marry her son to the daughter of a powerful white planter as a symbol of peace between the races. The cast includes six-



We Must Breathe
Victory Garden's one-night event in December 2014

Turning on a Dime

time Jeff Award winner E. Faye Butler, Tosin Morohunfola and Cleavant Derricks.

This isn't the first time Victory Gardens has responded to the "black lives matter"



protests. In December, two weeks after the grand jury's decision in the Eric Garner case, the theater hosted a one-night event called *We Must Breathe*, featuring poems and short plays inspired by the news, including one by Gardley. After the performance, audience members talked about the issues. And then, many of them marched out into the streets of Lincoln Park to protest. "People were looking for something to do that was productive, and to talk about how we feel," says Victory Gardens' associate artistic producer, Joanie Schultz, who directed *We Must Breathe*. "It was really beautiful to be in that space, in that sort of community that we created for that night. It was actually one of the most profound and powerful moments of my theatrical life so far."

Gardley, a native of Oakland who has also spent time on the East Coast, senses a different kind of racial tension in Chicago, where he has lived since he became a member of the Victory Garden playwrights ensemble two



years ago. "Chicago is extremely segregated," he says. "I feel like when I go into certain businesses on the North Side, there's always a glance that is a little chilling. I don't really get that anywhere else. Once I talk — and once they get to know what I want and that kind of thing — I think it goes away. But I sense it, and it's not just me. Other artists I talk to feel the same way."

Last year, Victory Gardens bused in several groups of young people from the South Side to attend performances of *The Gospel of Lovingkindness*, Gardley's play about two Chicago mothers whose lives are shattered by a homicide. "For a lot of them, this was the first play they ever saw," Gardley says. "They had a really great time and had a lot of questions about how to make a play. And so we decided to start a very small theater company with them, to teach them the very basics of theater-making in Englewood."

Schultz, who has been watching as Gardley and Yew bounce ideas off each other for *An*

Issue of Blood, is thrilled to see Victory Gardens taking such swift action on current events. Theaters often get locked into the schedules they announce to subscribers far ahead of time. But it's actually possible to write a script, design a show, rehearse it and get it into the stage fairly quickly, she says. "It takes much longer to make a movie," Schultz says. "Live theater has an opportunity that other mediums don't necessarily have. We should be a place for people to come talk about and think about what is going on in their world right now."

As the "black lives matter" protests made headlines, Gardley felt curious about the thoughts of an uncle and a cousin who work as police officers in California. But, he says, "I can't even have a discussion with them. That blue wall of silence and that brotherhood is so intense." Gardley hopes his play can spark the dialogue that needs to happen. "That's how you move forward: conversation. That's why I do theater."



This page and opposite: *We Must Breathe*, Victory Garden's one-night event, invited audience members to discuss issues of race in America.