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'The Journal of Ordinary Thought'

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'The Journal of Ordinary Thought' Through Oct. 24 Chicago Theatre Company, 500 E. 67th St. Tickets: \$20; (773) 493-5360. Highly recommended

Poetry and plainsong meet in a rapturous embrace in "The Journal of Ordinary Thought," the exquisitely acted, emotionally charged show now in its world premiere at the Chicago Theatre Company. Though a compilation of scores of voices, this work spins its magic with a single silky thread. And it continually reminds its listeners that the sublime and the revelatory are, more often than not, rooted in the everyday.

"The Journal" draws on work created under the auspices of the Neighborhood Writing Alliance, an organization that hosts writing workshops in Chicago neighborhoods and publishes this material in the Journal of Ordinary Thought. Most of the work is based on the personal histories and daily experiences of the participants. But at the Chicago Theatre Company it has gone through a marvelous sea-change thanks to the stirring performances of a winning ensemble of seven actors, to the impeccable, richly musical direction of Mignon McPherson and to the expertly shaped adaptation by McPherson, Luther Goins, David Barr and Douglas Alan-Mann.

We are in the proverbial "hood" - a pitiless urban landscape of brick walls, trash and broken things - all neatly conjured by set designer Patrick Kerwin and infused with sirens courtesy of sound designer Larry Nance. But while there is considerable talk of race and police brutality, and of drugs and media misrepresentation, many of the pieces are playful, intimate, offbeat.

Listen, for example, to the lustful tones of Rolanda Brigham as she awaits the great, all-consuming passion of her life - her two-week paycheck. (Credit D. J. Tabron with the writing.) Or hear her explain, in richly comic tones, the lure of the layaway plan (the work of Denise Taylor) and the near orgasmic pleasure of a rare family dinner at Red Lobster (by Geneva Gay).

Mourn with Cynthia Jackson who plays a woman who describes the deep ache and emptiness she feels after the death of her husband. (The writer is Susan L. House.) Follow the dreamily pretty Saadiga Muhammad as she evokes the fears of a young battered woman. (Marlene Dandridge is the writer.) And listen to the ever-feisty Dushon Monique Brown as she tells the story (by Eunice C. Favors) of a promising blind date. It all begins with a call to a bureaucratic government office where the phone is answered by a man with an impossibly seductive voice (his dulcet tones are pricedly rendered by actor Anthony Fleming III).

Throughout, Fleming skillfully plays the hip-hop guy - young, angry, good-looking, full of verbal music and pain.

Woody Bolar plays the more mature, troubled, guilt-laden man trying to put himself back on the road to a righteous life. Aaron Todd Douglas is more of a mischief maker - never better than when he describes (in a piece by Larry Davis) how he eluded a gang attack by affecting the palsied stance of a Jerry Lewis Telethon participant.

The show is loosely framed with the memory of Miss Christine - one of those neighborhood fixtures who not only survives her own personal tragedies but ministers to others in time of need. She is their compass.

Although the show's second act grows somewhat too polemical and repetitive at times, the overall pacing of the production - and the endlessly artful interpretations of the actors - make it a work of magical transformation. Woven together, these workshop jottings form a rich and varied tapestry of African-American life. Or, as writer Pat Guy puts it: "Shade of black, tinted with blue, splashed with red."

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