



East Village Chronicles

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nytheatre.com review

Martin Denton · Jun 10, 2007

This is the fourth edition of *East Village Chronicles*; Metropolitan Playhouse has been running this series on an annual basis, and it just keeps getting better and better, it seems. What they do is commission original short plays about the neighborhood where the theatre is located. Because they're on East 4th Street between Avenues A and B, that neighborhood—call it what you like: Lower East Side, East Village, Alphabet City—offers rich and diverse inspiration for the playwrights.

There are two different evenings in this year's *Chronicles*; I caught "Evening B," which features five plays, written by Trav S.D., Carlos Jerome, Kimberly Wadsworth, Richard Sheinmel, and Laura Livingston. Two of these draw on real historical events, both absolutely worth telling. Wadsworth's contribution, *Triangles Everywhere*, is about a survivor of the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, who wonders to the TV journalist who is interviewing her on her 100th birthday whether the lessons supposedly learned from that catastrophe have actually yielded tangible social change. Mr. S.D.'s delightful piece, *Parkhurst's Descent*, traces the journey of real-life preacher/do-gooder Rev. Charles Parkhurst as he travels to a succession of increasingly indecent (and hazardous) locales in search of authentic sin. S.D.'s language here is vivid and lively, and he's supplied a terrific surprise ending. Both of these plays are blessed with leading actors who seem to perfectly embody their intriguing roles—Wendy Merritt in the case of *Triangles*, who tells the survivor's harrowing tale grippingly; Christopher Lukas in the case of *Parkhurst*, who shows us both the zealot and the innocent in this crusading reverend. (G.R. Johnson lends strong support as a private detective named Gardner who serves as Parkhurst's guide.)

Jerome's play, *Age of Discovery*, takes place in Seward Park High School in 1952, when it was at the very bottom rung of the New York City education system. An ambitious principal and a smart but tenacious senior lock horns over a number of issues, the most important of which is whether she will stop hanging around with the rowdy neighborhood gang, as the principal would prefer. Jerome packs several other issues into this short play, and the result is somewhat diffuse.

The two pieces presented after intermission both offer nostalgic and optimistic views of the East Village's possibly gentrifying but still distinctive character. Sheinmel's *Sheila Mom* is about a free-spirited Auntie Mame-type sharing a pretty summer day in Tompkins Square Park with her nephew. The ending of this play seems to come out of nowhere, but the impressionistic jaunt through the city's Bohemian heritage is a lot of fun (even if the best of the aunt's anecdotes takes place in the West Village).

Laura Livingston's *Quiet Howl* is a terrific tribute to the East Village's sometimes-sleeping artistic soul. In a new trendy bar, a yuppie gets stood up by his blind date and morphs into a latter-day Allen Ginsburg, while a performance artist soaks in the mundane evening happening around her and makes performance art out of it and all the while the anarchist upstairs threatens to call the police. This is grand, zany, oversized stuff, performed brilliantly by Debargo Sanyal, Shelleen Kostabi, and Wendy Merritt, with Amy Smith as the proprietress of the establishment where it all goes down.

Sidney Fortner is at the helm, with Alex Roe responsible for the *Parkhurst* play, which is neatly wound around the other pieces to give the evening a reinforced connectivity; great idea that.

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