

production history

Look Away

November 3, 2000

Play Evokes Strong Emotions at Blacksburg School

Isak Howell– *The Roanoke Times* (Roanoke, Virginia)

Students surround a classmate in the school parking lot to urinate at his feet. A hallway brawl erupts and the crowd forms a ring of fist-pumping supporters. A boy begins to mimic the rage he sees when his father berates his mother.

They're all scenes from Thursday night's play at Blacksburg High School, its script drawn in part from the lives of students in the audience. After the original 50-minute drama "Look Away" was performed for the entire student body, the Blacksburg teens reacted with a mix of tears, admiration and anger at its stark examination of alienation, identity and violence. The heated discussions – particularly over the play's treatment of homosexuality – continued into the school day.

Your typical high school drama this was not.

With minimal props – six folding chairs and six raw eggs – a cast of six acted out adolescent episodes from forming cliques to playing violent video games. Characters tossed and caressed the eggs – symbolic of a budding but fragile teen identity – and taunted each other in the unconventional mix of narrative snapshots and choreography.

While adults talk about school vouchers and accreditation ratings, high school students live in a different world. The student world is what artistic director Michael Rohd wanted to tap into. Rohd leads Sojourn Theatre, the company of Virginia Tech graduates that created the show. This was the first performance of "Look Away" before an entire high school.

"We would like this show to be a conversation starter, around particularly violence and alienation in schools," Rohd said.

Senior Sheena Kittinger said the depiction of high school life was realistic and provocative. She said the show has the potential to both open minds and amplify friction at school, but the risk is worth it.

"That's the whole point of it, to generate questions," she said. "We pick on people and we really don't think about what we're saying."

The play's creators used interviews with Kittinger and other Blacksburg students, as well as students in Oregon, Massachusetts and Chicago, and the actors' own lives to create the show's material.

"One of the major purposes of the play is to consider other's situation and how they perceive other people," said senior Ben Nelson. "It really struck deeper at society, too."

The play's music is contemporary and the characters are shifting, nameless students who share glimpses of their most painful and formative moments. Rohd said it was designed to break the mold of adults talking down to students. Its fast-paced, fragmented style was meant to connect with the media-saturated lives of today's students. One central theme, he said, was students "being who they are and not having to feel unsafe."

Rohd called it a gutsy move by Principal Alfred Smith to allow tough issues such as homosexuality, poverty and race to take center stage. Smith, who was out of town for the performance, said last week the play addresses many issues raised by the county's Diversity Forum.

After the show, the atmosphere in the auditorium was charged when a student asked if the play was meant to support homosexuality. A mix of applause and groans ensued as another student cited his opposition to homosexuality. The

audience was dismissed for the second period of the school day, where contentious discussions continued. Throughout the day students talked with Rohd and the actors at round-table discussions.

During the play, reaction was mixed – a few cheers when a character was shot, laughter at the tale of homosexual student being beaten, nods when student identified with a scene. Rohd said the performance was meant to support nonviolence, not to assert political views. He said verbal friction can be a healthy release – addressing difficult issues before tensions escalate.

“If this conversation stays below the surface, is a community safe?” he said.

Rohd said he was focused on how many students paid attention to the play, not on how few were disruptive.

Drama teacher J. Nick “Dee” Dickert said the play fit well with this approach to drama as more than entertainment.

“It can be very powerful tool for social reform,” Dickert said.

The play was to be performed for the public Thursday night. In four weeks the theatre will move to Oregon, where it will tour high schools with its original shows. Rohd has worked with the Blacksburg High drama program for years, but because he is relocating, Thursday's performance was the culmination of his work with the school.

July 28, 2000

'Look Away' eyes issues

The play focuses on youth, violence and gender concerns

Dana Haynes – Statesman Journal (Salem, Oregon)

Create a dramatic work of art. Say something new and original on the topic of violence. Work with a company of strangers from across the country.

You've got 10 days. Go.

That was the charge for Michael Rohd and Laura Eason, co-directors of “Look Away,” an original production focusing on violence and youth.

The company – a blend of old mates and perfect strangers – has been rehearsing non-stop at the Willamette University. They had 10 days to write the script, block their movements, memorize the words and get it right.

“This is a huge project,” says Rohd, flopping down to the matte black floor of the rehearsal room and digging the remains of a sorry-looking breakfast bar out of his back pocket.

“You think, what's new about violence? What can we say? But I think we've made some discoveries along the way about our own connections.”

It's Thursday afternoon and the rehearsal space is hot, the air stale, one lonely box fan laboring away in the corner.

The space isn't called “the black box” for nothing. It's a perfect cube of black walls, floors and ceilings. The directors have taped 3-by-5 cards to the walls with random thoughts like “why violence” scribbled on them.

The cast of 10 work through a scene over and over. Four of them poke fingers at four others, who melt to the ground, while the last two read the plaintive plea of someone suffering from abuse.

They run it again and again, each time pausing while Eason and Rohd tweak the blocking.

It isn't a typical play, with three acts and characters.

Rather, it's a collection of choreographed scenes – what Eason refers to as “no couches and no kitchen sinks” theatre.

The play evolved from the annual Violence Prevention Summer Institute, an event sponsored by several state agencies. It took place earlier this month in Corvallis.

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Last year, Rohd took part in the institute. He and John Leissen of the Oregon Department of Education started talking about creating an original theatrical work.

They met a few months later in Los Angeles and finagled to get Eason on board. She's artistic director of the famed Lookingglass Theatre Company of Chicago, and is using her vacation time to work on "Look Away."

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