

BACKSTAGE

Street Angel Diaries

by Les Spindle

Dec 13, 2006

"Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...."
This passage from Emma Lazarus' 1883 sonnet "The New Colossus"—etched on a plaque on the Statue of Liberty to be read by arriving immigrants—provides an aptly ironic beginning for Mary Lou Newmark's artful theatre piece. Exploring the plight of homeless citizens, it's a subtly profound portrait of human resilience in the face of extreme adversity.

Inspired by accounts from homeless citizens, Newmark performs her sweet and melancholy violin compositions, integrating them with textual passages, John Pennington's vibrant choreography, marvelous projected images (Jeffrey Elias Teeter, Robert M. Fisher, and Gary F. Clark), and recorded music to create a lovely poetic tapestry. Eloquent design elements—Dan Weingarten's austere urban landscape and lighting, Sherry Linnell's costumes, Ellen Juhlin's sound—enhance the evocative milieu. Director Darin Anthony and an inspired nine-member ensemble (Sue Gaetzman, Barbara Gordon, Robert Owens-Greygrass, Carlos Linares, Kevin T. McCarthy, Newmark, Togba Norris, Toni Sawyer, and Katy Tyszkiewicz) illuminate Newmark's themes with grace and insight, putting distinctive human faces on the disregarded flotsam of our capitalist culture. Sawyer enters to deliver the introduction, wearing a fur coat, a reminder that street people didn't enter the earth as vagabonds, that circumstances in life can lead anyone to an existence as an outcast, mired in poverty and humiliation.

Anecdotes are minimal. The performance is driven by a cumulatively powerful amalgam of sights and sounds—repetition of phrases and words, rhythmic movements in response to the music, tidbits of wisdom gleaned from this unconventional way of living. Characters share their sense of detachment from the world, as the group chants, "I see no one; no one sees me." They remind us that the worst part of their lot in life is not the loss of creature comforts but enduring the way they're treated. Ultimately this heartbreaking look at a disgraceful failure of mankind's humanitarian responsibilities is leavened by depictions of playfulness, camaraderie, and determination, as the characters find beacons of hope and dignity amid the degradation.

Presented by Zebulon Projects at the Theatre@Boston Court, 70 N. Mentor, Pasadena. Thu.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Dec. 7-17. (626) 683-6883, ext. 106.