

Misty, Across The Pond: The Shed's Griffin Theater

We went to see 'Misty' on March 15, 2023, it was the first show I had watched with TRaC and although I wanted my hopes to be high, I had never watched an actual off-broadway show that wasn't one in my school. Therefore, I was set up with low expectations for Misty, and thankfully Arienze Kene didn't fail to prove those expectations completely wrong.

In short, Misty is a play about the struggles of an artist to produce the art that he wants to, and the struggles of the character he is writing about as he faces an evolving city. To achieve this he used a format that musicals usually use with song breaks in between scenes with strong lyrics, and interesting props.

The story starts off with a song titled, "City Creatures", sung by a passenger on a night bus in London, all seems well until someone tries to force his way onto the already packed bus, and the narrator pushes the "blood cell" only to be pushed back. The situation escalates quickly and leads to the narrator, or "virus" beating him badly to the point of getting off the bus because of a sense of fear/shame, this is the inciting incident of this half of the "virus's" journey. After this, we are placed into another story about the author of the scene that we just witnessed and of the whole play, Arienze Kene. He is on the phone with Raymond and Donna, two of his friends and recurring characters. They give him criticism about his play being too much of a cliché of a black man's story, which they don't like but are sure that his audience (white people) will. After this conversation ended an orange balloon is produced from Arienze and continues to appear every time his work is criticized throughout his story. The rest of the play is a back-and-forth of Arienze and his character, "Virus". At the beginning of the second scene, the "Virus" takes the new name of "Bloodcell" because he realizes that viruses invade the body, and if the city is a creature he must be a blood cell, and the gentrification of London, his city must be the virus. The climax was reached when a door opened from a box on stage revealing a mass of orange balloons which Arienze tried to pop but there were too many, and he eventually got tired. The play ends with Arienze, revealing that his friend Lucas, the real person that inspired his play, was never even real. The last song, a freestyle "Jungle Shit" is performed and ends the play with "If they don't like my theater shit, *Featre shit*, they can suck my big black theater dick"

The story of gentrification from London reminded me of my own neighborhood, Harlem. I was born in East Harlem, and have been raised here ever since. I went to elementary school and middle school, in Harlem and I always knew that my neighborhood was unsafe but didn't know until I went to high school that it showed up when you google "most dangerous neighborhood in New York". Just like the Virus/Bloodcell in Misty, I find myself now dealing with the gentrification of East Harlem, not really knowing how to feel other than like a new tenant in the apartment that my parents have been living in for over 20 years now. I found this aspect of Misty to be a perfect illustration of how gentrification affects neighborhoods and people

Misty does a very good job of conveying a message of resistance. In his parallel stories, there is a common topic of how they are both fighting back or running from an expectation and outcome that they don't want to fit into. The Virus/Bloodcell wants to badly escape from all of the things surrounding him. After he assaulted the guy on the night bus his whole life falls apart, his mum kicks him out because he stole money from her, his female friend's father won't let them see each other, and not even his suspicious

uncle will lend him a place to sleep. To further add to his misfortune, the police start looking for him because of the incident that happened on the night bus, the person died after the beating. Nevertheless, he keeps fighting, running and even diving at one point all to see his sister before the police catch up to him. He manages to see her one more time before the authorities catch up to him but this doesn't end the resistance that is shown on stage.

At the same time, Arinze wants his play to be more than just "another black man's story" and is therefore resisting all of the criticism he is receiving for his plot by deciding to continue with his play anyway. To channel all of the pressures that he feels, he uses an orange balloon throughout the story. I didn't mention this earlier but, at one point we see him trapped in a balloon struggling to get out, eventually, he does- this seems like the end of the recurring balloon. Yet we see it again afterward, even though he managed to escape, the balloon of disapproval remains and he has to fight all of the thoughts holding him back and preserve his idea even when it seems like everyone else won't. The irony of this theme however, is that it is one that his friends in the story were telling him to run away from, the common "black" person story. I agree that it is seen often in many forms of media but I am glad that Kene continued with it anyway because even if a story is told dozens of times, people will still watch and enjoy it if the story is told in a different way. Which I think is exactly what happened when Kene came on stage in the big city.

Although this was first produced across the pond at Bush Theater in London, the production at The Shed did a very good job at keeping all that made this performance so great originally. We were warned about the flashing lights before entering the theater, but the warnings did not include how well the flashing lights blended with the performance. In the high moments of the show, the accent lights would match the mood, and the intensity of the scene, and even in the calmer parts of the play the lights still did a very good job of creating an atmosphere that matched the play. The use of light in the show was spectacular, but what I most liked was the contrast between the bright and dark that they included with shadows. There were many parts of the play in that Kene used his shadow as almost an extension of either character that he was playing.

There were two co-music directors in this play, Nadine Lee and Liam Godwin. Arinze wrote the lyrics but they're the people who play the pieces and really bring the music to life. While they were on stage they both had mics, Lee was on the drums and vocals and Godwin had the keyboard and soundboard. Together they made the perfect sound backing to Kene's vocals while he was rapping and I was able to hear the emotions that I was feeling through their smart playing that carried so much emotion with every new note they played.

There weren't any over-the-top costumes, and the clothes that they chose to use were all very effective. To show the character shift between Arinze and Virus Bloodcell Kene put on a red beanie whenever he was Virus bloodcell and took it for all the quick switches between the two characters. At one point, his outfit completely changed when he put on a wetsuit when water balloons were thrown at him by one of the staff from the shed. Other than that however he never really changed clothes, but he was constantly taking it off and back on to represent change in his character. For example in the final scene, Kene was shirtless without the beanie finally accepting that even if his audience doesn't like his play he does. I thought that the lack of costume change made it easier to focus on what the story was actually

trying to tell, the changes that gentrification makes. Even though his play was adapted into one of the biggest examples of gentrification (New York City) he didn't really make his costumes, characters, or songs over the top to fit the aesthetic that plays in New York City are held to. Instead, he went the opposite route and stuck with the elements that worked for his play, however simple they might be. By doing so the play felt more powerful than it would've if he had even flashier lights, background dancers, and bolder outfits.

I left the performance remembering the songs, and the story that it conveyed. One specific moment I remember was during the intermission, when all the lights were on I looked behind me to see the people that were around me, and just like the play had mentioned- most of the audience was white. I knew that they probably understood the story to an extent, but not from the eyes of an actual POC (person of color), I am glad that they were able to see Misty but disappointed that the people that Kene was actually trying to reach weren't part of the crowd.

Review written by: Angela