THEATER

A Theater Marathon Looks at September 11

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New World: American Theatre Responds to 9/11," which took place at Town Hall September 9 through 11. The words felt like an echo, resonating with that mixture of sadness, horror, and resignation that has grown all too familiar over the past year. Then he adds: "It's Ground One, I suppose." In a flash, and with a sense of infinite relief, the mood of the room changed. There was laughter—rueful, even painful in its self-irony—but it lightened the story we had gathered to tell ourselves, which is the story of anyone who was here this time last year.

Each of the marathon's four events—three evenings and a matinee—began with the

explanation that its title came from *The Tempest*, a play (according to the announcer) "about freedom, renewal, and healing." Fortunately, many of the plays themselves were in tune not only with this cheerful interpretation of the title phrase, but also with the dense ironies of its original context in innocent Miranda's naïveté. Indeed, their bracing doses of irony and self-mockery made these events far more worthy of their symbolic Town Hall space than did the unimaginative official ceremonies at Ground Zero, now the city's—and the country's—most potently symbolic space. Raw and unpolished though they were, the plays in the marathon packed more honest reaction and more promising reflection than any speech made by any of our leaders over the past year. The Ground One joke, for example, wryly delivered by John Turturro, did what theater needs to do now: begin to move us away from the initial horror of the unthinkable event. Not to forget it, but finally to think about it while continuing to feel it.

The ideas and images that arose from this new space of contemplation—call it Ground One, I suppose—are such stuff as theater is made of: ordinary people saying and doing astonishing things. A woman begins to walk across the country (*The Grand Design*, by Susan Miller). A family "adopts" a sailor during Fleet Week and argue bitterly in front of him about the meaning of the attacks (*Adopt a Sailor*, by Charles Evered). An English teacher confides her homicidal fantasies to a cop (*Thirty-Fourth and Dyer*, by Lee Blessing). A juror at the trial of an Arab woman imagines he recognizes her from a dervish convention in Egypt (*Woman at a Threshold*, *Beckoning*, by John Guare). There were also stories of how ordinary lives are secretly illuminated by extraordinary events, as September 11 casts its terrifying shadow over both past and future: A couple squabble about who should miss work when their babysitter fails to show up—and work, of course, is in the towers (*The Moon Please*, by Diana Son). Three pairs of variously neurotic parents worry about toddlers on the first day at pre-school,

then leave together to enjoy the beautiful morning, that morning (*First Day of School*, by Lynn Nottage). Three cars hold a conversation in the parking lot at the PATH station, waiting for their owners to return (*We Never Knew Their Names*, by John Henry Redwood). In these plays as in the ones that dramatized the horrific events more directly, the materials of theater—bodies and voices, movement and rest—intervened decisively in the nauseating recycling of images and clichés that has recently been choking our television screens.

The theater artists who gathered for this marathon—the list of actors, directors, and playwrights ran into the hundreds—gave courageous voice to the sorrow, anger, and confusion of the past year. Perhaps it would be ungrateful on my part to wish that their focus on the city and its inhabitants had been supplemented by more engagement with the other subject the program invited them to explore: "the reasons for a type of warfare that is grinding away at the foundations of cultures around the world." With very few exceptions, the playwrights in the marathon chose to treat the attacks as a new context for exploring personal and cultural politics rather than as evidence of a disastrous international predicament. With the possible exception of Guare's bold appeal to a tradition of Islamic mysticism for re-envisioning what his character called "that pit inside us," none of them seemed to have been inspired by something like, say, Tony Kushner's audacious *Homebody/Kabul*, American theater's most imaginative encounter to date with that strange other world that has delivered such a violent message to us.

Nevertheless, "Brave New World" was an important step in that inevitable process by which September 11 will take its place in American cultural mythology. As such, the most heartening thing about it was the distance so much of it achieved from sentimentality, self-pity, and saber-rattling. Even the plays that dealt directly with the

tragic loss of life did so with gratifying originality. José Rivera's *Impact*, directed by Michael Kahn and performed by Marisa Tomei and Jason Patric, bestowed amazing beauty on one of the most nightmarish aspects of the attacks: the victims who jumped from the burning buildings. Christopher Shinn's *Lakeera*, directed by Mark Brokaw and performed by Armando Riesco, managed to convince us that there are kids in this city for whom the attack was not the worst thing they had ever seen. A character in Chay Yew's brilliant satire on the politics of American identity, *Second Skin*, confided that he was almost glad for the attack, relieved that this time it was not us but someone else doing the bombing. And as the queeny Aunt Pitti-Pat, in David Simpatico's play by that name, Mario Cantone bared our collective political myopia by sharing his new security consciousness: "I bought a cell phone when we started bombing Kuwait—I mean, Afghanistan." The bitter ironies and brave insights of "Brave New World" made Town Hall a good place in which to spend this grim anniversary—and from which to move to Ground One.

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