

THE SOURCE

Native Girl Syndrome pushes its audience into the shattering stories of the streets

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Performer Karian Iraola in Native Girl Syndrome. | Photo by Marc J Chalifoux.

Self-destruction and addiction, cultural disorientation and alienation: these are the stories of NGS (Native Girl Syndrome), a contemporary dance creation by Montreal-based choreographer Lara Kramer. NGS, showing in Vancouver as part of the 2014 Dancing on the Edge Festival, explores traumatic and somewhat hopeless experiences of street life. However discomforting, its raw performance style, serious themes, and tragic realism push the audience to take notice.

Kramer explains how the idea for NGS arose from an earlier work inspired by her mother's experience of residential schools. While researching the schools, she came across the term "Native Girl Syndrome," and was struck by the description.

"It was a nun describing a student, a First Nations woman. It was very derogatory, saying she will go on to experience these horrible things, and she will fail within the system."

Despite its disparaging tone, Kramer felt that some parts of the description reflected her grandmother's story. Wanting to learn more about her grandmother and her history, Kramer visited Lac Seul Reserve, the remote community where her grandmother lived, and migrated from as a young woman.

"There wasn't any work there, so her and her sisters wound up in Winnipeg living on the streets. She had a rough life. She dealt with addiction. She lost her children to the system," says Kramer whose work often contemplates social and political issues surrounding Canada and First Nations Peoples.

Her grandmother's experience of living on the streets inspired Kramer to explore the reality of street life for First Nations women. She points out that for First Nations women, it is not only a story of the difficulties of street life. It is also a story of cultural appropriation, genocide and the aftermath of residential schools.

"There is a long history of identity being stripped," she says.

Pushing for awareness

Kramer notes that as the characters developed, the work evolved so that NGS was no longer expressing her grandmother's story. Instead, it exposes a much deeper truth, implicating Canada's relationships with First Nations Peoples as well as audiences' understandings of persons who live on the street and who struggle with mental health issues and addiction.

"It is not a hopeful piece. It puts the audience in a position where they cannot look away. It creates a sense of awareness and empathy," says Kramer, who has been recognized as a Human Rights advocate by the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre.

Performed by dancers Angie Cheng and Karina Iraola, Kramer's work may overturn audience expectations as it extends beyond dance and into the realm of performance art.

“There are a lot of elements of improvisation. It’s not just dance; it’s very theatrical.

NGS premiered in Montreal in Nov. 2013, one year after Kramer first started working on the piece. It first performed in Vancouver at the 2013 Talking Stick Festival, which Kramer valued as an opportunity to show work-in-progress to an audience, and see how they respond.

“It helped me to know if I was pushing the work far enough,” she says.

Pushing herself, her performances and her audiences into challenging territory seems to be something that defines Kramer’s body of work. With NGS, the audience bears witness to the distressing realities and traumatic socio-political histories that we may sometimes pull away from.

For Kramer, it is the witnessing of these stories and the reflection that they provoke that are most meaningful.

“There is a huge history here. There is not a simple solution,” she says. “It is the aftermath of genocide.”

Monday, July 7 and Wednesday, July 9 at 8 p.m. at Firehall Arts Centre.

To find out more, please visit: www.dancingontheedge.org/program/lara-kramer/