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Theater for **Life**

By Chris Rohmann



Two Springfield-based groups create dynamic theater and touch young lives.

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“If you had an hour to speak to the world, what would you want to say?”

That question, posed to participants in the Springfield-based youth program First Generation, was one of the sparkling points for their creation of a theater piece based on their life experiences. It could just as easily have been heard in a workshop of Teatro V!da. Both projects work with teens and young adults, mostly from the city’s communities of color, and both strive, in the word of Teatro V!da founder Magdalena Gomez, to “give voice and venue to the diverse populations of Springfield on issues that are relevant to their lives.”

Both programs are led by women artists with long experience in community-based work in the Valley. Gomez is a Bronx-born poet, playwright, performer and busy teaching artist who has been described as “a force of nature.” Visual artist, writer and director Julie Lichtenberg is co-founder of the Performance Project. Julie Lichtenberg began by creating movement-theater with inmates of the Hampshire County Jail, grew on to encompass formerly incarcerated youth and adults dealing with issues of readjustment, and last year developed the First Generation project to explore issues of identity and origin with young people of diverse backgrounds.

This summer marks the beginning of the third annual cycle of programming for Teatro V!da. (Yes, that’s a ! punctuating

The Rebecca M. Johnson Visual and Performing Arts Magnet School in Springfield is the program’s host. At a recent rehearsal there, Lual sat beside a suitcase and pulled a string of shirts and trousers sewn together in a long banner. As he related his story in Dinka, his fellow ensemble members, gathering up the chain of garments, rendered his words in English.

“My family is a family of farmers. Cattle keepers. My father had three wives, and the other wives had children too. In Dinka culture, children are brought up to love one another. We all come to one table and eat from one tray. People were not scared of one another and parents didn’t worry what time their children came in to sleep. This was a peaceful place. We played at night in the bright moon.”

Lual is the cast’s most recent immigrant, having arrived four years ago. A couple of the ensemble members were born abroad and came here as children. Not all are “first generation” in the traditional sense, but all represent some “first” in their families: first to go to college, to come out as gay or lesbian, to be (or not be) incarcerated, to imagine becoming an artist. And all of them have wrestled with issues of tradition and assimilation, with connections to or estrangement from their families and histories.

In one sequence in the piece, drawn from a real-life encounter, Lual mentions being able to name his family members back six generations. Shareef Ibrahim, an African American whose ancestral lineage was broken by slavery,

artists. In writing exercises and movement improvisations, participants explored the project’s themes. Out of the recurring idea of personal and emotional journeys came the image of an airport, an international crossroads where all the characters’ life-paths intersect. Stuck in a departure lounge by airline delays and cancellations, they share their histories and dreams while waiting to resume individual journeys.

The characters occupying this limbo are the performers’ visions of their future selves fulfilling their present ambitions. Yissel Rosario, for example, runs a wellness center in her family’s homeland, the Dominican Republic; Denzel Coleman-Paulin is in law school; Emily Laufer is a mother of two and in search of her own mother; Ben Bland is a successful New York businessman; Shareef Ibrahim is founding a mentorship program for youth; and Abraham Lual is on his way back to Sudan to reunite with his mother, whom he feared was dead. Itoro Udofia, Kinnethia Tolson and Tyrone Polk complete the cast.

Elsa Menendez is one of the co-directors of the piece as is Julie Lichtenberg, Nancy Tolson, project co-leader and I-Shea, singer-percussionist. It must be noted that during a break in rehearsal, Menendez marveled at the cast’s “amazing amount of willingness to be met with challenges.”

For their part, the performers testify to the profound effect the program has had on their lives and outlook. Yissel Rosario says, “I feel more comfortable in my own skin. I’m more outspoken and more comfortable being around people.



First Generation works on its production *through the eye of bakok*, a story of connections and estrangements.

(the name.) And this weekend, First Generation caps its inaugural year with three performances of *through the eye of bakok*, an original theater work created by the project’s ensemble.

On a Journey

Bakok is a word meaning “one who leaves their place of origin and goes to another place” in the Dinka language of southern Sudan, the homeland of First Generation participant Abraham Lual. His true-life story of flight from civil war, displacement in refugee camps and immigration to the U.S. forms one of the production’s connecting threads.

responds, “I can’t even imagine six generations back. I’m frustrated that it’s so hard for some of us to figure out where we come from.”

