

Reviews by EVA HEINEMANN

At Metropolitan Playhouse they are currently running their East Side Stories which are divided into 4 different evenings of short plays with the themes of: Players, Sages, Connections and Revolutions.

I went to the CONNECTIONS AND REVOLUTIONS performances. The 4 short playlets all start in the 19th century and build to present day concentrating on the Lower East Side.

In CONNECTIONS:

John Shea's "Like Home" set against the "Draft Riots" of 1863 an Irish couple (Ryan Halsaver and Olivia Killingsworth) flees the dangerous streets and breaks into the home of Mother (Kathryn Neville Browne) and son (Seth McNeill) who are afraid to leave and abandon the Father and sister who haven't returned home yet. Are the Irish couple safer with the mob or this upper class prejudiced family?



In Kathy Coudle-King's "A Roof Over Every Head" taking place in 1902 and 1907 features 4 historical women prominent in the Labor movement: Frances Perkins (Alice Rothman Hicks), Clara Lemlich (Olivia Killingsworth) Pauline Newman (Ellen Warner) and Rose Schneiderman (Regina Gibson). History comes to life over the plight of working girls,

From Wikipedia: Pauline M. Newman (October 18, 1887 – April 8, 1986) was an American labor activist. She is best remembered as the first female general organizer of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) Rose Schneiderman (April 6, 1882 – August 11, 1972) was a prominent United States labor union leader, socialist, and feminist of the first part of the twentieth century. She is credited with coining the phrase "Bread and Roses", later used as the title of a poem and set to music and interpreted by several performers. Frances Perkins Wilson (born Fannie Coralie Perkins; April 10, 1880[1][2] – May 14, 1965) was the U.S. Secretary of Labor from 1933 to 1945, the longest serving in that position, and the first woman appointed to the U.S. Cabinet.

We are now up to present day in Alan Stolzer's "Orchard Street Revisited". A Grandson (Seth McNeill) is haunted by his Grandfather (Michael Twaine) as he contemplates selling the synagogue to a Representative (Max Hunter) of the Collier's Trust, an uncaring Corporation.

Reese Thompson's "Neighbors" has flustered Maud (Regina Gibson) pitted against snobby by the rules Kenneth (Max Hunter). Can they come to an understanding?

I loved the curtain call that director Patricia Lynn came up with to show the actor's versatility by taking bows in the different plays they were in. As I live in the neighborhood I could appreciate its rich history of the poor and downtrodden trying not to turn into the rich and uptrodden.

HI DRAMA

April 2016

REVOLUTIONS:

Directed by Alexander Harrington

Steve Kalvar's "The Fall of Boss Tweed" is before the election of 1871 when Boss Tweed (Frank Anderson) tries to get his aide de camp Sweeney (Garth Kravits) and his crony the NYC Mayor Oakey Hall (Eric Emil Oleson) literally help him 'fix' the election by getting money from Slippery Dick Connolly (Kelly Dean Cooper).

Nina Howe's "And Here's ...Boris" was about Young Boris Thomashefsky (Andrew DiTusa) and his friend Sam (John Maddaloni) getting ready to sell tickets to his performance when a Dr. Daniel Schimmel (Garth Kravits) comes in with other plans.

David Vazdauskas' "Abandon" is about something I am very familiar with. A group of people have taken to squatting an abandoned building in 1978 when CBGB was just starting out and penniless young people with their dreams were flocking to the city. Hilly (Kyle Minshew) would send people to this abandoned building where Joe (Jack Sochet) seemed to be in charge. Di (Amanda Mason) who's been around the block and knows a thing or two with tools takes over the basement until new arrival Kira (Kelly McCready) comes into the picture with her own ideas.

Sergio Castillo's "Radical" set in the not-so different future has fed up Hector (Randy Cordero) and old flame Celia (Kelly McCready) trying to get him to come to his senses. I didn't quite understand this one as there were too many loose threads that didn't add up to a coherent plot and I didn't quite understand their relationship either. But the acting was good even if the plot was weak.

The beauty of all these shows is how they mingle real historical characters into the narrative of universal themes that we can all relate to no matter where we live.



PLAYERS

Written by Performers Jesse Hawkes, Laurabeth Brea & Anthony Wills Jr.

Directed by Mahayana Landowne

For more than a decade the Metropolitan Playhouse under the direction of Alex Roe has been heavily involved in the sort of ‘community theatre’ that gives us an authentic lens through which to view the residents of its locale in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Performers create stories from interviews with people who live and work in the historic neighborhood famous for its indie-art-punk-rock-gastro-café-free loving, and now often pricey rentals. The neighborhood has changed, it’s been changing, and it will continue to do so. Pick up any coffee table book about one of its famous children, check social and print media for podcasts and articles about ‘louisada’ ‘alphabet city,’ ‘the east village’, and then you’ll realize that what’s been happening every year at the Metropolitan Playhouse is theatrical archiving in the form of what it calls “East Side Stories.”

