

# The Queens Mirror

The bustling theatre scene in NYC's most diverse borough is all about putting the neighborhood on stage

BY LES HUNTER

Yoko Myoi in *(re)DEVELOP (death valley)* at the Chocolate Factory in Long Island City, Queens.

**E**VERYTHING YOU COULD WANT YOU'D FIND right in Queens," says John Guare of his Queens childhood in the intro to *The House of Blue Leaves*. Today, more than half of the population of Queens was born in another country, and that's one reason Guare's statement holds true: From the famous spicy chicken over basmati rice served in Urdu-inflected English at Sammy's Halal in Jackson Heights, to the outdoor cafés in predominantly Greek Astoria wafting the scents of halva and baklava, to the Afrocentric bookstores and boutiques lining the 165th Street pedestrian mall in Jamaica, it's all in Queens. Increasingly, "everything you could want" includes a thriving theatre scene that derives a good deal of its creative engine from the diverse communities it serves.

For many years prior to 1996, professional theatre in Queens was offered on a continuous basis by only two groups, Black Spectrum Theatre and Thalia Spanish Theatre, organizations that today still offer culturally relevant programming to the black and Hispanic communities, respectively. Since that time, the scene has grown to seven full-time producing bodies that offer a wide range of theatrical presentations, including more than 25 different plays last season alone. Of any U.S. area, "Queens has the most ethnicities and spoken languages per square mile," says Angel Gil Orrios, Thalia's artistic director. "It's only natural that cultural institutions come out of these growing populations."

Queens Theatre in the Park, or "QTP" (pronounced "Q-Tip"), as it is affectionately known, became an independent nonprofit in 1997 and is by far the biggest player on the scene,

running a \$4-million-a-year budget, showcasing dance and music as well as plays in a building constructed for the 1964 World's Fair. Its new-play series, the "Immigrant Voices Project," develops plays from public readings to polished works. "The goal is ultimately to show the pieces here," says Jeffrey Rosenstock, executive director of QTP. Both *Our Dad Is in Atlantis* by Javier Malpica (co-produced with the Working Theater and Lark Play Development Center) and *Kingdom* by Aaron Jafferis and Ian Williams (in partnership with the Public Theater) were developed at QTP and later produced both in both Queens and Manhattan.

A litany of other groups has since joined QTP on the scene. Long Island City's Chocolate Factory, which opened in 2004, has become a theatrical hothouse of new plays and performance art. Astoria Performing Arts Center, which opened in 2001, supplies a robust arts education program in conjunction with mainstage shows. Both the Queens Players, which focuses on new interpretations of old classics, and the classical theatre Queens Shakespeare were founded in 2005. Jackson Repertory Theatre, the most recent addition to the scene, looks to create new work that engages the diverse neighborhood of Jackson Heights.

That being said, the longest-running show in town—still going strong in its 40th season—is Black Spectrum Theatre in St. Albans, Queens, a middle-class African-American and Caribbean suburb stretching eastward of Brooklyn. "People ask me, how can I do this for 40 years?" says Carl Clay, founder and artistic director of Black Spectrum and a St. Albans native.



ANN MOORE

Leslie Harrell Dillen in *Stepmother in a Sari* at Jackson Rep in Jackson Heights, Queens.

“What sustains me is the idea that our theatre is a reflection of our community.”

The theatre got its start in 1969 in the basement of Trinity Lutheran Church with *Black Love*, a piece that spoke directly to

the African-American community. In 1978, Black Spectrum moved to a storefront on Linden Avenue, a place whose seating capacity, according to longtime Black Spectrum musical director Derek Galloway, “just kept getting smaller and smaller. We’d have a show, sell it out, and the police would come and tell us we had too many people. So we’d have another show, let in the max number that they told us, and then they’d come back and tell us there were too many people anyway.”

Eventually, in 1988, the theatre moved to its current residence, a 425-seat renovated theatre in a breezy concrete municipal park building in Roy Wilkins Park, a few miles from its old storefront. Though the venue has changed, the goals of the company have not. “We take issues that are of paramount concern to the community and turn them into theatre pieces,” says Clay. Theatrical pieces such as *Oh! Oh! Obesity*, which addresses overeating, *Samson’s Way*, which deals with gang violence, and *Clear Vision*, which examines teen pregnancy, illustrate that commitment. Each piece is an original work written by a resident of St. Albans, which the company develops through readings to full productions.

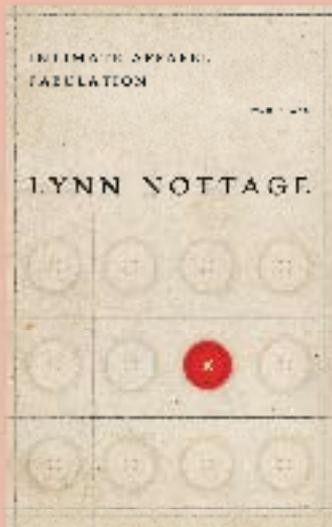
Black Spectrum opens this season with *Single Black Female*, Lisa B. Thompson’s humorous consideration of the romantic options available to a successful black woman. The theatre then hosts its annual original work *’Twas the Night Before Kwanzaa* in December. It takes a turn for the serious in March with a revival of Rob Penny’s *Good Black Don’t Crack*, a piece about a single mother’s struggle to raise her child in Pittsburgh in the 1970s. In conjunction with the play, the theatre is holding an informational conference, “Loving Our Single Mothers.” Also in March, Black Spectrum will launch into work on a new play by Clay titled *The Game*, with the expectation of producing it on the company’s traveling summer stage.

