

Cultural Daily

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A Portmanteau Full of Surprises

Sylvie · Wednesday, June 6th, 2018

“Portmanteau” is an old word. You don’t hear it often. But Nigerian American playwright Mfoniso Udofia uses it boldly in the title of her play, *Her Portmanteau*, now on stage at Boston Court Pasadena.

I say boldly, because “portmanteau,” originally derived from old French, has many meanings. The original describes a large trunk or suitcase, usually made of hard leather that opens down the middle into equal parts. One of the newer English meanings is grammatical: it describes two halves of different words conjoined to make a single new word. (A recent example is “laze,” the conjoining of “lava” and “haze” to describe the recent Kilauea volcanic eruptions.)

In that sense, both of those meanings apply to Udofia’s play. This traditional tale of family relationships (two sisters, two mothers, two daughters) is enlarged by the nuanced complexities of divorce, separation, emigration and immigration, with all the implied anguish and complications that any one of these events, alone, might provoke. Here two halves of a long separation come together — like those of a portmanteau — to right an old psychological and emotional wrong.

A red portmanteau is used by a member of each of the two generations of this family. Abasiama Ufot (Joyce Guy) is the Nigerian American mother of two grown daughters. Her eldest daughter, Iniabasi Ekpeyong (Délé Ogundiran), is the product of a failed first marriage; after the divorce, as a young child, she was sent to Nigeria with her father, which is where she has lived until now. The second daughter, Adiaha Ufot (Omozé Idehenre), is the eldest of three siblings born of Abasiama’s unhappy second marriage. Adiaha has known life only in America.



l-r: Délé Ogundiran and Omozé Idehenre in *Her Portmanteau* at Boston court Pasadena.

When the play opens, Iniabasi, armed only with the ancient portmanteau, has arrived at New York’s JFK to be reunited with her mother. Her plan is to rejoin the American half of the clan and eventually bring her young son Kufre to America as well.

Aside from the normal apprehensions of such a reunion with a mother she feels had rejected her and whom she has not seen in years, Iniabasi is worried about having left her own son Kufre back in Nigeria (for now). Kufre was born out of wedlock, an event perceived as so grievous by the Nigerian branch of the family that it promptly ostracized Iniabasi and the boy. Having been twice rejected in this way has left Iniabasi angry, vulnerable and defensive. Tensions only mount when her mother fails to meet her at JFK as promised, and where her half-sister Adahia, whom she’s

never met, comes to greet her instead.

To say that the situation is fraught is a vast understatement. The stage is set for a generational showdown in Adahia's neat if cramped New York apartment. Iniabasi eyes the place with diffidence. (Tesshi Nakagawa supplied the fine scenic design, while Karyn Lawrence delivered the appropriately claustrophobic lighting.)

Verbal exchanges between the half sisters take place in both English and their Nigerian Ibibio dialect, which might easily prove confusing. But no. All three women, Mama, who finally arrives, and the daughters all speak English as well as Ibibio. There is no confusion, not least because the most significant form of communication among the three is body language. And body language never lies.



l-r: joyce Guy and Omozé Idehenre in *Her Portmanteau* at Boston Court Pasadena.

We easily follow everything throughout this messy, often exasperating series of half-spoken, half gestured confrontations, that includes poorly concealed fears, tentative endearments, unspoken (and spoken) resentments, tears, entreaties, pleadings and the eventual eruptions that help clear the air. The thrusts and parries, spoken and not, bring this tortured threesome together. It's painful and sloppy and stubborn and difficult, but by play's end we know where everyone stands.

There is a kind of epiphany brought about in good part by the contents of the portmanteau, which, among other things, turns out to contain some significant family heirlooms. These are stronger and more precious than gold and help the women come together and carve a path forward. It will take time, it won't be smooth, but it will be smoother, thanks in no small measure to the magic of... Skype.



l-r: Joyce Guy, Omozé Idehenre and Délé Ogundiran in *Her Portmanteau* at Boston Court Pasadena.

Director Gregg T. Daniel treads gingerly in the minefields that lie between anger and desire, betrayal and reconciliation, isolation and acceptance. Above all, the three actors never flinch. They deliver difficult, distinct and demanding performances, with Joyce Guy particularly effective as the mother torn by regret for what she did, what she did not do, and what she might have done better. She's a life force that will never surrender to defeat.

The playwright counts this work as one of nine plays (some yet to be written), a fiction based in fact. It is that. Its whirlpool of emotions and the mixture and importance of languages elevate it. So do the wider circumstances that compel the action and the intricacies brought on by the shadow immigration issues that are never far behind. The resulting production, rigorously staged by Daniel, moves us largely by its authenticity.

Top image: Délé Ogundiran, Joyce Guy and Omozé Idehenre in Her Portmanteau at Boston Court Pasadena.

Photos by Craig Schwartz

WHAT: *Her Portmanteau*

WHERE: Boston Court Pasadena, 70 N. Mentor Ave., Pasadena, CA 91106.

WHEN: Thursdays-Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays, 2pm. Ends June 30.

PUBLIC Discourse Night: Tonight only (all tickets include a drink token for T. Boyle's Pub to enjoy after the show).

COMMUNITY MATINEE: June 9 ONLY, 2pm. All tickets, \$5.

RUN TIME: One hour, 45 minutes; no intermission.

HOW: Tickets \$20-\$39, available at BostonCourtPasadena.org or by phone at 626.683.6801.

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