

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

Theater

March 4th, 2011

You Are Now The Owner Of This Suitcase!

by Ben Gassman

It's been 11 years since John Rocker (if the name means nothing, think *Eastbound and Down*) got off the 7 train and shared his nuanced thoughts on that elevated conduit of multiculturalism in the January, 2000 issue of *Sports Illustrated*: "Imagine having to take the 7 train to the ballpark looking like you're riding through Beirut next to some kid with purple hair, next to some queer with AIDS, right next to some dude who just got out of jail for the fourth time, right next to some 20-year-old mom with four kids. It's depressing...The biggest thing I don't like about New York are the foreigners."

The Mets still congenitally suck when it counts, the 7 train is still a chugging global village, and Jackson Heights, which Mr. Rocker passed over on his ride out to the bygone Shea, is still the city's greatest articulation of cosmopolis in miniature, and arguably its most exciting neighborhood. And for us prideful Queens-folk, the ones who gush about it being the most culturally diverse place on the planet, it is great vindication that Theater 167 (which evolved out of earlier incarnation Jackson Rep and whose name is a tally—give or take—of the number of languages spoken in the neighborhood) has arrived to rep the aspirational melting pot that is Jackson Heights. *You Are Now The Owner of This Suitcase*, their upcoming show at P.S. 69, an irreverent imaginative collage of contemporary folk tales and bumpy real life, is inspired by stories culled from the streets of the neighborhood. A homegrown and potent artistic rebuttal to the John Rockers of the world, it is also a beckoning invitation to you among the culture-consumerate who are not used to getting your art fix north or east of P.S. 1.

Ari Laura Kreith, the artistic director of Theater 167, who conceived and directed *You Are Now The Owner Of This Suitcase*, wants to show you her neighborhood. Again. Since moving to Jackson Heights from Park Slope five years ago, she has been obsessively thinking about it and reinventing it in theatrical terms. Initially interested in devising something with actors from the community, her first neighborhood-inspired piece ended up calling on multiple writers to offer perspective on a relationship note her husband had found on the subway stairs. In the years since, Kreith has honed this more writer-centric devising process, and learned to strike a careful balance between offering her collaborators freedom and constraint.

This sense of balance has helped Kreith guide her writers through the devising of the new piece. In the beginning, the neighborhood became a gigantic walk-in closet out of which the playwrights pulled language, character and story. What had been germinating in Ms. Kreith's mind as a piece that would reinvent and weave together folktales from the vast array of cultural traditions in Jackson Heights became more visceral, more direct, when her team of writers first gathered in the neighborhood. The seven writers were sent out to walk Jackson Heights, to talk to Jackson Heights, "to unearth some of the magic, dreams, and aspirations that people bring to Jackson Heights from all over the world," explained Les Hunter, collaborating playwright and neighborhood resident.

Some of what the writers gathered were the kinds of folktales initially sought, albeit with the subjective sheen and singular mutation of casual street retellings. After a rebuff from a reading Russian woman in Travers Park, a fruitful conversation in Spanish with a middle-aged couple yielded Hunter tales of "priests trapped in caves, talking dolls made out of corn-cobs, and *nahuales*, mythic Mexican indigenous people that have the power to turn into animals. It was some pretty surreal stuff—and great story material." Other writers recorded more personal narratives of striving, sadness, and success. Then they reconvened, told each other the stories, and Ms. Kreith gave them their first assignment: "I asked them to figure out how these found stories could live together in the contemporary sphere."

With an eye to both the quotidian and the magical realist aspects of life in the neighborhood, the writers, their characters, and their stories entered into conversation. Kreith and dramaturg Angie Balsamo canvassed their newly acquired narrative neighborhood for possible intersections, and an overarching story map began to emerge.

A few months of intensive Google Docs sharing later, Kreith and her seven playwrights have a rehearsal-ready script, a sort of universal tapestry delicately stitched with overlapping parochial threads. In reading the script, I find so many echoes of the neighborhood that it celebrates. Among the seven playwrights, there are wild aesthetic differences, but their languages manage to understand each other with the unexpected ease characteristic of the neighborhood.

In the utopian construction of why the neighborhood is possible, Colombians and Pakistanis get their coffee at different places, but both take it very sweet. The veneer of difference belied by the similarity underneath. We all bleed red, right? But more honestly integral I think, to the frenetic peacefulness that is the neighborhood, is that we all measure our striving in green. Tolerance breeds customers. And customers breed cultural awareness and linguistic prowess.

LAURITA

I don't need to buy a phone, I just need to borrow yours, if that's okay.

ELECTRONICS GUY

You're just off the plane? Are you new to New York City? You need a phone if you're going to survive here.

