

Voices Of the Armory Packs a Dramatic Wallop

By Lauchlin Mac Neil
Theater became reality and reality became theater when a troupe of homeless women, all members of BrooklynWAVE (Women Against Violence Everywhere), presented, *Voices of the Armory*, their personal glimpse of life in the Park Slope Women's Shelter inside the Park Slope Armory, 1402 8th Avenue.

The Allegorical Everywoman

A compilation of the experiences of 50 homeless women are woven into the characters of eight residents of the shelter. The first two acts of the play Through the voices of the women the audience comes to realize the sense of social isolation, despair, struggle to retain their identity, and be reunited with their children.

"We need to learn to love," Kate, the character played by playwright Bronwyn Rucker, urges the women. The chorus of women reply sarcastically, "Just love, who told you life was fair."

As the play unfolds, the audience comes to learn about the lives and aspirations of the women. Domestic violence is confronted head on through Helen, played by Ethel Pickney, entered the shelter to escape the violence in her life, "I used to live with

a guy who wrecked my teeth."

It is through Helen that the audience is made to realize how hard it is for a homeless woman to find employment or return to school. "Do you want to look like me," she asks. "How do you dress for a job...how do you get a job?"

In the words of Freda, played by Tracey Bryant, the women are economic pawns. "The truth is, hopelessness is big business in this city," Freda informs her colleagues. Quoting figures from 1993, Tracey tells the women that rent for a small apartment comes to \$215 a month; however, the city earns \$18,000 per year per woman housed in its shelter system. "The one thing they are afraid of is a smart woman," concludes Freda.

The crushing anonymity imposed by life in the shelter system prompts one character, known only as "Bed 33" to cry out at the end of the second act, "Does any one hear my voice?" The chorus of women answer, "Can it make money? Does any one care?"

Reaching Out To Park Slope

Originally written in 1993 by Rucker in collaboration with the women in

the shelter and social worker Laura Metallo, when the shelter was operated by the City the play was designed a vehicle for self empowerment and a way dispel community opposition to the shelter's residents, according to Rucker.

At the conclusion of the first two acts, Rucker paused to tell the audience that the third act is still evolving and the input from the community is welcomed.

Many in the audience expressed a new awareness for the women's situation, and a greater sensitivity to their plight.

In the past, Rucker and her cast have performed this play to audiences as small as five persons. On this night, April 7, the second floor room of the armory was filled with spectators, with many standing in the doorway to watch the play.

The Future

Several days later, in Meltdown's office, 346 Flatbush Avenue, Rucker and several members of the cast discussed the importance of the play in their lives.

Tracey Bryant didn't expect to wind up living in a shelter when she moved from upstate New York to Brooklyn. Unfortunately,

when her brother and his wife moved to a smaller apartment, there was no longer sufficient room for Tracey. Unemployed, without a permanent address, a woman's shelter was her recourse.

For her, the play provided a means to hone her interviewing skills. She observed that the physical and verbal cues needed to develop her character are similar to the ones she needs to convince an interviewer that she is a capable job candidate.

She observed that life in the shelter subtly erodes her sense of independence. One of her fears, that she feels is not being addressed is how to acquire life skills to cope with being alone once she has a job and an apartment.

Bristling at how her caseworker budgets her monthly public assistance check, Tracey notes that even purchasing personal amenities becomes a major economic decision.

Ollie Grant, who plays Jamaica, is forthright about her the reason why she is living in the shelter and her feelings. "This is my second time in the shelter. I didn't like it the first time, and I don't like it now," she states.

Grant readily admits that she was a substance abuser. "This time I doing all the



Meltdown players Tracey Bryant, Ollie Grant, Bronwyn Rucker, and Ethel Pickney enjoy a light-hearted moment.

things I can to get out of here and stay out of here," she asserts. In her experience, life in the shelter is greatly improved since the Church Avenue Merchants and Business Association (CAMBA) took over operation of the shelter last year.

Home to 70 women, the shelter now has a small library, and a staff more willing to work with the women, according to Grant.

While Ethel Pickney shares experiences of domestic violence with her character, she maintains that it is not her. However, like her character, she entered the shelter to escape an abusive spouse. In the future, as the play takes its final shape, she would like to see more of her story woven into the lines of her character.

Pickney, now in her final semester of college and a psychology major, wants to continue her education and earn a Master's degree in the field. Recalling the first time she walked into the City's Emergency Assistance Unit to seek help, the burst into tears at the sight of dozens of people and children waiting in the city office. It's this callous treatment of people in need that has fired her desire to graduate and pursue an advanced degree.

Rucker, playwright-advocate-social worker, sees the unfinished third act concluding with meaningful vocational training for these women and acceptance by the Park Slope community that these women live here.