

Clear your mind

'An Evening with Suzan-Lori Parks' comprised of 38 short vignettes taken from Parks' '365 Days/365 Plays'

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Article Last Updated: 09/13/2007 01:53:21 AM PDT

Clear your mind. Free up the slots in your brain containing templates of "theater." Let them float gently away. Are you relaxed? Good.

Then we'd like to introduce MPC Theatre Company's production of "An Evening with Suzan-Lori Parks." It opens Friday on the studio stage at Monterey Peninsula College.

Director Kirsten Clapp said, "It's absolutely contemporary. It's absolutely brand new. The audience has to go in with no expectations."

Clapp has chosen 38 of Parks' 365 short vignettes containing realistic dialogue and sometimes equal amounts of non-verbal communication among (often) unnamed characters in absurd situations.

"You have to work a little bit with this one," said the director, while recognizing that that is not what every theater-goer craves. "The payoff is figuring it out on your own."

We'll give you a leg up where we can: There is the airplane scene, a visit to Santa, an episode in an art gallery — the only vignette in which all nine cast members share the stage at once.

There is the bit titled "Dead Beauty" in which a woman addresses the corpse of her beauty that died due to neglect.

Parks leaves much to the individual director's discretion in her writing, like the "non-verbal business" the playwright requested be added to "Dead Beauty."

Clapp decided she would have the character try to resuscitate her beauty in a variety of ways.

The language and content is mature in spots, plays on words abundant.

About 80 of Parks' full collection touch on war, and Clapp has placed a couple of them in the dramatic arc for the evening, though lighter considerations of the subject and nothing with a strict political statement.

Parks is the only African-American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in drama for her 2001 Broadway play "Topdog/Underdog."

She has collaborated on films with Spike Lee, Oprah Winfrey, and (forthcoming) Denzel Washington. Parks had a rather conspicuous entry into playwriting: When James Baldwin asks you to write plays, you comply.

Parks started writing a play a day on Nov. 12, 2002. A year later she had completed "365 Days/365 Plays."

"She's really showing her yearlong process to the world, and it's such a neat thing," said Clapp. It's something that felt like a complete anathema to Clapp prior to digging into the script. "I would never have considered it before getting involved with this project. And I would never have gotten involved in this project if it weren't for (Peter DeBono)."

Though Clapp did the selection and arrangement of the vignettes, MPC theater department co-chair, DeBono offered her the show to do. "It's totally expanded me as a director, as a writer," Clapp said.

The kind of project she usually gravitates toward, she describes as "contemporary dramatic with a touch of dark comedy, reality-based, situational, dialogue-heavy, where there is humor but it's not comedy."

She names as examples playwrights Neil LaBute and Eric Bogosian whose "Suburbia" she directed for MPC this summer.

Currently there is a "365 International Festival" in which colleges around the country are each performing a week of plays from Parks' project.

MPC is following its own route with the work and not taking part in the festival per se, but they are honoring Parks' request to open her shows to the public on a "pay as you can" basis.

The ticket price is a requested donation only. "Her writing is theater for anyone, any budget," Clapp said.

Even those who chose to be part of the official festival approach the material from a wide range of perspectives.

Clapp has reports of a recent San Francisco State production that used Cirque du Soleil-like costumes and themed the plays around the sun, moon and earth.

It is the advantage and the challenge for a director to mold material left so raw. For most of the vignettes, Clapp says, she had sculpted her vision before the actors arrived.

However, there were a couple that initially sagged and had to be helped along by hard work and a little spontaneous clowning.

When the director's cell phone went off during rehearsal and the actors on stage took off dancing to the techno ring, the ad-libbed number got to stay in.

The humor that ties together the 38 bits flashing by in 90 minutes, is subtle and comes from recognizing something familiar within the scene even as it is juxtaposed against something else incongruent.

"It's not like Eric Bogosian or Neil LaBute," Clapp said, "where the jokes are written for you right there. There are no one-liner, great gags; it's not written like that."

"Nothing is very good in any of these scenes. I think that's what's funny about them."

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THEATER OPENING ·What: MPC Theatre Company presents "An Evening with Suzan-Lori Parks" ·Where: Studio Stage, Monterey Peninsula College, 980 Fremont St., Monterey ·When: 7 p.m. Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays, Sept. 13-30 ·Tickets: \$10, suggested donation only. No one turned away. Available by calling 646-4213, from 3 to 7 p.m. Wednesday through Friday or online at www.ticketguys.com ·Information: 646-4213

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