LAURITA

I really just need to get where I'm going. I'll come back tomorrow or soon and look at phones, once I'm settled, but if I can just use your phone today to call my abuela.

ELECTRONICS GUY

Your abuela?

Who can say no to a request to call a grandmother? Okay, okay. Here you go.

LAURITA opens her suitcase but discovers it's empty.

LAURITA

What? What happened to my things? This. This isn't my suitcase. ...This can't be happening. Why is this happening to me? What am I supposed to do?

ELECTRONICS GUY

How about you calm down and call your abuela? Use my phone, it's a very good one, and good opportunity for you to test it out. You'll talk to her over a nice clear connection and then she can come and help you.

(from *Laurita's Suitcase* by Joy Tomasko)

Rajesh Bose, the actor playing ELECTRONICS GUY, and a Theater 167 board member, said “the guy on the street selling cell-phones, he's kind of ubiquitous. When I started thinking about the character my initial thought was *Don't Mess With The Zohan*. The Israeli and Palestinian electronics salesmen guys. They all have this sort of unabashed—they would lie with bravado. Now the more we're delving into it, he's a little more than a sharp salesman.”

The ELECTRONICS GUY character, this immigrant entrepreneur who can't separate his empathy from his commerce, is tackled by half of the writers and sells his way through *You Are Now The Owner of This Suitcase* in at least six languages, most impressively Ravenish. Often, we think of facility with many languages as a mark of education, and often it is, but more often it is love or commercial desire that inspires language learning. “In Jackson Heights you have to know a few languages at least well enough to make a sale,” Bose added, still thinking about his character. And the ELECTRONICS GUY more than anyone or thing else in the play, really suggests and celebrates the silk-road nature of Jackson Heights, as well as the dreams of upward mobility that fuel the neighborhood.

To say it all ends happily ever after is not giving too much away, I don't think. The ending is besides the point; the plot points are besides the point. This piece of theater, in a nod to the neighborhood, is all about the interactions. Between characters. Between the different but conversant worlds created by each of the writers. It is about permeability. It reminds me of a bumper sticker I used to see around Jackson Heights a lot: "*la dignidad no tiene fronteras.*" And neither does the pizza. Rajesh Bose tells me how he first fell in love with the neighborhood in the early '90s when he found a spot—now long gone—called Rajesh's Pizza on 73rd St. and 37th Ave.: "Nowhere else in the world am I gonna see this place."

Theater 167's *You Are Now The Owner Of This Suitcase*, conceived and directed by Ari Laura Kreith, written by Mando Alvarado, Jenny Lyn Bader, Barbara Cassidy, Les Hunter, Joy Tomasko, Gary Winter, and Stefanie Zadavec, dramaturgy by Angie Balsamo, runs March 11 - 27 at PS 69, 77-02 37th Ave., Jackson Heights. For tickets and further info, visit: www.theatre167.org.

CONTRIBUTOR

Ben Gassman

BEN GASSMAN is a playwright from Queens.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



A SOCIAL ORGANIZATION A Decade of ISSUE Project Room

by Marshall Yarbrough

OCT 2013 | MUSIC

ISSUE Project Room is currently celebrating its 10-year anniversary with *10 Years Alive on the Infinite Plane*, a festival taking place from August 31 through October 26. Lawrence Kumpf—the festival's curator and ISSUE's artistic director—and musician C. Spencer Yeh sat down recently with Marshall Yarbrough, the *Rail's* assistant music editor. Here is the second part of their conversation.

Baseball and Marxism in Brooklyn (and Boston)

by Peter St. Clair

MAY 2014 | FIELD NOTES

Every spring when the snow melts away and baseball season rolls around, my thoughts turn to Brooklyn where I was born and grew up in the baseball-crazed New York of the '50s. Despite the fact that I've lived in and around Boston for the last 45 years, it was in Brooklyn that I first fell in love with baseball and with my team, the Brooklyn

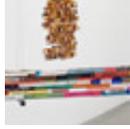
Dodgers.

Mrs. Brown's Furniture

by Ashley P. Taylor

JUNE 2014 | BOOKS

In Virginia Woolf's novel *Night and Day* (1919), the description of Ralph Denham's bedroom includes this phrase: "The only object that threw any light upon the character of the room's owner was a large perch, placed in the window to catch the air and sun, upon which a tame and, apparently, decrepit rook hopped dryly from side to side."



INCONVERSATION

ISHMAEL RANDALL-WEEKS with Alex Bacon

FEB 2013 | ART

Alex Bacon recently sat down with Ishmael Randall-Weeks to discuss the artist's thoughts on utopia, audience, community, and futurity. Randall-Weeks's work is on view at Eleven Rivington (*Quoin*, January 10 – February 10) and the Drawing Center (*Cuts, Burns, Punctures*, January 17 – March 13).

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