

Talking Broadway

Splendor

Two plays currently at local theaters plumb the depths of human connection and examine the definitions of community; are virtual relationships more or less nurturing than face-to-face contact? Can you project your genuine self through cyberspace more comfortably than across the dining room table? What does it take to escape the ghosts of the past and make a better future?

Company One opens its fifteenth season with the world premiere of *Splendor* by C1 playwright-in-residence Kirsten Greenidge. Expanded from her one-act play *Thanksgiving*, written for the 2010 production of *Grimm* at Company One, *Splendor* explores the family and community relationships in a fictional town north of Boston as Thanksgiving preparations are underway. What began as a slice of life conversation among three young mothers in a ballet school waiting room has become a discourse on race, class and gender as they apply to life in small town Bellington. Employing a non-linear structure, the events go back and forth in time between 1965 and 2012, and Greenidge challenges the audience to connect the dots.

Artistic Director Shawn LaCount and Dramaturg Ilana M. Brownstein have collaborated with Greenidge to develop *Splendor* over the course of the last four years, and LaCount directs an ensemble cast of ten actors, all but one of whom play their characters as both children and adults.

Their personalities are distinctive, but they are united by their disappointments in life and their strong connection to a shared community. Viewing Bellington as the source of their deepest pain, some wish to escape, while others feel compelled to remain, reliving the past they cannot change. Set Designer Cristina Todesco makes it a stark world with shadows and moods imposed by Lighting Designer Jen Rock and Sound Designer Arshan Gailus.

Fran Giosa (Alexandria King) and Nicole Gazza Mahoney (Molly Kimmerling) are best friends at the age of eight, undeterred by Fran's mixed race and Nicole's less-than-welcoming mother. King and Kimmerling capture the unencumbered joy of two little girls so well that it is a marvel to see their rich portrayals of the older (35), wiser women they become. Although she managed to get away—all the way to Chestnut Hill—Fran has moved back with her young daughter following her divorce, back to the squabbles



The Cast

Photo provided by Company One

with her shoplifting mother Gloria (Becca Lewis), her frustration with her aimless brother Anthony (Danny Mourino) and the cold shoulder from her high school peers. In contrast to her old friend, Nicole lives hand to mouth in a troubled marriage with high school sweetheart Mike Mahoney (Michael Knowlton) and their five kids, bewildered that she has to clip coupons to get by. Her other friends Colleen Madden Colby (Hannah Cranton) and Lisa Murphy Vitello (Nicole Prefontaine) aren't much better off with four and five kids respectively, but at least their husbands have steady employment.

Greenidge sketches a variety of characters—working class, school counselor, butcher's son—and LaCount gives his actors the space to flesh them out. Greg Maraio is particularly impressive as Dave Murphy whose teenage son lost his life on a dare. He struggles to maintain a positive spirit, fueled by a little afternoon delight, Dunkin' Donuts coffee and snippets of conversation with strangers he meets in line. When his remedies fail him and Dave is crushed by the weight of his grief, Maraio's collapse is devastating and raw. As his daughter, Prefontaine channels her pain into biting cynicism, only letting her guard down briefly with her father.

Dressed by Costume Designer Katherine Stebbins in skin tight pants and leopard print high heels, Gloria is quite the character, simultaneously downtrodden and unapologetic. Lewis brings her to life with a harsh Boston accent, exaggerated mannerisms and a wobbly gait. Although Gloria did the best she could as a single mother, she's not much of a role model to Fran and Anthony. Their African-American father Clive Cooper (James Milord) has not been in their lives, but Anthony sets out to rectify the situation in a highly fraught scene. Clive's significant other Aline (Obehi Janice), a former guidance counselor at the high school, tries to smooth things between father and son, shining a spotlight on the dark corners of her relationship with Clive.

Each of the scenes is a mini-drama unto itself, but with a common undercurrent of sadness and desperation. Everyone has a secret or some part of themselves they are loathe to share, fearing more hurt or disappointment. They have long memories that inform their view of the future. When one old friend offers an overdue olive branch, it is greeted with suspicion, but it is Greenidge's attempt to insert a ray of hope into the Thanksgiving diorama. Nothing turned out the way any of them expected, but the holiday gathering may be a chance to finally move forward. A little honest communication will go a long way in helping the community to heal and a little more clarity will make the entire *Splendor* shine like some of its parts.