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InterAct Presents Scenes From the "Other" America

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As great as theater in Philadelphia is, it doesn't allow local theatergoers to regularly experience works being produced in other parts of the county. If you wanted to see that kind of theater, you basically had three choices: the Kimmel Center's Broadway Series; the occasional work presented by the Annenberg Center (often spectacular but only occurring a couple times each season); or wait until September for the mega Philadelphia Live Arts Festival and Philly Fringe. Luckily, all that changes beginning March 27, when the InterAct Theater Company stages its *Outside the Frame: Voices from the Other America* festival.

Featuring eight productions on two stages at the Adrienne, the shows represent a wide range of perspectives, with one common thread: the exploration of identity in America.

Keeping with InterAct's mission to promote cultural diversity, Artistic Director Seth Rozin says the company wanted to include works that represented an array of racial, ethnic and cultural communities. The hope is that audiences that don't typically go to a lot of theater will be drawn to what InterAct is offering, Rozin says.

"When you do one play you typically have a particular community that will be interested in the story the play tells," says Rozin. "With the festival we can market the shows to a variety of communities."

Of course, none of this matters if the shows aren't any good. The festival includes six productions making their Philly debut and one world premiere. (One of the slots is occupied by *Young Voices*, which InterAct is co-presenting with Philadelphia Young Playwrights, featuring monologues written by area students and performed by professional actors.)

The works include Antigua-born playwright/performer Iyaba Ibo Mandingo's **unFramed** (March 30-April 1), in which Mandingo tells his story of life as an immigrant in post-9/11 America while simultaneously painting his self-portrait on stage. **Palestine** (April 17-19) is a new work from self-described "Palestinian-American princess" Najla Said, who travels to the Middle East in search of "her deeper identity as an Arab-American woman." Another production of note is writer/performer Paul S. Flores' **You're Gonna Cry** (March 30-April 1). Created by Flores to explore the violent effects of gentrification in a Latino San Francisco neighborhood at the height of the dot-com boom, the production includes a musical "gangster puppet show" in which Flores uses puppets representing brands of malt liquor named after violent actions or objects (Colt-45, King Cobra etc). Flores says he created *Cry* to highlight the difficulties that arise when new cultural values are forced on an established ethnic community.

One show that Rozin says crystallizes the festival's goal to present voices not typically heard on local stages is **Draw the Circle** (April 4-8), created by transgender theater artist Deen. The only work that InterAct is producing, *Circle* tells the story of an Indian Muslim family in America struggling to come to terms with the fact that their second child is not the daughter they thought she was. A compelling and heartfelt play that exposes the ignorance and misconceptions that a transgender person is confronted with on a daily basis, Deen says that his goal with *Circle* is to "gently move the world toward being a more accepting place for queer and transgender kids." Doing so, he says, requires people to be open about their identity.

The four-week festival is something entirely new for InterAct, which usually has a four-show season. And with the exception of gay performance artist Tim Miller (who is performing his new work, *Lay of the Land* (April 12-15), which exposes the "systematic homophobia" in America), the storytellers, performance artists and monologists at the festival are not big-name performers with huge national followings. The productions are small, often solo affairs. Yet the themes they explore are big, to say the least.

Rozin says that from a financial standpoint, presenting other people's work costs about 30 percent less than producing a play from scratch. But money is just a small part of it, he says. The festival format helps shine a light on the people most Americans are unfamiliar with. "We want to present people and stories that aren't being showcased in the mainstream media," Rozin says.

March 27-April 22. \$10-\$25. The Adrienne, 2030 Sansom St. 215.568.8079. interacttheatre.org

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