

From Life & Arts:

Theater Review: Los Angeles Women's Theatre Festival

1). Cynthia Lee. 2). Dina Morrone in "The Italian in Me." 3). Elaine Del Valle. 4). Juliette Marshall sings and jokes at LA Women's Theatre Festival. Photos courtesy of LA Women's Theatre Festival

For seventeen years, the Los Angeles Women's Theatre Festival has been presenting performances by talented women from the theatre, dance, and performance art world. This year's festival, with the theme "Meeting the New Decade," was presented at the Electric Lodge in Venice over the unusually hot weekend of March 25-28. Opening night on Thursday featured an awards ceremony honoring Fifth Dimension singer-actor Florence LaRue, dancer-choreographer Sri Susilowati, performance artist Odalys Nanin, character actor Connie Sawyer, and posthumous awards to actors Beatrice Arthur and Alaina Reed Hall. Los Angeles City Council member Bernard Parks posed for photos with the winners, although he did not fulfill the hosts' humorous suggestion that he recite Shakespeare. As a bonus, there were special performances like Juliette Marshall's laugh-inducing one-woman cabaret show "Shift Happens," about her experiences with divorce. Friday night's highlights included Cynthia Lee's "ruddha rude huh?" in which the dancer-choreographer used kathak (Indian classical dance) movements while speaking in nonsense syllables and watching her own invisible performance from the audience. In a similar vein, Sheetal Gandhi's "Bahu-Beti-Biwi" was a combination of Indian dance and music with odd verbalisms segueing into nonsense comments like "My brother cannot wear short shorts in India." These pieces managed to be both amusing and graceful. On Saturday afternoon, Raleigh S. Pinsky took the audience through "Evolution of Soul 685," in which she played a soul (complete with glittery halo) who decides to be born and live on earth. The childlike nature of her narrative seemed a quiet interlude compared to many of the more raucous Festival offerings. Saturday evening offered an energetic program with Elaine Del Valle's hilarious and ultimately moving

“Brownsville Bred,” the story of growing up Latina in an African-American neighborhood in New York; and Barbara Cole’s “Surviving Chrysalis,” about a maturing mother struggling with erotic temptation and identity. Sunday afternoon featured the strongest performances. Gloria Rosen’s “Listen, Can you Hear Me Now?” dealt with the dilemma of a woman whose parents are deaf and rely on their daughter as a “translator.” This story of family conflict was amazingly funny at times and audience members, regardless of their backgrounds, identified with it. Lydia Nicole’s “Calling Up Papi” was another stunning tale of a girl growing up in the inner city with a pimp for a father. Erika Green Swafford’s monologue “The New Black” drew whoops and cheers from the audience for her observations on the marketing and co-opting of black identity. And Dina Morrone’s “The Italian in Me,” was a hoot, with Morrone telling of her attempts to find movie work in Italy and meeting a series of film industry types (including Federico Fellini!). One audience member, who had made a long trip from Palos Verdes to attend the Festival, told this reviewer: “What I love about this is the amazing cultural diversity.” Not only was the diversity in the performances, she noted, but it was also in the way that audience members from different backgrounds got to meet and talk and befriend each other. The Los Angeles Women’s Theatre Festival can be proud of this achievement.

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