

Cultural Daily

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5 Betties Is Sweet and Strange

David Sheward · Wednesday, September 12th, 2018

The description in the press release for Jen Silverman's *Collective Rage: A Play in 5 Betties* sounded more than a tad pretentious. First there was the ridiculously long subtitle: "In Essence, A Queer and Occasionally Hazardous Exploration; Do You Remember When You Were in Middle School and You Read About Shackleton and How He Explored the Antarctic?; Imagine the Antarctic as a Pussy and It's Sort of Like That." Any play which needs to spell out its themes in such an extended, jokey way usually isn't going to have much to say beyond that subtitle. It seemed as if she was trying too hard to express the ideas of sexual discovery. Then there was the synopsis: five women, all with the same name, each identified by a single characteristic: "one rich, one lonely, one charismatic, one lovelorn, and one who keeps working on her truck." It sounds like a clash of feminist clichés.



Ana Villafane and Lea DeLaria in *Collective Rage: A Play in 5 Betties*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Fortunately, Silverman's wildly funny script, Mike Donahue's imaginative, brash direction, and five incisive performances make *Collective Rage* a hoot of hilarity, a howl of anger, and a celebration of the power of theater to awaken spirits and provide connections. The rage of title is expressed by Betty 1—she's the rich one—as the play opens. This Betty is sick of the constant tragedy spewing from the TV news and her (unseen) husband Richard's indifference to it and her, so she decides to throw a dinner party attended by Betty 2—the lonely one—and Betty 3—a charismatic bisexual charmer with a huge personality. Betties 4 and 5 are sexually liberated lesbian friends of Betty 3, maintaining a distance from the straight world and baffled by the repressed attitudes of Betties 1 and 2.

All five come together when Betty 3 decides to quit her salesclerk job at Sephora and mount her own version of the play-within-a-play of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. ("I can be an actor. It's like having a nervous breakdown at certain times," she explains.) The quintet makes unexpected bonds and interrelationships as they discover and explore their gender, sexuality and power. Silverman cleverly transfers the characters from the Rude Mechanical segment of *Midsummer*—Wall, Moonshine, Prologue, Lion—into metaphors for the Betties' states of mind. Sounds confusing? It could have been, but thanks to Donahue's clear direction and the centered acting, we are never unsure at which Betty is which.



Adina Verson in *Collective Rage: A Play in 5 Betties*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The play is simultaneously a broad cartoon and a moving portrait of women shattering the limits set by a male, heterosexual society. In our real world, Bettys 1 and 2 would probably not cross racial, sexual and class lines to connect with the remaining three, but Silverman creates a bizarre, open universe where anything is possible. Donahue echoes this theme in his staging with a slightly exaggerated, yet consistent logic. In this world, props and furniture drop from the sky in Dane Laffrey's Alice-in-Wonderland set, rehearsal space is available with no discernible cost, and sex and love are freely expressed.

Dana Delaney is delightfully dry and daffily smitten as the wealthy hostess descending from her Upper East Side nest to experiment with a gay affair. Ana Villafane is a force of nature as the dazzling would-be playwright-director. Lea DeLaria captures the surface bluster and inner vulnerability of her truck-driving friend and Chaunte Wayans displays a sly wit and strength as the boxing trainer who becomes romantically involved with ritzy Betty. The stand out is Adina Verson as the isolated housewife, hilariously making friends with her sexuality and timidly reaching out to the other women. The play concludes with Verson singing a sweet, unpretentious song with quirky lyrics about dealing with the world and making your own way. A fitting wrap-up for an unconventional show—both sweet and strange.

Sept. 12—Oct. 7. MCC Theater at the Lucille Lortel Theater, 121 Christopher St., NYC. Tue—Wed 7pm, Thu—Fri, 8pm, Sat 2pm and 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: 90 mins. with no intermission. \$49—\$99. (866) 811-4111. www.ovationtix.com.

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