

REVIEWS

MIGRANTS PLAYING MIGRANTS FORGE A NEW COMMUNITY THEATRE

Shelagh Goonewardene

Migration: a word which encapsulates a confusing, contradictory reality of thought and feeling, of ideas and concepts, of social discomfort and emotional pain shot through with comedy, tragedy and occasionally, joy, is a 'state' or 'country' in which both actors and audience live. To portray all this dissonance on stage needs a new kind of freedom in the theatre.

First, a bare space stripped of all illusion, just the starkness of electric wires and lights hanging loose with sound equipment and a huge mechanical gantry of uncertain significance in full view. Also included, a conventionally "dressed" corner which symbolises both the establishment theatre and the comfortable home of the successful middle-class migrant.

This is the performance arena which brings Theatre of Migration with its rich profusion of meanings to an audience which responds with equal complexity.

The actors/migrants have written their own scripts in several cases and from these flow a multitude of stories, some only glimpsed or lightly traced, others are more complete, and still others, almost weighty. The sketches use different forms of narration: song, dance, recitation, stand-up comedy and naturalistic drama. The episodes are woven into a whole by the Story Teller (Pauline Gunewardene), the Counter Story Teller (Kumudini Gunasekera) and the Third Story Teller (Chris Day) "with the master story", an imaginative theatrical device which enables the scenes to telescope fluidly into each other. Another innovation which binds the scenes together is the old woman (Carmel Raffel) who traverses the stage at intervals wheeling her trolley, while she recites her daily shopping list like an incantation. It is only at the end that she stops to give the audience her own personal view of migration.

Thoughtful dramatic cameos such as "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" and "A migrant maid who discovers Shakespeare's Mirror" are juxtaposed with comic pieces such as "First Job in Australia", "Oh what a feeling!" and "Language".

Providing counterpoint and reaction from the 'actors as audience' within the collage of playlets are, on the one hand, the three old men of the "Crude Jokes Cafe" with their derisive laughter, and the main group of migrants on stage throughout, on the other.

In "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" Kumudini Gunasekera and Jehan Gonsalkorale convey the heightened emotions of a clash between an insecure mother who clings defensively to her past influential connections in Colombo despite the damning aspersions cast on them by her human rights-conscious son. This episode introduced a new dimension to the general level of the exploration of migrant dilemmas, and invited serious reflection on the issues it projected.

Natasha Moldrich was outstanding as a migrant house-maid in Singapore in "A migrant maid who discovers Shakespeare's Mirror". She captured a dramatic intensity which provided one of the most gripping moments in the whole presentation.

In the segment "Moreton Bay" the first-ever Australian cricket team, an Aboriginal team which toured England in 1868, are shown returning "home" to be confronted with the song "Moreton Bay" which relates the story of an episode in modern Aboriginal history which is linked with the torment of Irish prisoners. Natasha Moldrich used her attractive voice to full advantage to movingly express the tragedy described.

In "Bound for Botany Bay" Anglo-Irish migrants sang a sad ballad "Toorali, Oorali, Yea, We're bound for Botany Bay" which was their journey's end. In contrast, the airport, which is in fact in Botany Bay a couple of centuries later, witnesses the arrival of Sri Lankan migrants who sing of their hopes and expectations to the same tune, but in comic mode.

There is an irresistible vein of comedy running throughout the chain of episodes sustained by Sunil de Silva's and Gandhi Macintyre's marked talents for this genre of theatre.

Devika de Fonseka and Chitran Duraisamy demonstrated fine ensemble playing throughout with youthful Cameron Duraisamy and Rohan Lalich making interesting contributions.

Daya Gonsalkorale rendered a powerful Australian song of the Gallipoli experience "And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda" with considerable impact, winding down the gaiety of "Mona Goonewardene's Party" into sadness and contemplation of the final passage to old age, death and the post-mortal state.

The last scene "Anton Chekhov and Migration" depicts two sisters in the military town of Diyatalawa who are about to migrate to Australia leaving a handicapped relative behind. They are in tears as they farewell their mentor, a close friend of their dead father, as he leaves with his regiment for the North-East and war. A military band plays resoundingly in the background giving a lift to the sadness of the sisters and the resigned resolution of the Colonel who goes to perform his duty although he longs for the day when humanity would have outgrown the need for war.

Migration is shown again as movement within the diverse and contradictory demands of the forces in life—to stay in one's country of birth or to venture into a new country is ultimately to confront the unknown, to face success or failure, joy or pain, to make a human effort without any guaranteed results. The Chekhovian influences from "Uncle Vanya" and "The Three Sisters" were poignantly appropriate and gave resonance and added significance to the entire scene which was acted well by Natasha Moldrich, Judy Macintyre and Gandhi Macintyre.

The ending fittingly summarised and completed the theatrical exploration of the journey that is migration as it extends into the larger journey of life itself.

Director Ernest Macintyre's considerable knowledge of stagecraft was needed to shape this mass of material into a cohesive, balanced whole that is viable and effective for both performers and viewers. Theatrical resourcefulness is one of his particular strengths and

here he uses imagination and flair to overcome the problems that are peculiar to this production.

The production is also a movement into a new, experimental community theatre where the flexibility of theatrical construction and its ability to evolve with the actors as they express and endeavour to articulate their own experiences, is tested to the full. There are difficulties and risks, the occasional unevenness in writing and performing, but the lapses and imperfections are interestingly, those inherent in the condition that is portrayed, no longer made invisible or smoothed over by theatrical techniques of older conventions of performance. The very nature of this type of performance investigates the themes and metaphors of migration seen as three countries, the home country, the host country and the country of migration itself. Questions are posed: which country is real and which is lived as fiction or, as one line describes it "being here and there, and neither here nor there."

The production is enhanced by Macintyre's long and rewarding relationship with theatre itself. The Shakespearean and Brechtian references, the use of music from the productions of the plays of these seminal playwrights, builds on the associations of the originals, adding immeasurably to the overall enjoyment of this fresh theatrical journey. It is a journey that the theatregoer has to take more than once to absorb the full experience and derive all the benefits which Theatre of Migration makes available.

The performances were given at the Lighthouse Theatre on 19th and 20th January 2002 for the Sydney Fringe Festival. ■

