

Play Examines Life of Homeless Armory Women

Based on Weekly Discussion,
Empowerment Group in Slope

By Raanan Geberer

The homeless women who live at the Park Slope Armory, and homeless people in general, are not a solid mass of despair, drug addiction, mental illness and public assistance. Rather, they are individuals, often from dysfunctional families or marriages, each one of whom traveled a separate path to homelessness.

This was the mass of "Voices of the Armory," a play reading about the women of the Park Slope Armory that was presented at New York Methodist Hospital last Saturday.

The play had a secondary theme: the hostility and/or indifference of the Park Slope community (and most middle-class communities) to the homeless in their midst.

This was underscored by the fact that, despite publicity in this newspaper and elsewhere, only three or four people sat in the audience.

The play was presented by Meltdown Inc. in cooperation with WAVE (Women Against Violence Everywhere). Meltdown, a social service and arts organization located on Flatbush Avenue, runs a weekly empowerment and advocacy group for the women at the shelter.

The dialogue is based upon the comments of these women, plus the various social workers and officials that they met in their day-to-day lives.

Most of those playing parts were

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actors or Meltdown staff; only one was actually a "graduate" of the shelter group. But the characters were all based upon real characters.

At center stage was Bronwyn Rucker, the real-life leader of the group. At her side was Laura Metallo, the social worker who started the group with Rucker in 1993. At her other side was a fictional character, "Kate," based on an Armory woman who rose to a leadership role.

The play basically tells the story of the group. Parts have been presented elsewhere, but this is the first time the entire thing has been presented, says Rucker, who worked at the Brooklyn Hospital Center when she started the group.

The first act pictured day-to-day life at the Armory. The women talk about how they got there: one was burned out from her apartment, one suffered incest, another had a falling out with a violent husband, etc.

They also talk about their hopes for the future. One talks about getting a Section 8 housing subsidy so she can get her children back, apparently from a foster home. Another talks about wanting to apply for a job, but not having a typewriter to type a resume.

A third wonders what to wear on an interview. "My mother told me it's best to wear solids," she says.

Drugs and theft are covered, but contrary to stereotypes, they are far from being all-present. One woman talks about how she doesn't like random drug testing because "I like my reefer." Another tells about how she has to take her clothes into the shower when she bathes because otherwise, they might be stolen.

But all in all, as one of them says,

"we're just trying to do the right thing. This is our home."

Ideology and religion are also covered. One woman constantly tries to bring up belief in Jesus, while another suggests that the system puts drugs in the ghetto deliberately. A third woman, an Italian-American, says she resents the fact that the Black women in the shelter see her as a privileged type since her life has been marked by poverty, violence and family problems.

The second act tells the story of Meltdown's unsuccessful bid to manage the Park Slope Armory shelter. This newspaper usually praises community board officials and activists. However, *Voices of the Armory* presents them in a different light.

Over and over again, the play shows, the Armory women were not allowed to speak for themselves at meetings about the fate of the building. When possible future uses for the Armory were discussed, the board leaders only allocated a small amount of time for discussing the shelter and its relationship to the community.

Another scene makes an unusual point. At a church meeting, the reverend doesn't want Bronwyn to speak. This makes her mad, since the social workers, who volunteer so much time, see themselves as a legitimate part of the shelter community, too.

Eventually, the city awarded the contract to run the women's shelter to a group known as CAMBA (Church Avenue Merchants Block Association).

By the end of the play, the weekly Meltdown discussion group has broken down. Bronwyn finds it hard to manage her job, her family and her volunteer effort. Many of the Armory women who were active members of the group have moved on. Among the new residents, most are indifferent.

All in all, *Voices of the Armory* is a challenging look at homelessness. If it plays again, this writer hopes that the audience will be more than two or three.