

'American Value' explores multiple perspectives in community-based play

Performance created from local interviews

By SANDY LONG
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HIGHLAND LAKE, NY — America is a nation of unlimited perspectives, based upon diverse influences that define the experience of being an American. Michael Rohd, director of Portland, Oregon's Sojourn Theatre, explores those perspectives using a place-based approach.

Recently, Rohd focused on the Upper Delaware River Valley, where he interviewed regional residents, invited local community members to perform and linked creative forces with other professional theater groups.

The result was "American Value," a phenomenal and thought-provoking performance that combined song, stilt walking, improvisation and trapeze performance. Based on local interviews, the text explored community, democracy, personal histories, politics and individual and shared values. The performance transpired last weekend at North American Cultural Laboratory (NACL) in Highland Lake, and served as the stirring season opener for its Catskill Festival of New Theatre.

Now in its seventh year, the festival presents international avant-garde performers who bring new plays, physical theatre, devised performance, community interactive works, site-specific theatre, new media and performer training workshops to NACL.

"I found a lot of diverse perspectives here," said Rohd, who posed questions like, "What does it mean to be an American?" and "What are your core values?" to individuals from across Sullivan County and neighboring communities. "I'm interested in how people build bridges across polarizing perspectives," he added.

Rohd likes exploring work that is "connected to the world in which we live." Rohd also appreciated the chance to work with theater troupes from California, Arizona, Oregon, Texas and New York, saying, "It's very rare that a theater company invites multiple companies to collaborate."

NACL co-founders and artistic directors Brad Krumholz and Tannis Kowalchuk have encouraged such collaboration for years. But for the first time, they brought community members into the process. "When we first came here, I wasn't thinking about involving the community. I just saw this as a place to do my work," says Krumholz. "I decided this year would be different. The community performers were wonderful; they committed a lot of time and energy."

Kowalchuk worked directly with the community choir and enjoyed it immensely. "We were like a small company within the company. I loved it. They were so passionate," she said.

During the play, actors performed an improvisational technique called "Soundpainting," where a composer uses a form of sign language to guide the



Leese Walker, artistic director of Strike Anywhere performance ensemble, leads performers in live composing sign language known as "Soundpainting."

creation of sounds and words unique to that performance. It was during this section that Kowalchuk experienced a revelation—that she had come full circle from her childhood days in Winnipeg, Canada, when she would round up her sisters, create a play, then invite the neighbors to come to its performance.

"I'm doing the same thing I was doing when I was seven," said Kowalchuk, "only instead of the prairies of East Manitoba, I'm here in a small town in New York, working with people who are not professional actors. The text is from people here. They created it!"

Performer Ramona Jan, from Damascus, PA, who has participated in two reality television shows, says such shows are anything but "real." She approached Rohd to discuss doing something completely unrehearsed during the play. "True live performance is live," says Jan. "No acting; no rehearsal." Rohd welcomed the idea and the pair improvised "Three minutes with Ramona," for an amused audience.

Another performer described her experience as similar to being an American—with groups of different people getting to know one another and learning how to be open and expressive.

In exploring the concept of patriotism, an actor asks, "In what does a patriot believe? A place? A nation? A set of ideals?" The actor probes the notion that, for some, patriotism exists as certainty, while for others, as curiosity, and ultimately asks, "What would allow us to speak with each other, the certain and the curious, without using language of division? How do individuals heavily invested in their own belief system come together to talk about our national life, and the important things we do collectively as a nation?"

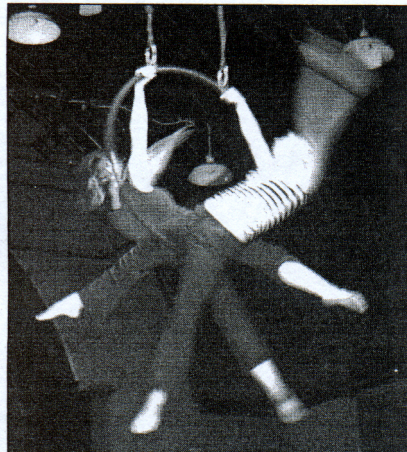
Following the performance, audience members drifted outside to a lawn dotted with cafe-style seating. Energetic discussions ensued, as people also listened to live, on-the-spot interviews conducted by

Trailer Talk's Sabrina Artel, who asked probing questions within the cozy shelter of her vintage trailer.

Sally Rowe, who attended the performance with her husband, Anthony Biancovisio, felt it was an evening well spent. "Whenever I come here, I always feel so good. I think it's the spirit of what they do." "It's the authenticity," added Biancovisio. "They are living in the now."

Possibly the most important question raised by "American Value" is one asked as the play begins: "You said what does it mean to be an American. I think before you can ask that question, you have to say to yourself, 'Well, who am I?'"

The ongoing work created throughout NACL's Catskill Festival explores this singular and yet multifaceted question. See www.nacl.org for information about the festival schedule.



Trapeze performers create aerial artistry during the play.



A scene involving a counseling session explores issues of self worth and life purpose.

The NACL Catskill Festival of New York runs from July 14 to September 2.

The festival offers international theatre experiences like these upcoming performances:

Friday, July 21 and Saturday, July 22 at 8:00 p.m.

"Nor the Cavaliers Who Come with Us" One Reed Theatre/ Toronto, Canada

"Nor the Cavaliers Who Come with Us" is a vivid physical play about a Canadian tourist's search for "an intelligent source of evil in the world." His quest takes him to Mexico, the home of his heroes and a net of personal entanglements: love, bullfights, the Virgin of Guadalupe and an apprenticeship to a mysterious horse doctor. He enters into an epic contest with the spirits of the conquest of the New World, and his belief system is questioned. The audience sits on all four sides of the playing space to watch a delightful performance in an intimate, dream-like setting.

Sunday, July 23 at 3:00 p.m.

"Peking Opera for Kids—Monkey Steals the Heavenly Peaches"

Chinese Theatre Works

The award-winning Chinese Theatre Works from New York City will perform a real Peking Opera for a family audience. The actors will perform with full face paint, colorful traditional costume, Chinese acrobatics, and ancient traditional dance. The performance tells the story of the adventures of the fabulous Monkey King, Sun Wu Kung, from the classic 16th century novel, "Journey to the West." Not only does the show provide great entertainment but the audience will learn the history and tradition of Peking Opera and children will be invited to participate in this wonderful traditional form of theatre.