

REDEFINING HOPE THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES AND THE BATTLE FOR VISIBILITY

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The Children's Theatre Workshop at NEIU produces two fully realized plays each year for Chicagoland public school students. These productions not only fill gaps in arts curricula, but also enrich and expand current curriculum offerings regarding critical social questions that affect youth. With a mission couched in offering safe space for the exploration of identity and self-expression, this fall's CTW class chose to produce Naomi Iizuka's acclaimed play, ANON(YMOUS). This piece was selected to interrogate the complicated and often heartbreaking issue of refugees seeking a new life here in the United States.

NEIU sits at the forefront of modeling and supporting initiatives in inclusion of diverse populations. Alongside the teaching of diversity however, sits a crucial need and many questions for young people who've come to this country not necessarily by choice, but for survival. ANON(YMOUS) takes a contemporary lens to Homer's THE ODYSSEY and examines the story of a young man named 'Anon' and his mother 'Nemesani.' They have fled an unnamed country on an unnamed boat and are tragically ripped from each other in a mythic storm. Deposited on the shores of the United States, the pair vie to re-claim what critically is often lost in refugee or diasporic experiences, a sense of identity, and *home*. Through Anon's eyes, we are asked to parse the difficult questions that result from being ripped or forced from a homeland, "who am I?" "where is my home?" "What *is* home?"

In this mode of anonymity CTW's production explores the battle to reclaim what and who disappears in the migrant, refugee, and immigrant experiences. Many of our students here and in the classes that will attend ANON(YMOUS) come from various points of origin, but all have arrived at a common destination, our theatre. Acclaimed playwright, Philip Dawkins penned a recent article in *TYA Magazine* in which he posits that the critical difference between theatre for youth and theatre for adults is that in theatre for youth, not only do we bear responsibility for parsing crucial social problems and questions, but we also carry the burden of offering young audiences "radical hope" that those questions have answers.

By the date of the Faculty Symposium we will be a bit more than halfway through our performances of ANON(YMOUS). Adam Goldstein (director and instructor), along with several members of our cast and team, will discuss the themes and heart of the play with specific focus on visibility and community building for youth. We in the class collectively view CTW as a space in which we render a theatre a new kind of home and we hope to share the tools and moments of that journey with our Symposia audience. In this presentation we will share images of the play, moments and stages of our process, and personal stories from our experiences with our student audiences as well as our own lives that touch on this notion of how we shift from radical loss to radical hope. The Presentation will be accompanied by an audio journalism project created by a CTW studio as well as various visual aids from the production.