

SOJOURN

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production history

The Justice Project

July 2001

Community Collaboration and High Artistic Quality

Polo - The Asian Reporter

To the actors and producers of Sojourn Theatre, the processes of exploring then incorporating their community's experiences and opinions is just as essential to great theatre as the acting company's actual stage craft.

Sojourn Theatre's latest Portland production, The Justice Project, according to Artistic Director Michael Rohd, "is an original work based on local community engagement and built on our high artistic vision and quality."

Director Michael Rohd initiated The Justice Project four months ago by sitting down over a yellow pad with Portland and Salem judges, police officers, religious leaders, community activists, attorneys, prison inmates, and locked-up youth. Individuals collaborating with Director Rohd in the creative process, including veteran local Asian American advocates and incarcerated youth, did so on condition of anonymity.

As a result of Director Rohd's insistence on community collaboration in his artistic product, stories told and characters portrayed in The Justice Project, are true. Some are just, Some are not.

In developing drama and performing before Portland audiences, Mr. Rohd explains "we explored the concept of justice from many perspectives. We worked hard to balance opposing points of view, as well as presenting a social critique of our current system of justice." Voices of police officers, as well as those of those criminal courts, are therefore all represented in The Justice Project.

Since Sojourn Theatre's move to Portland from Virginia in the fall of last year, Mr. Rohd reports his company's work has been enthusiastically received by local dramatic artists and social activists.

In nine months, Director Rohd, production manager Dawn Young, set designer Daniel James, and company have produced *Cities on a Hill*, a touring performance of *Look Away*, and currently *The Justice Project*.

Local Vietnamese-American Jono Eiland and Japanese-American Ryo Okamura, actors from the earlier cast of *Cities on a Hill*, perform in *The Justice Project*. In expressing Rohd's central themes of personal choice and the tensions of social justice, Mr. Okamura portrays an Oregonian Issei father struggling to strike a balance between the need for justice and the tensions of small town bigotry.

Befitting the grand conception of justice, in both its brick and mortar legal dimensions and in its loftier moral aspirations, Sojourn Theatre was able to secure one of Judge Gus Solomon's bigger-than-life marble and brass courtrooms in his near mythical Old Federal District Courthouse.

Director Michael Rohd will appear before Portland's Mayor and City Council on July 5th, to formally invite elected City officials to attend his company's dramatic interpretation of Portland justice.

The Justice Project's three-week performance ends this weekend, July 6 – 8.



July 2001

Theatre Review: The Justice Project: I Am Not Now Who I Might Have Been

Theatre Review: The Justice Project: I Am Not Now Who I Might Have Been

Steffen Silvis - Willamette Week

Sojourn Theatre's first production in Portland was a worthy piece exploring the issue of citizenship within a melting-pot America, a play whose separate parts never successfully cohered (perhaps itself a statement on the topic at hand, but a structural problem nonetheless). With its latest piece, I am not now Who I might have been, the company has created a thought-provoking and beautifully staged poetic documentary (the title phrase is Ping Chong's) delving into the meaning of justice – appropriately, it is performed in a courtroom. Using fragments of interviews with Portlanders that are interspersed with fictional episodes, the piece (literally) displays the ties that bind a community together. The play is a fraction too long, but there are many memorable scenes, including a bedroom scene during which lovers discuss crime and punishment (the last image here is haunting) and a violent moment shared between two Polish friends, one of whom is Jewish. The company, including Ryan Keilty, Jules Bausch and Jono Eiland, is first-rate, as are Ithica Tell and Bobby Bermea (this play ends Bermea's long spell of miscasting). As an homage to Thornton Wilder, director Michael Rohd stage-manages the proceedings for us, giving us a better idea of our own town.

June 28, 2001

'JUSTICE PROJECT' BASED ON REALITY, NOT MOVIES

Richard Wattenberg, Special Writer - The Oregonian

The sixth-floor courtroom at the Gus Solomon Federal Courthouse is an imposing space -- one that calls to mind the dignity but also the high hopes that our system of justices carries and sometimes betrays.

It is a most-appropriate location for the Sojourn Theatre presentation of "The Justice Project: I am not now Who I might have been" -- a tautly directed poetic documentary that explores how Portlanders understand "justice."

Conceived and written, after more than 50 interviews and 20 workshops, by Michael Rohd in collaboration with the eight other actors who perform the piece, this play defines "justice" broadly. It encompasses the judicial institutions that ultimately exonerate or condemn as well as the personal sense of justice that all of us carry within our hearts.

Eschewing a linear plot, the play begins with a brief monologue by Rohd, which establishes the parameters of the evening's exploration, and then proceeds as a loosely structured assemblage of vignettes, monologues and movement interludes. Throughout Rohd hovers on the edge of the action -- an attentive presence, providing continuity as the eight other actors present 65 characters drawn from different races, ethnicities and classes.

As the company members briefly enter into the worlds of these diverse characters, sketching out their assorted viewpoints on what justice is and how it works, they piece together a rich theatrical mosaic that calls attention to the contradictions and ambiguities marking the pursuit of justice.

Among the more powerful themes presented here is the way in which popular culture distorts our expectations of justice.

Over and over again movies reduce the quest for justice to a simplistic revenge tale in which the good-guy hero inevitably overcomes and violently punishes the bad-guy villain.

Such stories may lull us with easy resolutions, but when we view the complex world through this kind of lens, Rohd and company suggest, we cannot help but get into trouble.

As thought-provoking as it is, the script would, however, benefit from some cutting and tightening. The broad range of concerns threatens to undermine the play's coherence. A narrowing of focus and a more clearly articulated shape may help to sharpen the play's final impact.

Whatever weaknesses the script may have are more than compensated for by the fine work of a highly disciplined company. Under the careful eye of director Rohd, all the performers -- including actors we have seen in other venues (such as Bobby Bermea and Ithica Tell), Sojourn Theatre company members (Jules Bausch, Jono Eiland, Dreagn Foltz, Ryan Keilty and Jenn Van Nice), and Ryo Okamura -- do excellent work, making crisp and imaginative choices. Movement and speech are splendidly integrated. Whether hopping onto the judge's bench to play a scene or offering a monologue while precariously balancing on the balustrade separating the general public from courtroom participants, the actors used the available space inventively and are artfully supported by Michael James' creative lighting design.

971.544.0464 - 2005 Company Brochure - Preview Michael Rohd's book

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