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Theater Reviews / Tuesday, September 27, 2011

unFRAMED

Gerald W. Lynch Theater

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Photo: Brent Buell

Artist and performer Iyaba Ibo Mandingo is undeniably talented. Though he describes himself “as a painter and a poet,” in unFRAMED, Mandingo also demonstrates his abilities as a singer, dancer, performance artist, standup comedian and storyteller. With the aid of director Brent Buell (From Sing Sing to Broadway; The Gem Exchange), Mandingo combines his talents and produces a multimedia performance that is entertaining, thought provoking and truly beautiful.

UnFRAMED begins without words. To the sound of percussive music, Mandingo appears on a dark stage wearing an orange jumpsuit that resembles a prison uniform. His posture is

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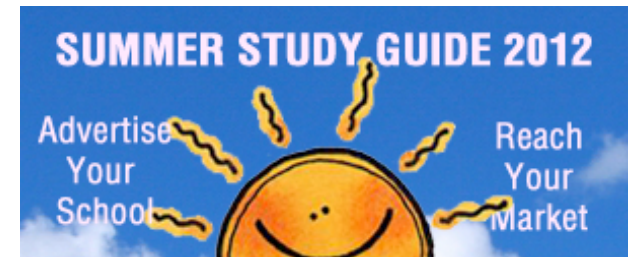
hunched and his gaze to the floor; perhaps he is examining the space around him, or perhaps he is carrying some heavy burden, but there is an energy to him as he hops around his surroundings. He then strips down to a miniscule pair of briefs, naked before the audience as he prepares to share all. He coughs uncomfortably and gives a pained, wheezy cry. Then, the stage lights up, and Mandingo changes casually into jeans and a T-shirt and begins his narrative.

He starts by recounting an incarceration he experienced earlier in life—his crime, getting a white woman pregnant. He then flashes back to his childhood as a small boy in his native Antigua — named Kenny, at the time — sharing fond and often amusing memories of his grandmother. Things take a turn for the worse, however, when Mandingo’s grandmother dies and his family moves to New York City.

There, Mandingo is thrown into the world of racial discrimination and hardship that come with being poor and black in America.

The focal point of unFRAMED is a self-portrait, painted by hand, that Mandingo intermittently works on as his story progresses; starting with a blank canvas, we soon see an elongated face, then a flat-top haircut. Dreadlocks are added when Mandingo describes his conversion to Rastafarianism, and the painting assumes a dark and fearful quality as he describes some of the more traumatic events in his life, such as his younger brother’s imprisonment for drug dealing and his near deportation after 9/11. At the end of the play, however, Mandingo leaves the audience with a self-portrait that is calm, content and wise, expressing the gradual improvement and sense of accomplishment that has come to characterize his life. After the play, the audience is treated to a gallery of other paintings that have been generated from previous performances, all of which look strikingly different from one another.

Mandingo does his fair share of moralizing. He is highly critical of what he perceives as post-9/11 hypocrisy, citing how the magnitude of the tragedy hardly measured up to America’s often-brutal national policy. He also voices skepticism of Barack Obama’s presidency, arguing that electing a black politician is not necessarily an accomplishment — “I’m from a country that is full of black politicians who are full of shit,” he says. Remarks such as these can easily end up sounding heavy-handed and tiresome, but one does not get this impression listening to Mandingo; his opinions seem to arise from his genuinely tumultuous and trying experience of America, and this gives them more force than they would have otherwise.



Visually, unFRAMED is a treat. Mandingo's painting is colorful and expressive, and lighting designer Nicholas Houfek does an excellent job enhancing the various emotions that Mandingo conveys throughout his story. UnFRAMED is also very funny at times, especially in a sequence in which Mandingo makes light of his own name. Best of all, unFRAMED is worthwhile because it shares a different perspective on America, one that stands in stark contrast to most people's naive notion of a land of equality and opportunity. By sharing his trials, Mandingo reminds us that there is still much work to be done before America becomes the nation of equity and tolerance it was meant to be.

unFRAMED; *Written by Iyaba Ibo Mandingo; Directed by Brent Buell; Produced by Jane Dubin; Gerald W. Lynch Theater, 899 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY.*

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