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Chicago Danztheatre Ensemble challenges status quo by staging four shows ‘against type’

Hedy Weiss Sun-Times Theater Critic November 27, 2013 5:35PM

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You're either too young or too old. Too stunning or too bland. Too tall or too short. Too fat or too thin. Female when you should be male. White when you should be black. Black when you should be Latino. Latino when you should be Asian.

Don't take it personally, but you probably never will be cast as Hamlet or Blanche DuBois, as Malcolm X or Madame Mao.

To be sure, these days the whole casting game is considerably more imaginative and diverse than it was just a couple of decades ago. But typecasting persists — in the theater, movies, television. And no matter how great a performer's transformational gifts might be, more often than not there are “limits.”

It was out of this realization that Ellyzabeth Adler, founder and artistic director of Chicago Danztheatre (an interdisciplinary performance art ensemble that combines dance, theater, the visual arts and a healthy dose of activism), joined forces with Kyra Morris, Jack Ryan and the Fulton Street Collective to devise “All the Shows I've Ever Wanted To Do But Couldn't.”

Politically charged theater designed to challenge the status quo, “All the Shows...” features a diverse cast of actors who are breaking with tradition as they perform scenes from four relatively familiar dramas. In each scene the casting has purposefully been done “against type” in one way or another.

In a scene from Tennessee Williams’ “Sweet Bird of Youth” — the tale of an aging Hollywood actress and her young gigolo — two men will now play the roles, with Alex St. John directing. Sam Shepard’s “True West,” a rollicking tale of two antagonistic brothers who ultimately trade places, will be played by two women here, with Jude Hansen directing. “The Pillowman,” Martin McDonagh’s tale of two brothers in a police state, will instead be played by two women — one South Asian and one Caucasian — under the direction of Lavina Jadhiani. And “Danny & the Deep Blue Sea,” John Patrick Shanley’s tale set in a Bronx bar and ordinarily a conversation between a brooding, self-loathing guy and a divorced, guilt-ridden woman, will now be played by two men, with Tara Branham directing.

“The directors chose these plays, and none of the scenes have been rewritten,” said Adler. “But Dana Lynn Formby has supplied bookending material for each scene based on conversations with some of the performers about how they are often pigeonholed, or out-of-the-running from the start because of how the casting breakdowns for auditions are worded. And each scene will be followed by a brief Q&A session with the artists and curators.”

The participating actors include David Besky, Laura A. Harrison, Christopher Jackson, Maria Margaglione, Maren Rosenberg and Vahishta Vafadari.

“I think there is so much classification in this country,” Adler said. “So I wanted to pose the questions: ‘Who are you?’ and ‘What are you?’ In my own case, I’ve always wished I could perform Ntozake Shange’s ‘For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf.’ I’m not black, but so many of the themes in that play are universal.”

“At times, having that ethnic and gender specificity in a work is really great, but it also can be frustrating when the work is so good. And I think these are important issues to raise, and difficult ones to answer.”

“Beyond all that, there are so many people in our society who have no voice at all, so one of Danztheatre’s ongoing goals is to make sure we give that voice to people — whether it’s teenage mothers, veterans, the disabled or others.”

Asked if the unconventional casting of scenes has triggered any revelatory moments — or unintentionally funny ones — Adler said: “Mostly it all just comes out with sincerity. Work that stands the test of time has everything to do with the essential message.”

So, will Adler be inviting casting agents to these performances?

"Well, I hadn't thought of that, but it's a good idea," she said.

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