

‘Voices of Nashville’ - TN Women's Theater Project explores immigration experience with engaging world premiere

By Amy Stumpfl, for *The Tennessean* October 8, 2013



There is a Native American proverb that says, “It takes a thousand voices to tell a single story.”

And with its world premiere of “Voices of Nashville: Immigration and Community,” Tennessee Women’s Theater Project (TWTP) uses its unique voice to illuminate the experiences of some of the region’s newest residents.

Commissioned by TWTP and written by Christine Mather and Sara Sharpe, “Voices” offers a documentary-style approach to theater. As part of their research, the playwrights interviewed immigrants from various backgrounds, melding their stories into composite characters.

The result is both thoughtful and engaging. Structured as a play-within-a-play — a setup which facilitates quick changes and smooth transitions — “Voices” runs at an economical 90 minutes with no intermission.

But what really strikes me is the way this earnest production balances heavier themes with humor. Amidst horrific tales of violence, brutality and broken families, we find amusing bits of culture shock ranging from the weather to the wonders of peanut butter. And through it all, we hear the voices of these new Americans, ringing out with strength, resilience and courage.

That’s not to say that “Voices” shies away from tougher topics. Not all Tennesseans have embraced the area’s changing demographics, and there are plenty of examples of ignorance and bigotry. But the play’s tone is never bitter or preachy. Instead, it offers an excellent forum for difficult questions and the meaningful discussion of some truly complex issues.

TWTP founder Maryanna Clarke directs a strong ensemble, featuring TWTP regulars Keri Pisapia and David Chattam, along with newcomers Becky Wahlstrom and Colette Divine. The four actors take on more than 30 characters of varying ages and accents — including everything from Sudanese to Hispanic to Kurdish.

It’s quite a feat, especially when you consider that there are no real scene changes. Actors switch gears in full view of the audience, using simple costumes — along with distinctive accents — to establish their characters. In the hands of lesser performers, such a streamlined approach could easily get clunky. But this cast draws us into the powerful narrative with great skill, with each actor finding his or her moment to shine.

Chattam is especially charming as Gatlaug, a former boy soldier from Sudan who embodies the American Dream with grace and gratitude. Pisapia challenges our misconceptions of Muslim women as Midya, while Wahlstrom gives a sensitive — and remarkably convincing — portrayal of a young Mexican man named Oscar. And Divine is simply mesmerizing as Uwimana, an elderly Congolese woman who was forced to leave her family behind in order to survive.

These are the stories that not only define our population, but also can serve to connect us. There is much we can learn from “Voices of Nashville” — if only we’re willing to listen.