Three weeks-worth of storytelling about the inhabitants of this popular nabe, from monologues, and short plays to downright ethnodrama, no matter which night you attend you are sure to meet a resident or worker filled with more color than a Pantone chart, and possibly more energy and dynamism than you would ever bargain for. This year’s offerings include Directors (listed as Players on the website), Sages, Connections and Revolutions. I saw “Players” recently – 3 monologues woven together by hope. In “Athos” Laurabeth Brea presented the life of a writer, comedian, and ex-prisoner Athos Cakiades in a manner reminiscent of Chekov: not much was happening, but a lot was going. She managed to pull us into the story quietly, taking us along for what seemed to be a ride going nowhere and then in the last minutes everything is made clear and we’re rejoicing with Cakiades, and then you realized you just had an intimate moment with someone, and witnessed a damn good portrayal.

Unlike Brea’s “Athos,” Jesse Hawkes and Anthony Wills, Jr. represented the kind of lower eastsiders whose personalities leap and spring at and into you. In “The Cockeyed Pessimist” Hawkes introduced us to Robert Hieger a life brought to the stage as a yellow clad duck. Well that got my attention, it was definitely the most theatrical of the three stories and yet, you never got the feeling of embellishment, no matter how yellow, feathery, or bubbly Hawkes portrayal was, in fact I kept thinking, “I’ve seen this guy, I’m pretty sure I’ve seen him more than once.” And the singing, was wonderful - The staging of this piece was arguably the most successful of the evening regarding clarity, and movement. The work had a particular ebb and flow without being predictable, which allowed for the audience to see a natural journey of character and evolution. In “It’s Good to be Alive” Anthony Wills gives you the joyful, thoughtful, yin and yang world of Ahmed El-Motassem. He says, he dances, plays instruments, makes art, and stories and philosophies. This story started to break my heart a little, and then I realized no empathy needed here Ahmed wants you to just be and understand that there’s music and poetry in everything. He’s living by his own rules and stepping to an original beat. There was strong imagery as well crafted by what could have only been a happy resolve between actor and director – the photograph/picture moment when he places them on the wall, coupled with emotional intensity that jumped from bitter to sweet to complex made you look pass the bad wig.

“Players” was a success. A peak into the public and mostly private lives of the theatre organization’s neighbors. Catch all four evenings this week before it closes.

HI DRAMA

April 2016

SAGES

Written by Performers Teresa Kelsey, Alex Roe, and Andrew Bryce

Directed by Mahayana Landowne

"Sages" is great theatre. Taking us to the root and heart of the genre, it is storytelling at its best: natural, engaging, entertaining, meaningful and satisfying. Each actor represents a resident of what is now termed the 'East Village.' The Metropolitan Playhouse has been doing this kind of theatre for the last thirteen years, and the lineup and structure has developed over that time to include short plays, as well as the staple monologues. The organization has managed to maintain the standard however, and that's because it has stuck to the core of the project's original intention: to tell stories, and give voice to the lives of the people who shape and trod the landscape of Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Teresa Kelsey is clearly a Metropolitan favorite having done 4 previous shows with the theatre house. Her flawless Hanya Krill in 'A New Design' had us from her entrance with a bowl of decorated eggs. At no point were we ever lost, or unsure, we just sat and inhaled the history, the details, the artistry. We learned about a woman who cares about her heritage and the people who preserve it, and a great deal more. It's good to witness acting technique on display without its strings – she was my clear favorite.

Alex Roe as motorcycle man -Hugh Mackie in 'The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance' provided a textured segue that introduced much movement to the evening, the placement of his piece in the center of the three monologues was smart.

Andrew Bryce's Pastor in 'Possible/Impossible' ended with a sermon, and got away with preaching to us only because he pricked at a moral core earlier by shedding light on some of the nasty blotches in the immigration process for those seeking asylum on our shores. The immigrant issue was in fact the glue and threading of the evening's work, giving the audience three distinct perspectives of what a country boasts in its policies, but so messily, and mercilessly handles in its execution.

Kudos to the combined creative energies involved in putting together this cohesive, and simple staging of theatre. Set pieces and props transitioned from actor to actor, scene to scene, and in some cases time and space beautifully.

The Metropolitan Playhouse is one of those tiny downtown spaces with seating similar to that of a thrust style theatre with its 3 section raked seating ensconced in what can easily feel like a box. Not a true black box, but when staging anything here, it could prove challenging, if you're inexperienced. "Sages" team managed to make all that seem like child's play. The direction was thoughtful, and effective, and the lighting design, ever so subtle, and just right.

"East Side Stories" will end on May 1st and if you don't hurry and catch one of these nights of theatre you would have missed a performance space paying homage to its neighbors, the lifeblood and history of its community.