

PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Genocide Trail: a holocaust un-spoken

October 10 – 26, 2002

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The Bathhouse Theater 7312 W. Greenlake Drive N 206 524 1300.

Presented by Seattle Central Community College in association with the Conciliation Project.

Conceived and Directed by Tawnya Pettiford -Wates, Ph.D., Musical score by David Duvall, Choreography by Kabby Mitchell III, Musicians: Piano David Duvall, Flute Blake Cisneros, Bass/Guitar Jesse Harmonson, Clarinet Melissa Locke. Scenery, Lighting Design and Technical Director Edward Hofmann, Costume Design Deborah Sorensen, Properties Artwork and Design Angelena McQuarter, Sound Design Herbert Thompson, Logo Poster and Program Design Chris A. Le Cocq.

Whenever you dance
Wherever you dance
Dance to heal the earth....

Genocide Trail begins with a chant, followed by an invocation to our Grandmothers and Grandfathers to “be with us tonight.” Warrior chiefs recite a prayer poem.

From this meditative beginning, a ritual poetic drama, based in its form on African roots and other sources, reveals the history of the oppression of Native Americans. But there is no linear story or explanation; instead song, chant, dance and music are the means of communication. There is almost no dialog in which people actually communicate, only speeches, pronouncements, clichéd ideas, and poetic invocations.

Historical figures pass through: Christopher Columbus, Queen Isabella, Buffalo Bill, Colonel Custer, Andrew Jackson, Captain John Smith and Pocahontas (after Disney), but collective voices and types of people create the drama. There are white women as wives of soldiers “We must strike first or we will all be lost,” as temptresses, as oppressive missionary, as harsh schoolteachers in the boarding schools, as a quiz show host, sympathetic psycho-talk show host, and new age Indian wannabe. All of these parts (and others) are played, complete with song and dance routines, by Amanda Carraway, Joan Williams and Kimberly Cook. White guys are the historical figures as well as “Good white person,” “Definitely Not Guilty,” dumb white guys assaulting and harassing natives, “They were weak and we were strong.” Called White Minstrels, Dennis James Hardin, Matt Peterson, Nicolas Townsend transform from one type of racist to another.

Red Minstrels are the women of the trail of tears, giving birth as they walk along, “It is hard to speak of what has been taken” the mothers, the daughters, the victims of the mission and boarding school oppressions, the poetic sources of wisdom, the celebration of native ideas. They are played by Myla Flores, Unyoung Kim and Donyell Spotsville.

Joe McLaughlin plays the Brave who is subjected to repeated harassment and insults. “I am a Lakota brave, I am a Navaho, I am the spirit that never dies. I am 400 Treaties broken, I am Choctaw, Seminole, Creek, Pawnee, Narragansett, Mohican.” Tecumseh, the great Indian leader with a vision of an all Indian alliance to resist white men, is invoked but not impersonated, nor are any other historical chiefs named. Two chiefs “Above the Clouds” and Above the Clouds too,” played by Ric Garcia and Vanessa G. Edwards appear and reappear, chanting alternative world views and resistance: “They want to assimilate us. To become them will destroy us as a people. They want to possess land and gold. We want freedom. We do not want power. Your freedom is not free. It is not just.”

At the end, the cast gradually reveals their own identities as they set up the dichotomy, “I am the Red Clay of my Mother Earth, I am content in you,” as opposed to “I need more, more, more.”

The purpose of the play is to stimulate the audience to understand our own place in a racist society. There was an intentional resonance with 9/11 with images of the ruins of the World Trade Center and echoes of recent political speeches. The speech calling for retribution for Custer’s Last Stand sounds exactly like Bush going after terrorists everywhere, all the time.

At the end the cast asks the audience how we feel.

For me, as I looked at this presentation of racism in America, I thought of the fact that native culture still survives, albeit in a new and transformed state, in the early twenty first century. That is a powerful source of hope. If brutal racism throughout our history has not eliminated native Americans, it will hopefully not eliminate the rest of the planet either. Humans acting collectively and poetically can resist oppression as well as racism.

Other audience members offered:

“I felt truth, I felt redemption” “ I felt we’re making the same mistakes.” “The dialogs had to do with what is happening now.” “There can be some resolve, some community some coming together.”

And finally from one of the cast members.” “Hope begins from within.”

Holocaust un-spoken is part of a cycle of five plays* intended to stimulate dialog that will begin to break down racism through communication and discussion . The Conciliation Project will document *Genocide Trail* with a video, study guide and workbook that can be used in communities and schools as a means of opening up and beginning to heal racism in our community. They are holding a benefit on November 10th (206 287 5544).

Don’t overlook the art exhibition in the Bathhouse Theater lobby organized by Angelena McQuarter. Ten visual artists, working in many media, address native American oppression and cultural transformation.** My favorite pieces were Eddie Hill’s densely packed collage centering around Chief Seattle, Angelena McQuarter’s oversized handwoven dolls, Uncle Tomahawk and Blackfoot, and Deborah Lawrence’s tray painting that commemorates Leonard Peltier, the Native American activist who has spent most of his life in U.S. prisons. Her second work is titled, “Under My Wings Everything Prospers” and includes a text by Chief Standing Bear, Land of the Spotted Eagle.

*The other four are (not all of them have been written)

Yellow Fever: The Internment

uncle tom deconstructed (sic)

Stolen Land: Who named me Hispanic

Females: Global Sexism Condoned and Commended

** The ten artists are Tracey Avery, Trevaughn Bynum, Conswella Uriola, Joan I. Glendale, Keka Grant, Deborah Lawrence, Edward B. Hill, Deni Luna, Angelena McQuarter and Pei Pei Sung.

