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Vitality at 'Café Vida'

Campbell Britton · Thursday, May 10th, 2012

An extraordinary stage collaboration entitled *Café Vida* is currently taking place at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. Lean and mean, perfectly integrated in its staging and bristling with authenticity, this production is undeniably one of the most generous, refreshing, and vibrant theatre pieces LA has seen in years.

Created as a Cornerstone Theater Company partnership with Homeboy Industries and Homegirl Café, *Café Vida* is everything that exciting theatre ought to be. Anyone familiar with the very best theatrical techniques currently used by Latin American theatre companies will instantly recognize that all stage elements (set, lighting, sound design) are unified to be solely in service of the actor, and of one core value – the human condition.

This production speaks with absolute clarity, and has something passionate to say about those who have chosen to transcend rather than transmit a life of violence and despair.

The Cornerstone company, as Angelenos know, has a sterling reputation for developing community-based theatre projects, frequently aimed at social engagement and activism and giving “a voice to the voiceless” (to borrow Mexican journalist and author Elena Poniatowska’s phrase). But this production seems spun from gold. The alchemy is due in no small measure to the wisdom of playwright Lisa Loomer and director Michael John Garcés. They have taken significant theatrical risks by placing the four major roles in the hands of actual “homies,” who they support with a clean, tight script and strategically inspired ensemble work.

Loomer’s beautifully crafted play is set in a café modeled directly on the Homegirl Café, and represents a synthesis of interview material gathered from the Homeboy community. By means of Brechtian episodes, the stylized production follows a homegirl named Chabela (the irresistible [Lynette Alfaro](#)) as she sheds her orange prison jumpsuit and advances through the hierarchy of required work assignments (maintenance, gardening, kitchen preparation and cooking) to become a server in the café.

The determined Chabela experiences a fresh self-revelation with each promotion in her rehabilitation process. Her awakenings afford us a glimpse into the challenges of her past and current home life by means of contrapuntal scenes. Without sentimentality or indulgence – and punctuated by incidents of song (led by the exquisite voice of Magaly La Voz De Oro), choreographed movement (with elegant simplicity from Ana Maria Alvarez), and humor – the play celebrates the human spirit of those who are hungry for employment and stability, community and self-respect.

Alfaro is accompanied in her theatrical debut by no fewer than ten homeboys and homegirls performing alongside the Cornerstone company members. The “homies” are so engagingly present

that it is often difficult to tell them apart from the more seasoned actors. But the three community members (Jesse Gamboa, Sue Montoya, and Felipe Nieto) who carry the roles of Chabela's husband Eddie and two fellow café inductees (Luz and Rafi) round out a courageous quartet of neophyte actors that is remarkably impressive in its stage presence, power and unaffected frankness.

A mention must be made of the special support for the collaboration given by Homeboy Industries founder, [Father Gregory Boyle](#). In Loomer's words from the Playwright's Note, Father Boyle made "this play part of the job at Homeboy Industries." It's an undeniable vote of confidence for L.A. theatre and for the "homies," when [Boyle tells LA Downtown News](#) that he saw the project as a "life-enhancing opportunity" that allows the community members "an unparalleled experience to act on stage and to find a renewed sense of community within a company of actors and artists." The colorful "Café Vida" T-shirts (reading "Vida 4 Life") worn by the actors are also clearly a product of Homeboy Industries.

Of the Cornerstone company members, Peter Howard as the understated Father Tim (modeled on Boyle) and the riveting Shishir Kurup (as the allegorical character El Maiz) are particularly noteworthy. Kurup delivers an expertly articulated monologue set in an anger management class Chabela chooses to attend. The speech, a trenchant harangue against the destructive results of NAFTA, is integral to contextualizing the life situation of the "homies" within the age-old story of corporate and nationalist agendas that overwhelm, displace and destroy social cohesion in the most vulnerable people and cultures. It is not, as an [LA Stage Times' critic suggests](#), "a brief interruption" that merely serves to connect this first play of Cornerstone's six-year Hunger Cycle Project to the eight productions yet to come. It is, instead, pivotal to audience comprehension of the sources of poverty, hunger and rage that contribute to the gang culture's existence, and the dilemma Chabela must surmount, in the first place.

This production needs to be seen by as many people as possible. It wakes us up even as it steals our hearts.

Café Vida's run is due to end on May 20, but may extend at LATC for one more week. I would love to think that some venue on LA's westside would pick it up for those audiences who wait for the mountain to come to them.

Image: Magaly La Voz de Oro (Singer), Lynette Alfaro (Chabela); photograph by John Luker.

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