BY ANNALISE KAMEGAWA | STAFF

There is no doubting that here at UC Berkeley, many students find themselves living in a bubble. Often, students have a home to go back to, food to eat and access to higher education and it sometimes becomes easy to forget about the rest of the world. In the UC Berkeley department of theater, dance and performance studies’ production of “Polaroid Stories,” director Margo Hall attempts to burst this bubble with heart-wrenching performances told in a series of vignettes about street youth and their struggles to escape their own lives.

Naomi Iizuka’s script descends into the underworld of these homeless youth as they don the names of ancient Greek mythological figures and consequently, their traits. Orpheus, clad in a Nirvana t-shirt, is the hopeless romantic. Persephone, with waist-length curls, is grappling with how to forget her past. And Narcissus, draped in rainbow rave gear, knows how good he looks.

“Polaroid Stories” begins with a spotlight on a balcony upstage-left illuminating a girl in gray rags, played by Anya Cherniss, performing a haunting rendition of “You are my Sunshine” to the
audience. The stage lights come on and Persephone, played by Paris Shockley, enters and begins her monologue. It’s not immediately evident that this play is supposed to be an adaptation of Greek mythology, but once she begins making allusions to the River Lethe and creating ties to her life and the fantasy world of these myths, the audience gains another lens with which to interpret this narrative.

The play’s vignette style attempts to reveal these characters’ backgrounds through a series of snapshots. Each snapshot exposes a piece of a character’s background, either through interactions with the other players or through revealing monologues.

The gods are immortal, and therefore they exist without the notion of time. In this way these teenagers, who are caught in the grips of a world whose economy is based on drugs and sex work, are much like the gods. Most of these characters have let the notion of future slip away, and with that comes a sense of immortality and invincibility. With no tomorrow, the play has a sense of chronology that gives the audience the same sense of stagnancy that the characters grapple with.

These kids fall into the same habits repeatedly and consequently, they have no plot arc to follow. Despite this, where “Polaroid Stories” shines is not in how it brings the characters forward but how it brings the audience back into their pasts. Through their monologues, these teenagers cut themselves open and spill out onto the stage.

Skinhead Boy, played by Baela Tinsley, is the manic drug addict who has escaped from his life in Oklahoma. For most of the play, his dialogue between the other characters just shows a lost kid who has fallen into the grips of addiction. Only after an altercation with Dionysus does he become more than what his name would entail. He lays slumped against a chain link fence and delivers a gut-wrenching monologue about his experiences with childhood abuse.

“Polaroid Stories” touches on themes of prostitution, addiction, the LGBTQ+ community and abuse. What’s tricky about a play about these subject matters is that they are extraordinarily difficult to perform. At times it felt that the actors were not fully equipped to take on the implications of these characters’ lives, and there were points in which the dramatization of these characters took away from the nuances of the people who they were representing.

However, despite the challenge of these roles, the players never allowed the show to lose its poignancy. Not only did the performers put on a moving show, but the set, the sound and the production were on par with professional performances. This dynamic play is an important way in which to not only experience the lives of those written by Izuka, but also to understand how valuable it is for UC Berkeley’s theater department to be brave enough to bring these kinds of stories to light.

“Polaroid Stories” runs until March 12 at Zellerbach Playhouse.

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