Fixing World Crises: The Women of ‘SEVEN’ are Succeeding and Inspiring

By Chuck Leonard

Presented by L.A. Theatre Works and Vital Voices Global Partnership, ‘SEVEN’ tells the stories of seven courageous women fighting for change in their countries. Vital Voices is an international non-profit organization that empowers and champions women leaders around the world.

‘SEVEN’ is a powerful documentary piece of theatre that brings the writing talents of seven award-winning playwrights to bear on the personal interviews of seven world-changing women from around the globe. It is an example of collaboration and self-empowerment by and for women that provides hope for those fighting to end gender-based violence, inequity, and oppression. Produced by L.A. Theatre Works, this play works beautifully for the style of shows that they specialize in. LATW does radio theatre, in which the cast speaks into microphones while facing the audience directly. This style emphasizes the power of the voice in theatre and storytelling, and it works wonderfully for ‘SEVEN’, which performed one night only at George Mason University’s Center for the Arts.

Conceived by Carol Mack, one of the seven playwrights, the play was created in collaboration with Vital Voices Global Partnership. Mack, along with Ruth Margraff, Paula Cizmar, Catherine Filloux, Gail Kriegel, Anna Deavere Smith, and Susan Yankowitz, have written of the moments that led to change for the following women: Hafsat Abiola-Costello, Farida Azizi, Anabella DeLeon, Mukhtar Mai, Inez McCormack, Marina Pisklakova-Parker, and Mu Sochua. (For more on ‘SEVEN’, read David Siegel’s DCMTA feature.)

Acting is superb across the board. Hafsat Abiola-Costello (Sarah Hollis) is a Nigerian studying at Harvard, when she hears of the murder of her mother, and later, her father. She becomes a charismatic advocate for human rights and democracy. Farida Azizi (Laila Ayad) brought medical supplies and instructions to rural women of Afghanistan despite the threats of the Taliban. Anabella DeLeon (Maritxell Carrero) earned a law degree and became a congresswoman in Guatemala despite coming from abject poverty. Mukhtar Mai (Lovelee Carroll) brought her rapists to justice in Pakistan, then went on to build schools increasing literacy. Inez McCormack (Ellis Greer) became a trade union and human rights activist, playing a critical role in the 1998 Good Friday Peace Accords in Northern Ireland. Marina Pisklakova-Parker (Shannon Holt) began a helpline for battered women on her own, which has grown to the resource center for all of Russia, coordinating over 120 organizations for the prevention of violence. Mu Sochua (Tess Lina) was sent out of Cambodia by her parents for her own safety before they were both killed. Working to stop sex-trafficking in Cambodia and Thailand, she won a seat in Parliament, and has been co-nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. She now travels the world calling for action, as an exile who had to flee Cambodia for her own safety when the government was dissolved 2 years ago.
The play interweaves these stories artfully, thanks to Director Alexis Jacknow. There is a great deal being shared, but it is portrayed clearly, and movingly, and it is certainly inspirational. The audience was on its feet at the end of the performance.

The design aspect that stands out the most was the evocative imagery of the projections, designed by Sean Cawelti. Some projections were literal references to the dialogue, and some images evoked moods without specific interpretation. Costume Design by Carin Jacobs creates clear identification for the homelands of the play's characters. While the Sound Design by Mark Holden is generally excellent, the moments which used phone calls were often distorted enough to make understanding difficult. To be fair, the mood of the phone calls was often more important than the words themselves.

Speaking to worldwide issues, SEVEN has been translated into more than 20 languages and has been seen in 32 countries. If given the opportunity to see the production, don’t miss it.