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Theater Reviews / Tuesday, May 18, 2010

De Novo

By Giovanni Palumbo



Coming to America Emily Joy Weiner, Jose Aranda and Carlo D'Amore in De Novo - alyssa ringler

Written and directed by Jeffrey Solomon

59E59 Theaters

59 East 59th Street

212-279-4200

It's difficult to imagine a work that deals with more pressing issues than , the new play written and directed by Jeffrey Solomon, currently receiving its New York premiere as part of the Americas Off Broadway festival. With a new Arizona law drawing national attention to the issue of illegal immigration, this true story about

a boy's struggle to stay in this country takes on the sort of timely relevance so essential to social theater.

When 10-year-old Edgar's mother, Margarita, leaves him to work in the U.S., her absence lets him fall prey to being indoctrinated into Central America's largest gang. When he decides he wants to leave the gang in an attempt at a better life, he knows he must flee or be killed. However, upon his arrival in the U.S., he finds himself once again seeking protection from a gang, this time to survive on the tough streets of Los Angeles, where a sympathetic lawyer's plea for asylum just might give him the second chance he needs to turn his life around.

Director Jeffrey Solomon succeeds in crafting a finely tuned ensemble in which the actors fluidly shift between characters, often with widely different perspectives, as they play dual roles. For example, Socorro Santaigo goes from playing Edgar's mother to playing the judge hearing his case, making the

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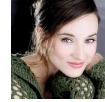
By Show Business Inc.

transition in only a few seconds. Solomon uses well-chosen moments to break away from the work's social realism in service of the play's larger themes. At one point the three members of the ensemble simultaneously read from the trial transcripts as a vast trail of paper extends behind them.

The projected images of award-winning journalist Donna Decesare form the backdrop of the story, revealing a world of violence and desperation with striking clarity. These projections never serve as mere ornament, and the result is a seamless integration of multimedia and theater. Michael Kimmel and Lisa Weinsbroft's lighting design transform Alex Escalante's minimal set into a variety of locales, avoiding unnecessary set changes that would needlessly slow the pace of the production.

The exceptional cast includes José Aranda, whose childlike innocence and charm make him surprisingly believable in his role as the young Edgar. Emily Joy Weiner delivers monologues about the difficulties of fighting Edgar's case with an unadorned sincerity, and Santaigo is both tender and tragic as a mother trying to save her son but overwhelmed by struggles of her own. Last of all, Carlo D'Amore, as Carlos, is an expert storyteller whose accounts of life in the gang underworld, though heavy on social commentary, are riveting and never taxing.

If seeing the themes of our times playing out across the stage isn't draw enough for theatergoers then the superb acting and directing should lure them to this well-crafted, intimate production.



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