Poignant, impressive: UC Berkeley students perform ‘Polaroid Stories’

By Emily S. Mendel March 6, 2017, 9:17 a.m.
Members of the cast of TDPS’s *Polaroid Stories*, with photographs of some of the real street kids whose stories inspired the play. Photo: Alessandra Mello

UC Berkeley’s Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies (TDPS) has created a first-rate production that would equally be at home on Addison Street as it is on the Cal campus. With fine direction by actor, director, playwright and educator Margo Hall, outstanding acting and sophisticated set, costume, lighting and sound design, the performance of playwright Naomi Iizuka’s *Polaroid Stories* comes alive.

Iizuka (author of the 2010 *Concerning Strange Devices From the Distant West* at Berkeley Rep) wrote *Polaroid Stories* in 1997 in order to publicize the turbulent lives of runaway teenagers who fall into drugs, prostitution and homelessness. Written after interviewing Minneapolis street kids, the powerful and sobering drama consists of the actors speaking to the audience and telling their characters’ life stories. Some accounts seem true, but most do not. In fact, the lies they tell about themselves are more shattering than the truth. We also observe interactions among the various characters as their allegiances and needs shift.

Playwright Iizuka has woven into the documentary-style drama the motif of the myths in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which unfortunately, gets lost in the *sturm und drang* of the characters’ bitter lives. But some references to Ovid are obvious and fit more appropriately into the play. For example, D, or Dionysus (student Joe Ayers) is a drug dealer/god who expects to be worshipped; Narcissus (Akash Patel), a gay hustler, is suitably self-obsessed; and Eurydice (student Paris Shockley) needs to free herself of the oppressive love of Orpheus (Yohana Ansari-Thomas).
The UC Berkeley Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies cast of *Polaroid Stories*. Photo: Alessandra Mello

Although the problem of teenagers living alone on unforgiving urban streets is as relevant today as it was twenty years ago when the play was written, there is a slightly dated quality about *Polaroid Stories*. And I’m not merely referring to the title. References, such as Narcissus wanting to appear on Ed McMahon’s *Star Search* and some dated slang subtract from the immediacy of the piece.
TDPS's choice to produce *Polaroid Stories* was certainly a more risky move than opting for a more conventional show with a beginning, a middle and an end. *Polaroid Stories* runs for almost two hours sans intermission and maintains a single, unrelentingly intense mood throughout. At instances, it is difficult to watch. Yet, *Polaroid Stories* succeeds largely because of the taut direction, the young actors who passionately embody their roles, the perfect garbage-strewn under-the-freeway set (Justine Law), the realistic sound design (Hannah Birch Carl), the effective lighting (Jack Carpenter) and the costuming (Wendy Sparks), rather than the content of the play itself.

*Polaroid Stories* plays through March 12. Performances are at Zellerbach Playhouse on the UC campus, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. Tickets are on sale through the TDPS Box Office or at the door.

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Oh dear. "At instances, it is difficult to watch. Yet, Polaroid Stories succeeds..." Well, not for me. Sorry to say it was one of the worst nights in the theatre in recent memory. Basically, all performances delivered at top pitch, a hideously misogynistic script, and a sameness about each performance. Directors of student performances at Cal owe these students some decent coaching. The direction of this show was mostly staging and directing traffic, lacking any subtlety or nuance at all in individual performances.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOSH</th>
<th>NOSH GUIDE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nosh</td>
<td>Breakfast &amp; Brunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bites</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drink</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nosh Lists</td>
<td>Dessert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipes</td>
<td>Coffee &amp; Tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nosh Guide</td>
<td>Drinks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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