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Body and Heart: Chronicling Wars of Gender and Race

David Sheward · Wednesday, February 7th, 2018

Two short, explosive new Off-Broadway works depict wars of race and gender with women's bodies as the battlefield. Both are intense and earnest, challenging theatergoers' expectations and perceptions. *In the Body of the World* from Manhattan Theater Club at City Center marks Eve Ensler's return to the solo performance format after her landmark *Vagina Monologues* and *The Good Body*. Adrienne Kennedy is premiering *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box*, her first new work in a decade, at Theater for a New Audience's Polonsky Shakespeare Center in Brooklyn. Like her previous Obie-winning one-acts *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, *June and Jean in Concert*, and *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, *Heart* is an abstract American dreamscape examining the devastation caused by racism. Each work has autobiographical elements, runs for less than two hours and leaves us wanting for more.

Eve Ensler in *In the Body of the World*.
Credit: Joan Marcus

In *Body*, Ensler chronicles her struggle with uterine cancer as she works to open a women's center in Congo for victims of rape. The figurative and literal overlap of the two crises provide dramatic and comic fodder. "Do you know who I am," she cries to her doctor when receiving the diagnosis, "Have no sense of irony?" Here is a woman who has chronicled female empowerment through their sexual organs, finding out she has a poison in the very part of her body she has been celebrating. On Myung Hee Cho's warm set which combines elements of a cozy living room with an exotic jungle, Ensler weaves the narrative of her medical issues with world issues. Climate change, the Me Too movement, the triumph of Trump—all are grist for her creative mill.

At times, the parallels are a tad heavy-handed, but the author-performer quickly balances self-deprecating humor and cutting observations with her social commentary. ("Have I been talking too much about my vagina?," she quips at one point.) She adroitly plays with language, comparing the common Latin roots of hysteria and uterus, and how "an infusion suite" where she receives medical treatment sounds like a artisanal tea salon. Diane Paulus' measured direction seamlessly guides us through Ensler's multi-stage journey of horror and triumph, aided immeasurably by Jen Schriever's evocative lighting and M.L. Dogg and Sam Lerner's sensitive sound design.

Ensler is a passionate advocate, spritely comedienne and friendly host. She coaxes the audiences to stand up and dance one minute, then recounts the harrowing tales of the systematic rape of African women the next. It's an intense, inspiring encounter.

Juliana Canfield and Tom Pecinka in *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box*.
Credit: Gerry Goodstein

Adrienne Kennedy's *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box* also recounts tales of violation and despair, but there is no reprieve of joy or connection. The brief play (45 minutes) chronicles the doomed 1940s romance of Chris, the white son of a wealthy Southern landowner, and Kay, a light-skinned African-American woman who attends the boarding school Chris' father endows. Told in fragments on Christopher Barreca's imposing set depicting the long stairway leading into the school, Kennedy's poetic script has several intense images and concepts, but ultimately it's too slight to stand alone. The two characters only speak to each in a brief dialogue at the opening of the play and then they alternate monologues relating their troubled pasts and uncertain futures. Kay recounts the tragedy of her mother dying mysteriously at 15 after a white man rapes her and Chris simmers with rage at his father (represented by an onstage dummy) and leaves their Georgia hometown to pursue a New York stage career. They plan to be together in the Northern city, but their ultimate fate is uncertain. The work ends with a shattering image of death, whether it's actual or a metaphor is unclear.

Director Evan Yionoulis creates a number of gripping stage pictures as Austin Switser's videos blend with Kennedy's hypnotic words. Snatches of Noel Coward songs and intermingle with scenes from Christopher Marlowe's revenge play *The Massacre at Paris*. It gets a bit confusing at times, evidently Chris acted in these works in college. Juliana Canfield and Tom Pecinka bring reams of subtext to Kay and Chris, but the final result is a fascinating intellectual exercise rather than a visceral drama.

In the Body of the World: Feb. 6—March 25. Manhattan Theater Club at City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 7pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2 pm. Running time: 80 minutes with no intermission. $90. (212) 339-3050. www.manhattantheaterclub.org.

He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box: Jan. 30—Feb. 11. Theatre for a New Audience at Polonsky Shakespeare Center, 262 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn, NY. Tue—Fri 7:30pm, Sat—Sun 2pm & 7:30pm. Running time: 45 minutes with no intermission. $90—$125. (866) 811-4111. www.ovationtix.com

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