

Powerful truths, limited aims: No Child by the Epic Theater Center in New York

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No Child, written and performed by Nilaja Sun, directed by Hal Brooks, produced by the Epic Theater Center at the Samuel Beckett Theater, New York City

The actors and playwrights of the Epic Theater Center aim at social responsibility through art. As the company's mission statement indicates, it hopes to "demonstrate the central role of the arts in a healthy democracy." Its upcoming season will present a number of political pieces, including Judith Thompson's *My Pyramids*, about the Iraq war and *Ariel Sharon Stands at the Temple Mount and Dreams of Theodore Herzl* by David Zellnik.

Through its successful "Journeys Series," Epic Theater uses ancient Greek drama and Shakespeare's works to teach public school students in New York City about theater. This latter effort has now generated an Off-Broadway play based on the experiences of one of its teacher-actors, Nilaja Sun: *No Child* (a play on words on the Bush administration's retrograde educational act, No Child Left Behind). In this one-woman comedy set in a contemporary classroom in the Bronx, Sun plays the roles of several students, two teachers, a principal and a janitor.

The lead character is Sun herself as a drama teacher who has been hired with grant money to direct a class in performing a play at their school. She has picked *Our Country's Good* by Timberlake Wertenberger, about convicts from Britain arriving in Australia in 1788 who perform a version of George Farquhar's 1706 *The Recruiting Officer*.

No Child begins with a conversation between Ms. Sun, the drama teacher, and her landlord. She tells him that she has a new job and can pay her back rent. The all-too-typical pleading that poor New York City artists often do once a month is carried off with a grace and humor that endears us to the play immediately.

Sun reminds us of the stark social inequality in New York when she travels to her new job from 59th Street in Manhattan, in the richest congressional district in the city, to Brooke Avenue in the Bronx, in the poorest, "in 18 minutes on the No. 6 train."

As she arrives in Ms. Tan's tenth grade classroom, Sun instantly transitions into the weary and defeated English teacher, slouching her shoulders and showing none of the

energy necessary to discipline or propel her class.

The students come in slowly, most of them late. They shout and abuse each other. They call Ms. Tan, who is of Asian descent, "Pork-fried rice." Sun becomes Jose, who tells her, "Miss, you should be scared of this class, 'cause we supposed to be the worst class in the whole school." Her new students are the Latino, Caribbean, and African-American children of the most impoverished urban county in the United States (Bronx County).

Sun becomes the class leader Jerome who sits with his arms and legs open, challenging Ms. Sun; she then turns into Shondrika, who primps and delivers attitude. The audience laughs, but there is a pathos in the dislike the students have for themselves and in their disrespect for their own education, which seems more of a lost cause to them than to anyone else.

Ms. Sun manages the class better than Ms. Tan. She tells the students that they are now thespians (the students relentlessly pun the word) and that "We may even think." It is encouraging (and hilarious) to watch this woman fighting for culture among those who have been denied culture.

Sun also transforms herself into the elderly janitor, Mr. Jackson, who acts as the play's chorus. He comments on the action, the children and the school. He describes the metal detectors that the children must pass through every day, the five security guards and the police officers with guns. Sun becomes one of the guards, a harsh Jamaican woman, who makes students strip off nearly every item of clothing.

As the days go by the play begins to have an impact on some of the students. Jerome tells Ms. Sun how they relate to *Our Country's Good*, "Because we treated like convicts every day."

But the difficulties mount, and Ms. Sun gives up. She lets the class vote on whether it will continue the play and the answer is no. As she leaves the classroom, Sun becomes Ms. Kennedy, the principal, who admonishes her. "We did not get an \$8,000 grant to give a lesson on democracy!" She will make a round of calls to the parents, and threaten the students with loss of privileges.

Ms. Sun continues teaching the class. It is uplifting when one student who has given Ms. Sun so much trouble quotes Timberlake's play: "The theater is an expression of civilization." More problems ensue, endemic to the New York

City school system: a student cannot pronounce the words in the play, a child cannot be found, a teacher quits.