Lichtenberg, herself the child of a Holocaust survivor, says she came up with the project’s theme of cultural inheritance and loss through experiences with Performance Project participants whose families had experienced displacement and diaspora, and who had gradually lost “the tight network of community and become more isolated. Separating yourself from your culture of origin, you leave behind a lot of potential strength and support.”

Through the eye of bakok was developed over the past nine months in workshops with a cadre of professional

I used to just be hush-hush, quiet about my ideas, but now I’m more expressive in that way. And I’m louder-way louder—that I was in the beginning.”

Shareef Ibrahim says the program has “motivated me to do other things, to approach things differently. It’s helped me find my true self.” And Emily Laufer adds simply, “There’s something here that’s really good for me.”

Rubrics for Success

The young participants of Teatro V!da have very similar things to say about the program. For Yolanda Scavron, “It’s the most amazing experience. At the end of the performance,



through the eye of bakok, was developed through conversation, writing exercises and movement improvisation.

When people are saying how amazing it was, and knowing that you wrote that, it was something you did from start to finish, the felling that came over me—it's yours, no one can take it away from you, it's your confidence.'

Teatro V!da and First Generation take parallel approaches to youth development and artistic creation. Both hold the bar high, encouraging participants to move out of their "comfort zones" to take personal and artistic risks, and demanding professional behavior in a setting that offers training and mentorship with skilled professionals. The emphasis in both programs is above all on personal growth and responsibility. "It isn't about 'talent,'" Gomez insists, "its' about character." Both programs are multigenerational, and assign an older mentor for each youth. Both create Community Agreements

among all participants—formal understandings of what's expected from individuals and the group. "A code of honor for the good of all," as Gomez puts it.

Teatro V!da means Theater for Life and calls itself "The Other TV." It is a project of the Latino Breakfast Club, an organization of business leaders that provides scholarships and other assistance to Springfield youth. Gomez says she was spurred to create the group in 2007 because "I saw a void—no Latino/Latina theater in Springfield. I wanted an opportunity for the creation of new performance works by and for the many gifted people who live here." The program is Latino/a led but has a diverse membership and seeks to appeal to a broad population. Among the artistic collaborators are musician Heshima Moja, poet Maria Luisa

Arroyo, videographer James Lescault and stage manager Diego Angarita-Horowitz.

The project has mounted two full stage productions, but places an equal emphasis on the written word on the printed page. Participants study literature from diverse cultures, news articles and other writing in order to learn and practice critical thinking and to develop cogent writing skills that "distinguish between sentiment and sentimentality." A chapbook of participants' writings, *...and literacy for all*, contains material from the second Teatro V!da show and other poems, monologues and stories.

The group is currently gathering material for an anthology of work confronting the near-epidemic of bullying in our schools and neighborhoods. It will be dedicated to Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, a Springfield sixth-grader who committed suicide in April after merciless taunting in school. His mother, Sirdeaner Walker, is partnering with Teatro V!da to raise awareness about the bullying scourge.

Like First Generation, Teatro V!da operates on a non-competitive, non-hierarchical model—a "community of learners" that values the young participants' voices and ideas as much as those of the adult leaders and guest artists. There's a constant "focus on the positive" that avoids judgmental criticism and strives to create "rubrics for success" through constructive critique of the participants' writing and performance work. Gomez stresses, however, that there is "no patronizing, no condescending, but straight talk, form the starting point that there is always a successful moment in all we do. Applause and compliments and earned, not given."

We can go and find the pieces we left along the way
Retell the story and take the things that make us tattered and
torn, tattered and worn
And suture us together again
Weave ourselves into beings that know we need mending,
Remember all the things we pushed aside
Find the hidden answers and shake the dust out
Call silenced things by their names, as we dig up our skeletons
and watch them turn human again

I'll trace back to when we were outlined with night
And the stars lit our eyes
And the only us seen was eyes and teeth, eyes and teeth...
We are, a bunch of tiny things, in need of putting together
As we dig up our skeletons and watch them turn human again

—Itoro Udofia, First Generation ensemble member