

# On the Front Lines of Ohio's Heroin Crisis: Playwrights

New plays are portraying and exploring opioid addiction, using the theater industry's response to the AIDS epidemic as a model.

By ERIK PIEPENBURG AUG. 4, 2017

KENT, Ohio — An epidemic that fills coffin after coffin with people in their 20s. Activist-minded theatermakers who work furiously between funerals to bring the tragedy to life onstage. Audience members who express fear that if nothing changes, they or someone they love will be gone soon, too.

For those who remember New York during the AIDS crisis, these scenes conjure heartbreaking memories of attending memorial services for friends and lovers and then watching new plays like “Angels in America” and “The Normal Heart” through tears. Yet, increasingly for many people across Ohio and nationwide, the theater world's response to an emergency health crisis isn't history — it's happening. The killer this time isn't H.I.V. It's heroin.

“In the Rust Belt, it's a situation where everybody's heard about it and everybody knows it's a crisis,” said Nathan Motta, the artistic director of the Dobama Theater in Cleveland Heights. “Everybody is one or two people from somebody who is suffering.”

At least five plays about heroin abuse have been produced in northeast Ohio alone in the last year as the state's residents grapple with the surging epidemic. The Columbus Dispatch reported in May that at least 4,149 Ohioans died from unintentional overdoses of heroin, fentanyl and other drugs in 2016, a 36 percent

jump from the prior year. This year's overdose fatalities are set to outpace last year's, according to the report.

Heroin-themed plays have surfaced elsewhere recently, too: at a high school in New Market, Md.; a community theater in Wilkes-Barre, Pa.; and a children's theater in Roanoke, Va. And on Broadway this spring, the new play "Sweat" — which won the Pulitzer Prize in drama in April — featured two characters who abuse heroin in working-class Reading, Pa.

The author, Lynn Nottage, spent time there, doing research for the play and learning more about the opioid menace. She said similarities between the theatrical responses to the heroin and AIDS crises were striking.

"It was true of AIDS that a lot of breakthrough conversations surfaced when the AIDS crisis was put onstage," said Ms. Nottage, who said her uncle had died of a heroin overdose. "It gave people an outlet and permitted them to sit in the theater spaces and have catharsis. I think it's going to be true of the heroin epidemic."

For Emelia Sherin of Warren, Ohio, it was after the eighth person from her high school died that she and a friend, Zach Manthey, 22, decided to write a play. In working-class Trumbull County, where Warren is, there were 82 overdoses, 10 of them fatal, in two weeks this year.

Onstage, "when you have someone in front of you, showing you the effect that this epidemic has, it opens your eyes," said Ms. Sherin, 20. "Confrontation is key to communication."

The result is "(In)dependent: The Heroin Project," a drama based on some 50 interviews with heroin users, counselors, family members and others that runs through Saturday at the Akron Civic Theater. The Akron area has been particularly hard hit, with the Akron Board of Education's recently voting to stock the anti-overdose drug Narcan in middle and high schools this fall.

Ms. Sherin and Mr. Manthey's play is a docu-theater piece — similar in style to "The Laramie Project," about the murder of Matthew Shepard — with characters that

include a Mormon convert, a drag queen and a father in Narcotics Anonymous. Heroin itself takes the stage as a female character, “like a Siren,” Mr. Manthey said.

“When I talked to current or recovering addicts, they would compare heroin to a girl or a relationship,” said Ms. Sherin, a young woman with inquiring eyes who, seated next to the towering Mr. Manthey at Scribbles coffee shop here recently, talked about their play with seriousness and passion. “They would always refer to her as her. I asked them, ‘Why do you keep saying her?’ And they say would say, ‘Because she’s so beautiful.’”

At the Dobama Theater, Mr. Motta recently directed “How to Be a Respectable Junkie,” a one-man show based on interviews by the playwright, Greg Vovos, with a recovering heroin user. The Cleveland Plain Dealer called it “raw, eloquent and deeply moving.”

Although “How to Be a Respectable Junkie” closed in July, Mr. Vovos, 45, said that he hoped future productions would “put a real face on the people who are struggling.”

“If you arm people with understanding, that’s a good thing,” said Mr. Vovos, the author of two other heroin-themed plays that have been mounted in Cleveland. “Before you solve a problem, you have to wrap your mind around it.”

Portrayals of heroin frequently appear in pop culture. Heroin addicts have jolted through films like “The Panic in Needle Park” and “Trainspotting”; TV shows like “Girls” and “Orange Is the New Black”; and the Broadway musicals “Rent” (which also features H.I.V.-positive characters) and “American Idiot.”

But unlike New York or Hollywood, Ohio has a relatively low bar for those seeking to make art: Grab a script and a stage, and it’s cheap to put on a show. Community theater and college drama groups offer an expeditious outlet for artists, many of them novices. Ms. Sherin and Mr. Manthey are students at Kent State University; Mr. Vovos studied playwriting at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and works at American Greetings in suburban Cleveland.

There are important differences between the AIDS and heroin plays, of course. AIDS devastated gay New York, at the center of the theater world, and hit people in that industry particularly hard. AIDS claimed the lives of many theater artists, like the playwright Scott McPherson, who died at 33 and whose black comedy “Marvin’s Room” is now on Broadway. Many AIDS-themed plays were set in cities, while many of today’s heroin plays are about local communities and, for the most part, have not received wide exposure.

What the genres share are calls to action and awareness. The Living Theater in New York sounded an alarm about heroin abuse in 1959 when it mounted “The Connection,” Jack Gelber’s experimental and incendiary portrayal of heroin users that shocked audiences. A doctor in “The Normal Heart” says, “You’ve got to warn the living, protect the healthy, help them keep on living.”

“If you’re trying to write about the world we live in, you ignore what’s going on at your peril,” said the playwright Jonathan Tolins (“Buyer & Cellar”), who has written several plays with characters coping with AIDS and its footprint.

It’s too soon to know if heroin plays will have the lasting power of award-winning works like “Angels in America,” which is currently being revived in London with a starry cast that includes Andrew Garfield and Nathan Lane. “The Normal Heart,” like “Angels,” was made into an HBO movie. The recent Broadway revival of William Finn’s musical “Falsettos,” written during the height of the AIDS crisis, received five Tony Award nominations.

In Akron, Howard Parr, the executive director of the Civic Theater, doesn’t have time to think about Tonys. He knows he’s taking a risk mounting Ms. Sherin and Mr. Manthey’s play as part of a theater project featuring topical works by local millennial writers. He’s paying the bills with escapist shows like “The Rocky Horror Show” and “The Luther Vandross Experience.”

But many members of his ticket-buying base are reeling because of heroin. Some Buckeye State businesses are having a hard time finding workers who can pass drug tests. The situation has been likened to “an ongoing terrorist attack,” as one Ohio newspaper editor recently put it.

What Mr. Parr can offer, as AIDS plays did for so many theatergoers in pain, is a kind of safe house.

“Our job as a theater is to reflect the community,” he said. “There are many things that are happy, and we will keep doing those things. But some things in the community are not happy. This is one of them.”

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