Our Country's Good gets produced, and there has been a transformation, within the bounds of the difficulties. Simply to have a small success affects the students. Toward the end of the play, a pregnant student tells Sun, "My baby will not live like a prisoner".

The characters are rendered well. At times Sun hits on a social type perfectly. The principal, Ms. Kennedy, for example, is like so many of the heads of inner-city schools: pragmatic, tough, with little regard for elementary rights, but in her own fashion devoted to educating her students. No doubt the popularity of Sun's one-woman play among teachers is attributable in part to the fact that she depicts the people inside school buildings honestly.

In contemporary American culture, such types are almost never depicted at all, or when they are, it is done through stereotypes (one thinks of the work of Spike Lee). Nilaja Sun portrays each of her characters compassionately, with nearly flawless transitions as she changes from one to the next.

No Child deserves credit for emphasizing that students in New York City public schools know they are prisoners, that they are not there to be educated, but controlled. This is not a new insight, but there is something fresh and even urgent in the way Sun's work presents it.

New York City has a school system of one million students and 80,000 teachers. Every day, after being exposed to police, metal detectors, overcrowded classrooms, often overwhelmed teachers, these students must cope with tense, overworked parents or siblings that need care or a host of other social problems.

This is the stuff of high art, and New York is the cultural center of the United States. By the law of averages, one would expect a few of the thousands of writers, painters, filmmakers and musicians who reside in the city to attempt an artistic representation of the lives of so many.

But that is not the case. One can think of hardly any authors who present these people to us. Simply and accurately depicting the inhabitants of public schools is culturally *verboten*.

To a certain extent Nilaja Sun is striking out on her own, and so for all its honesty, *No Child* inevitably has serious limitations. In particular, it is satisfied with too little. A teacher shakes up the routine oppression of the poorest youth by using the theater. But the play does not suggest the possibility of hoping for more than this. How has life in the city schools come to this? The problems of the characters fail to exist in time, with a past and a future.

At one point in the play, the janitor-narrator tells the audience a little about the history of the school, but only a very little. He was there when the most of the students were Italian-American, when the population became primarily African-American, then during the heyday of black nationalism in the 1960s when the

Black Panthers started their free breakfast program. There is almost no link between past and present.

While it catalogs the human effects of a social disaster, *No Child* is unable to locate the origins of the disaster. Early in the play, Sun quotes Rousseau: "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains." But this is left as a one-liner. Rousseau himself followed up this sentence with an examination of social history. Relatively little thought has been given in the preparation of this piece to the historical roots of the conditions in New York City public school classrooms. They didn't come out of nowhere. Poverty, social inequality, cultural regression ... there is much to talk about.

During a post-performance discussion, Nilaja Sun confessed that she had cut the janitor's monologue on the history of the school. In earlier performances she noticed that the audiences' eyes began to glaze over. There may have been another way to examine the history, but pleasing the audience is a poor excuse for cutting back on it.

The speakers in this discussion included a student intern, an Epic Theatre founder and a representative from the New Visions Schools. The latter is a multi-million dollar program funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It sponsors a number of new, small schools within the New York City public school system, often in some of the lowest performing districts.

The program of New Visions is to create smaller schools with smaller class sizes, and advisory programs. Each school has a different theme, but in general they are directed toward sending working-class youth to college. These are laudable goals, but they cannot by their nature address the crisis in education. Society has a responsibility to educate all its children, and any society that fails in this deserves to be indicted. The presence of New Visions in the discussion speaks more to the limited aims of *No Child* and the Epic Theatre.

The discussion itself was intelligent and sometimes angry. A number of teachers in the audience praised the play's veracity, but in tones of frustration and resignation. The conversation did not rise above the need for moderate reforms like New Visions: good teachers or smaller schools can save a few students. The word "poverty" did not come up.

No Child is an honest and truthful piece of work about circumstances that millions face every day. As it is, though, the play does not enlarge our view of life sufficiently.



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