
Variety is the Spice of Life

Posted on May 7, 2010 by William Coyle



167 Tongues refers to the number of different languages that one of the production's characters, a Rwandan emergency room nurse, credibly claims are spoken in the hospital in Jackson Heights, Queens, the town in which this production is both literally and figuratively set. The borough of Queens is perhaps the most ethnically diverse area in the world; half of its residents are foreign-born. Jackson Heights is said to be the home of families of 100 different nationalities.

In unskilled hands a production with 37 characters in 25 ethnic-flavored skits could become an unwieldy, hackneyed disaster. *167 Tongues* is anything but, and that's due primarily to the tight collaboration of 11 talented playwrights and 29 actors, assembled by director Ari Laura Kreith, who also conceived the entire production for Jackson Repertory Theatre. The scenes are not sketches so much as they are a collage of vignettes, many of them quite poetic and touching. Generally, they either avoid cliché or fearlessly embrace it, winkingly knowing.

The opening street scene is a fascinating use of a small space. One by one or pair by pair, characters appear on the stage. They go about their day, bumping into each other or otherwise interacting, singing, and chatting into their cell phones. The ubiquitous Number 7 train roars in the background, until, the stage now full, the assemblage reaches an almost intolerable cacophony of language and city sounds. It's quite remarkable.

Among the standout characters who populate *167 Tongues* are a homeless man who is partial to Little Debbie snack cakes and a graduate student who delivers Chinese food for a living. There's a humorous dosa chef, a suspicious Korean fruit seller, a Russian bookseller with a poetic side, a cantankerous, housebound Vietnam War veteran, a no nonsense Indian jewelry maker who rejects a footloose suitor, and others far too numerous to mention. Most of them feel entirely real rather than slight, one-dimensional caricatures. Though its "theater" is P.S. 69, this isn't amateur night. And the play doesn't shy away from adult themes such as homosexuality, teen sex, undocumented immigration, suicide and domestic violence. If there's any drawback to so many vignettes, it's that some of the plot threads don't entirely resolve. Perhaps that's the point. Life's colorful pageant simply continues, the good with the bad.

The living residents of Jackson Heights even have a thematic communion with residents long dead. The use of ghosts in a theatrical production can be a disaster. Yet, here, the device is used to great effect, as when a pair of them, one white and one black, haunt a young interracial couple whose lives reflect those of the ghosts' children, in love in a bigoted society some 40 years earlier. Those were the days of the Princeton Plan, the school-bussing system for racial desegregation, which catapulted many communities into an almost hysterical panic.

Inspired by the production's depiction of the neighborhood, I took a walk along 37th Avenue after the show and observed its genuine diversity. I ate a late dinner at an Indian restaurant and was served by an Asian waitress. As I walked back to the train station I passed a homeless man sleeping in an alcove, his belongings piled into a

shopping cart. I wondered whether he was the inspiration for any of the characters in the production that had just taken place across the street. I also wondered whether he would ever see that production, or whether he was worlds away.

He should know, though, that a creative band of artists at Jackson Repertory care about his life and those of others like him. Due in no small part to consistently first-rate writing, acting, and direction, this production's tasty concoction, against all odds, manages to work much like the neighborhood it lovingly chronicles.

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