

soloNOVA Arts Festival: Review of Mandingo's unFRAMED

Jun 10, 2012 by [Deborah Greenhut](#)



Mandingo with Self Portrait - soloNOVA Festival

lyaba Ibo Mandingo solos the drama of his identity. Born in Antigua, unwilling child immigrant to America, later the athlete, poet, Rasta, artist, father.

"unFramed" is an apt title for this solo narrative composed, performed, and illustrated by [lyaba Ibo Mandingo](#), known as "Kenny Athol George de Cruz" to his family. There are moments in the piece where it seems that there is no room expansive enough for the passion of this artist, no frame satisfactory for the personal experiences Mandingo has come to share through diverse media. Emotions run the gamut from amusement to anger, with many feelings in between.

Don't Be Afraid of Me Because I Am Black

In the comfortable black box New Ohio Theatre, the audience is welcomed by a blank canvas, an appropriate launch for the rich story to come. As the drama begins, Mr. Mandingo enters by way of a poignant movement piece, shackled for a deportation hearing. This wordless opening sequence features powerful

choreography by [Margaret Liston](#), a former member of the [Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company](#), and the solo artist of "Mentalpause."

Under [Brent Buell's](#) skillful direction, Mr. Mandingo confronts us, first, with racism, American style in Iowa before he turns to the roots of his own, admittedly imperfect, humanity. His opening address to the audience, "Don't be afraid of me because I am black," is as inviting as it is challenging. He has tapped into the audience members' collective guilt about American history along with their desire to be better humans.

Roots in Antigua

The first third of the show explores Mandingo's childhood in Antigua. The scene setting and sense of place contributed to an understanding of the poignance of his later life. The matriarchal culture he lived in, laced liberally with art, came to an abrupt end with the death of his grandmother, when his mother, a singer, decided to emigrate to America. Kenny did not want to go.

During this phase, Kenny began a monochrome self-portrait on the easel. Mandingo's media was acrylic mixed with dirt to fix his handmade strokes. Each new layer of experience from then on was illustrated with an additional application of nuanced color.

Multi-Media and Meaning

Mandingo, a successful [slam](#) poet who, according to Director Brent Buell, won Yale University's Martin Luther King Invitational Slam for the third time in 2011, transitions easily between painting, singing, and reciting. A [latecomer](#) to slam by his own admission in an interview with Leona Beasley of *Tarrytown Sleepy Hollow Patch*, Mandingo has made up for lost time.

Like fellow story teller, [Will Power](#), the creator of "Flow," Mr. Mandingo has seasoned his drama as a [New York Theater Workshop](#) Artist. While some of the

story is recited, quite a bit more is acted, creating an even deeper connection with the audience. "I, clay," he announced, explaining his chosen name by becoming the medium of his own message. Another such transformation occurred when the blue pigment staining his hand transmuted to a handgun barrel in a riveting sequence on the social cost of crack cocaine

The Optimistic Vision

Mr. Mandingo was honest in his reflections and spared no one, least of all himself. His thirty years of American history, leading to a poetic 9-11 reflection, comprised a riveting devaluation of symbols owing to institutional paranoia. Spoiler alert: The punishment for his passion will surprise no one. The eye of this poet is clear. Tony award-winning producer Jane Dubin of Double Play Connections has asked the audience to see with new eyes.

solaNova Arts Festival—Story Telling Excellence

"[unFramed](#)," by Iyaba Ibo Mandingo, was among ten solo pieces selected for The New York [soloNOVA Arts Festival](#) in 2011. Now in its ninth year, soloNOVA has produced more than 300 solo performers. Offering 8-10 performers each year enables Festival Producing Artistic Director Jennifer Connelley Darling and colleagues "to present the best in puppetry, dance, magic, physical theater, multi-character monologues, multimedia, and other forms of solo storytelling.

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