*The Game* finds two men, one black and one white, in the back of a library, playing a game of chess. It quickly becomes apparent that the game in progress serves as an allegory for race relations in the United States. “They’re not so much playing chess as they are dealing with the thoughts that we all have about other races,” says Clay. “This is the stuff that people deal with in the privacy of their bedrooms when they talk about race.”

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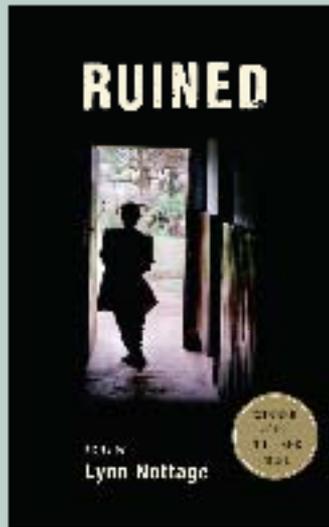
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Clay believes the issues raised in *The Game* are particularly timely: “Just because we have a black president, people think we don’t need to worry about discrimination anymore. But I think we still have things to talk about.”

Once you get to Jamaica Center from St. Albans, it’s then a simple ride west on the E train to Jackson Heights, one of the nation’s first urban “garden communities,” where the streets are lined by block-long brick neo-Tudor apartment buildings with steep shingled roofs and turrets. Many of these buildings house private gardens, only glimpses of which can be seen from the street.

Jackson Heights is home to large Indian, Pakistani and Colombian communities, as well as smaller Russian, Argentine and Chinese populations, among enclaves of young professionals. For Jackson Repertory Theatre, the rich diversity of the neighborhood provides ample material for works inspired by and about the various cultures in flux, but also creates programming difficulties: Previous shows such as *Stepmother in a Sari*, about a white woman who goes to India for her stepdaughter’s wedding, and *No Solo Mio*, an audience-participation solo show about,



*'Twas the Night Before Kwanzaa* at Black Spectrum Theatre in St. Albans, Queens.

among other things, learning English as a second language, may inadvertently alienate some demographic groups in an attempt to reach out to others. “How do you do work that celebrates all these different voices and at the same time is visible to a broad range of people?” wonders Ari Laura Kreith, Jackson Rep’s artistic director. This season, Jackson Rep will attempt to answer this question by developing and producing *167 Tongues* (named after the 167 different languages spoken in

the borough), a series of 12 interwoven short works by 12 different playwrights, many of them local (including Stefanie Zadravec, whose *Honey Brown Eyes* was published in the February '09 issue of this magazine).

“It’s not an evening of 12 short plays about Jackson Heights,” warns Kreith—instead, she explains, it’s an “exploration of the emotional geography of the area.” The playwrights, as well as a choreographer and a composer, will go through a series of

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dramaturgical workshops: First, they will physically draw a map of the neighborhood, then construct characters that would populate different parts of the map. With these characters, they will create scenes that will be streamlined into an overarching narrative, perhaps one guided by a child. “I like the idea of seeing the neighborhood through the eyes of a child,” says Kreith. “I want the work to share in the kind of non-judgmental encounter that a child has.”

Jackson Rep isn't the only group whose work opens a dialogue with its neighborhood. The Chocolate Factory, a hip Long Island City arts venue that trades heavily in the names associated with the downtown Manhattan performance arts scene, recently examined commercial development in LIC in a show called *(re)DEVELOP (death valley)*. Further west on the 7 train from Jackson Heights, and just across the East River from Manhattan, Long Island City is a former working-class Irish neighborhood that has recently seen a flush of expensive new skyscrapers.

“I wanted to make something that spoke to my own experience of living in this neighborhood,” says Brian Rogers, the Chocolate

## Jackson Rep will develop and produce *167 Tongues*, named after the 167 different languages spoken in the borough.

Factory's artistic director. *(re)DEVELOP (death valley)* took shape in the company's converted warehouse as a non-narrative pastiche of video, dance and theatre. The performance was partially obscured by a continually changing series of plastic panels onto which videos, including images of the live performance itself, were projected. “I'm interested in the way that neighborhoods constantly recycle, and the way different people have lived on the same piece of land at different times,” Rogers explains.

Next spring, a new version of *(re) DEVELOP (death valley)* will go up at the Redhouse Arts Center in Syracuse, N.Y. Syracuse, an old industrial town, is currently undergoing a real estate revival not unlike

the one in LIC. Accordingly, says Rogers, “It will be a different show, but some of the same things are happening there.”

Gentrification has not only played a role in the content of the growing Queens scene, but in its context as well. The founders of both the Chocolate Factory and Queens Players readily admit that cheaper rental prices in Queens play a part in their choice of location. And though many Queens theatres are experiencing the same financial problems faced by others nationwide (Thalia Spanish, for example, has produced fewer shows in recent seasons), many Manhattan artists who feel the pinch have chosen to situate themselves in the outer boroughs. Theatre becomes a way for them to engage their new neighbors. “You have to be invested in the neighborhood,” observes Astoria Performing Arts Center's executive director Taryn Drongowski. “When you are as interested in your audience as you hope they are in your shows, you have a more dynamic experience.”

**Critic and playwright Les Hunter's most recent play is *Cyrano de Bergen County, New Jersey*.**

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