

Sometimes A Soul Just Needs To Breathe: A Review of Mo'olelo Performing Arts Company's "Cell"



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Article by Rebecca Romani

Every society has its invisible people, its ghosts just struggling to survive. For 23 year old Gwen, new on the job and a bit slow to catch on, working at a private immigration detention center opens up a whole new world of security promised by steady paycheck, But then Gwen sees things, does things and must face the question- will this sort of security steal her soul?

This question and more are front and center in Cassandra Medley's powerful play currently being given its World Premiere by Mo'olelo Performing Arts Company at the Tenth Avenue Theatre.

Never a company to shy away from difficult, thought-provoking productions, Mo'olelo has chosen a magnificent piece to open its 11th season and to launch its new chapter under Executive Artistic Director Lydia Fort, who took over when founding director/Executive Director Seema Sueko assumed a new position in Los Angeles.

"Cell" takes place in a private immigration detention center, surrounded by a blighted town. Rene (powerfully fleshed out by Sylvia M'Lafi Thompson) has been working there for over 20 years, slowly moving up the ranks. She is so well regarded that she is able to place her younger sister, recovering addict Cerise (a strong performance by Monique Gaffney) and her niece, Gwen (a sensitive interpretation by Andréa Agosto), with the Center as well. At first, Gwen loves her job, is curious about the detainees and has lots of questions about the families in the waiting room, waiting-interminably, it seems to see their loved one (s) being held for immigration violations.

When she gets caught fraternizing with the detained immigrant women, Gwen at first stages a mini-rebellion. Eventually she is manipulated by her mother, her aunt and her new love interest, Leon, Rene's supervisor (a nuanced performance by Vimel Sephus) into going with the flow of the system- screaming at detainees, punishing them for infractions real and imagined, and looking down on them for not having had enough sense to have been born in the US.

It is only when a major catastrophe occurs that the inner workings of the detention center are laid bare and each must ask him or herself what role did their complicity play, how often did they look the other way and why.

"We decent people, we law-abiding," says Cerise.

Playwright Medley doesn't doubt that, nor does she doubt what decent, law-abiding people are capable of doing given the right circumstances.

“Cell” is right on time and right for the times, especially for a border region such as San Diego where immigration officers raid apartments at two a.m. and those without papers can disappear into the ICE detention system in the blink of an eye. As the characters of “Cell” slowly learn, their charges come from numerous countries, each fearing detention, each facing an uncertain future when they are released.

But ‘Cell’ also has a wider, deeper story to explore. In light of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement, “Cell” is asking whose lives matter and digging deeper, past the scars of segregation and Jim Crow into the tangled roots of slavery, detention and abuse. Underneath Rene’s bravado, Cerise’s struggle with addictions and Gwen’s confusion about how she should feel are the echoes of the push me, pull you counterpoint of racial politics and the question of just who is American. Medley is dredging up the issue of minorities made to do the grunt work of institutions in exchange for some access to the American Dream. It is Brown and Black Americans being turned on other Brown and Black people in a desperate search for job security and a way out of poverty. In a moment of clarity, Rene hits it right on the head- “we should not do the work of what was done to us.”

Medley’s powerful prose is well served by Lydia Fort’s deft direction and the flexible cast, easily some of the best actors working today in San Diego. While Act II, drags a little under the weight of the text, Fort’s first show as a director for Mo’olelo is a fierce, well-timed production that gives Medley’s characters a vibrant naturalness that a less experienced director might have missed.

This is due, in no small part, to the four member cast who give their lines a vibrancy that borders on the familiar- they are the voices of your neighbors, your co-workers, maybe even your relatives, so vividly do their characters inhabit the stage.

Sylvia M’Lafi Thompson is particularly strong as Rene, the older sister who takes in what’s left of her family. Thompson plays Renee with considerable range, allowing her to go from loving aunt to resigned cog in the machine to a breakdown so complete, that you can see Rene trapped inside the shell that remains. When Rene calls herself a “hollowed out soul,” you can hear hints of her fate to come. Monique Gaffney plays Rene’s newly born again, newly sober sister with a vulnerability that is both painful and wonderful to behold. Recently seen in Moxie’s “Trouble in Mind,” Gaffney really gets to stretch her wings here – Cerise is no picnic, a character whose register can turn on a dime, much like her newfound faith and sobriety, and Gaffney has impeccable timing. Vimel Sephus is another “Trouble in Mind” alum who also gets to draw on a wider scale as Leon. Unfortunately, Leon is not as well drawn as the female characters, but Sephus nicely balances him between smarmy playboy and decent human being who is trapped between a rock (keeping his job) and a hard place (protecting the female detainees and losing his job) when he finds out the Night Shift has been preying on the immigrant inmates.

Newcomer Andréa Agosto is touching as Gwen, slightly slower than her peers, possibly because her mother drank while pregnant. Agosto imbues Gwen with a charming vulnerability and naïve defiance that plays nicely against Thompson’s tired and jaded Rene. It is with a sense of loss that we witness Gwen becoming hard and inured to the detainees’ conditions.

“Cell” is set, appropriately enough against the backdrop of “cells,” the actual detention center office and Rene’s trailer. The spacing seems a little off with the trailer set seemingly a bit lost in the space while the office itself feels a bit too wide- the characters almost have to stride across

the stage sometimes to interact. The chain link fencing is a great touch, setting the mood as the audience comes in

Lily Voon's sound design is striking and gives voice to the silhouetted figures of immigrant detainees that fleetingly appear across the backdrop. Although Gwen describes some of the women in detention, the ghostly, disembodied voices speaking in a myriad of languages, allows their presence to hover over the plot. Voon's use of Angela Davis' disembodied voice providing some of the context to the action is interesting, but the gaps as Davis thinks her way through her text gives the voice over an overly earnest, over processed quality which undercuts the realness of the dialog.

"Cell" is not for the faint of heart. A raw, deeply felt staging, "Cell's" goal is to bring the untold and unknown stories of immigrant detention/mirrored by the deeper legacy of centuries of discrimination to one of the epicenters of the immigration debate. You cannot be unmoved by "Cell," and it is a production that will sit with you long after the lights have gone up.

"Cell" runs through October 18, at the Tenth Avenue Theatre. Every performance has a talk back with various cast members and/or local people involved in the issues in the play. Please see <http://moolelo.net/> for times and ticket information.

About Vanguard Culture

Vanguard Culture is an online media entity designed for culturally savvy, socially conscious individuals. We provide original interviews and reviews of the people, places and events that make up San Diego's thriving arts and culture community, as well as curated snapshots of the week's best, most inspiring and unique cultural and culinary events. We believe in making a difference in the world, supporting San Diego's vibrant visual and performing arts community and bringing awareness to important social and community causes.

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Richard Trujillo October 12, 2015 at 11:34 AM

Really intense, powerful work.