Like Polaroids come to life, dramatic snapshots of life on the street
By Anne Brice, Berkeley News | MARCH 3, 2017

A dark play of love, addiction and abuse, student actors take the stage to tell the harrowing tales of youth living on the streets in Polaroid Stories, the latest piece by Theater, Dance and Performance Studies at UC Berkeley.

Inspired by Ovid's Metamorphoses, the play is made up of a series of vignettes, each a snapshot of a young runaway or sex worker learning the harsh lessons of adolescence through the transformative lens of myth. Set in a dilapidated urban landscape, the play follows a cast of deluded characters — self-described "gods" — navigating complicated, destructive relationships while they struggle to survive on the streets any way they can.

Jordan Don, a senior majoring in sociology, plays Persephone, a crack addict who has been living on the streets for most of her life. Don says she hopes the play will inspire empathy and shift people's perspective of homeless youth. "We see homeless kids on Telegraph and Shattuck, and in People's Park," she says. "It's easy to walk by them without thinking that they have their own stories, their own lives. There are so many factors that led them to that spot."

Youth living on the streets in San Francisco are 10 times more likely to die than their peers, mostly from suicide and substance abuse, according to a 2016 UC Berkeley study. "This population is highly stigmatized," says the study's main author, Colette Auerswald, a pediatrician and adolescent medicine specialist who is an associate professor of public health at UC Berkeley. "Stigma kills."

Joseph Ayers, a third-year student majoring in theater and performance studies and English, plays D (Dionysus), a drug dealer whose abandonment by his mother, Persephone, leads to an obsessive relationship with a young man who eventually leaves him. Ayers says the play shows that we all struggle with the same problems — love and loss — regardless of how and where we live.

Members of Polaroid Stories, directed by department lecturer Margot Hall and written by Naomi Iizuka, holding photos of some of the real street kids whose stories inspired the play. (Photo by Alessandra Mello)

Jordan Don plays Persephone, a crack addict who abandoned her baby years before. "I'm interested in telling stories of marginalized communities," she says. "Stories that aren't normally told." (Photo by Alessandra Mello)
“You realize that there’s not that much difference between you and the person you’re walking by on the street,” he says. “Sometimes the way we love isn’t always healthy, but you learn how you love as you go.”

Polaroid Stories opens today (Friday, March 3) and continues through Sunday, March 12, at the Zellerbach Playhouse on campus. Tickets are $13-$20, and can be purchased online or at the door. The show runs an hour and 45 minutes with no intermission.

To learn more about Polaroid Stories, visit the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies website.

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