

Many worlds of Jackson Heights converge in new play

BY JOE KEMP



/ Tuesday, May 4, 2010, 9:24 AM

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A QUEENS neighborhood known as a melting pot of world culture is the backdrop for a new show set to take the stage Friday.

The culturally diverse streets of [Jackson Heights](#) are the setting for the upcoming "167 Tongues," which focuses on the area's polyglot nature.

The show - at the Jackson Repertory Theatre - started with a vision and a map.

"We drew a map...and plotted where each character lived," said one of the 11 playwrights, [Stefani Zdravec](#).

The team of writers swarmed the streets in October to build the 37-character cast that ranges from an Indian sweet-shop vendor to the ghost of an Irish immigrant.

"It's kind of like homecoming for me," said local playwright [Les Hunter](#), 31.

"I get to write about people in my backyard," said Hunter, who created a character based on a Russian bookseller who sets up shop in front of [Met Foods](#) on 37th Ave. and 78th St.

The play - which runs every Friday and Saturday through May 28 - gives audience members a two-hour experience of what it's like to live in such an ethnically rich environment.

"[These are] people's real stories," said the show's artistic director, Ari Laura Kreith.

"Slowly, you get that deeper sense of living here," said Kreith, who first got the idea for the show when she moved to the neighborhood five years ago.

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The play aims to capture the emotional struggles of diverse immigrant communities living in close quarters with each other and the tensions that often arise.

A Dominican manicurist waits for her Jewish-Chinese boyfriend to propose before she's deported, and a Rwandan night nurse struggles with the language barrier in the emergency room. Those are just two of the many scenarios depicted in the show.

"The play is really about how people communicate," said Kyle Knauf, who plays an elitist real estate agent.

"It's one of the few times I've [played] a minority," the white 35-year-old actor said. "And that's exciting."

With so many countries represented in the show, the team even hired a dialect coach to work with the 29 actors involved.

"It's been a big challenge," said Angie Balsamo, 27. "We want to be as close to exact as possible," she said of the many accents.

And after months of writing and rehearsals, the troupe is confident the show's representation of the neighborhood is spot-on.

"It definitely captures it," said Rehana Mirza, 31. "It does reflect a day in Jackson Heights."

For tickets, call (718) 874-9431 or visit www.jacksonrep.org for more info.



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