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Capturing the Vitality of Jackson Heights and Putting It on Stage

By **FERNANDA SANTOS** MAY 4, 2010

When Ari Laura Kreith moved to Jackson Heights, Queens, from California in 2005, it was not the 100 nationalities that are said to be represented in the neighborhood that captivated her. After all, California is a pretty diverse place, too.

What made Jackson Heights unique, in Ms. Kreith's view, was that it had none of the ethnic dividers she had encountered elsewhere, "no bubbles isolating one community from the next," she said.

"I had the feeling I was seamlessly dropping in and out of all these different cultures just by walking down the street," said Ms. Kreith, who studied theater at Yale and whose first job after college was as an assistant to the playwright David Mamet.

Her amazement turned into curiosity, which turned into excitement — an emotional jumble that Ms. Kreith said she had experienced before, whenever an idea popped into her head during her time running a theater group she started in Davis, Calif.

Her idea finally came to fruition when she managed to do what she knows best: encapsulate Jackson Heights in a play.

It took 11 playwrights, 25 scenes, 29 actors and 37 characters to pull off. The result is “167 Tongues”, a title that refers to the number of languages believed to be spoken in Queens and is a nod to Jackson Heights’s multiethnic fabric.

The play, which opens on Friday at Public School 69, is a production of the Jackson Repertory Theater, which was created in 2008 to bring affordable professional productions to a pocket of Queens where cultural activities are rare.

The play’s writers and cast are a microcosm of Jackson Heights, a neighborhood that many demographers believe is the most diverse in the country.

Ms. Kreith recruited them in unusual places and in unlikely ways. She found Les Hunter at a local cafe after she peered over his shoulder at the play he was writing on his laptop. She met Lauren Currie Lewis, who plays a pregnant Ecuadorean teenager named Leti, through her other job as a consultant, hiring actors to play patients in role-playing exercises with medical students.

Writing a play collectively requires organizational guidelines: an author develops a theme and doles out assignments to the writers. But this exercise unfolded differently. The playwrights went on a guided tour of Jackson Heights the first time they met and then convened around a big desk to draw a map of what they had just seen, complete with the streets, places and people they could remember.

“It was sort of like, forget about accuracy and scale. Focus on whatever caught your attention,” said one of the writers, Anna Kushner, a Cuban-American who grew up in Philadelphia and has lived in Jackson Heights for five years.

They sat in a circle on the floor of Ms. Kreith’s apartment on 80th Street,

came up with a character, wrote a basic description of the character on an index card and passed the card to the person next to them, who had to create a pair of characters with whom the original one might interact.

By then, many of the playwrights had spent time roaming around Jackson Heights on their own, eavesdropping on conversations, asking questions and observing. They were inspired by real people, like the men seen dancing the tango at a gay bar on Roosevelt Avenue, a bookseller who works two days a week from a sidewalk table at the corner of 37th Avenue and 76th Street, and a manicurist who doubles as a therapist to her customers.

The bookseller drives a van that he parks on the street overnight, not far from his books, which he leaves on a table, shielded by thick plastic. Mr. Hunter, who is studying for a doctorate in English at Stony Brook University and who also lives in Jackson Heights, said he had never talked with the man, but imagined that he stayed awake in the van all night, guarding his possessions from thieves.

He had heard that the bookseller was from the former Yugoslavia, but Mr. Hunter conceived of him as Russian. The part is played by Arje Shaw, the son of a Holocaust survivor who makes a living writing novels and plays that have run on and off Broadway. The manicurist was inspired by the woman who does Ms. Kushner's nails and who, upon meeting one of Ms. Kushner's friends who was dealing with relationship problems, dispensed such valuable advice that the friend has not since had a manicure from anybody else.

No one knows anything about the men who were dancing the tango. One of the playwrights spotted them and another, Rehana Mirza, used them in one of her scenes.

The characters in the play were changed just enough so that they would not be instantly recognizable, Ms. Kreith said.

Some of them "rub against one another," she added, their stories

interlaced across scenes. For example, Leti, the pregnant teenager, has a Bangladeshi friend named Tasleema, who steals contraceptive pills from her mother's pharmacy. She gives the pills to Leti, who hopes that by taking them all at once, she can mimic the effects of the morning-after pill. Spanish is used liberally throughout the play (there will be placards with English translations), and English is spoken with a variety of accents. The dramaturge, Angie Balsamo, doubles as the dialect coach, teaching actors how someone from Russia, Mexico or Tibet would pronounce the same English word.

More than a collection of short plays, the scenes are interwoven narratives, or "a collage," said one of the playwrights, Alvin Eng, the son of Chinese immigrants who settled in Flushing, Queens. "They're all elements of the same portrait."

Ms. Lewis, who lives in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, said the play "is like all of New York City squeezed into a neighborhood, and then the whole neighborhood squeezed into characters and scenes."

The performances will be held in the cafeteria of the school, at 77-02 37th Avenue. Ms. Kreith, who is also the theater group's artistic director, wanted it that way because it allowed seats to be arranged so that the audience surrounded the area where the actors perform.

"It's about making the people who are our inspiration not our backdrop," she said, "but part of the action."

A version of this article appears in print on May 5, 2010, on page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: Capturing the Vitality Of Jackson Heights And Putting It on Stage.