



**Arts
Centre
Melbourne**

Pike St

Preliminary Teachers' Resources

Prepared by Sam Mackie



Introduction

PIKE ST.

This is a preliminary document to the main study guide on Nilaja Sun's 'Pike Street' which will be released near the end of Term 2.

It is designed as a starting point (to the starting point): a way into Sun's previous work and what we might consider before seeing her latest production.

The playscript itself will be readily available for purchase via Arts Centre Melbourne; but not just yet.

I have read the script and recently was given access to a private copy of the production. It is a virtuoso performance, a piece of pure theatre, where a single actor tells a story with warmth, humour, cheek, rage, resentment, love, forgiveness and ultimately tragedy shadowed with a poignant final image of hope.

Resources prepared by Sam Mackie.

Before you walk down Pike Street ... a look at Nilaja Sun's work

Nilaja Sun is a half Puerto-Rican, half African-American actor, playwright (despite what she might say), teaching artist and a key member of the Epic Theatre Ensemble in New York, whose mission is to 'to create bold work with and for diverse communities that promotes vital discourse and social change.

Her film and television credits include 'Madam Secretary', '30 Rock', 'the Good Wife' and 'The Bourne Legacy'.

However, it is her award winning one-woman show, 'No Child', which has won plaudits and awards from around the world, including an Obie award for its Off-Broadway run.

It was her ability to embody and transform characters with seamless ease that has defined her work. She needs no tricks of the trade, no special effects. She has the truth of her own observations and experiences and immeasurable skills as an actor and storyteller.

'The work comes to me physically first, and then the word follows. I go through life watching and paying attention to body language, to accents, to the way people move in space, and that's where a lot of the writing comes from. I don't start by thinking in terms of "What do I want to say?" It's more, "Who do I want to leave the audience with?"

(Stoltenberg review, April 1, 2017)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3D32Rhk5fz0> – listen to Sun talk about the power of solo performance.

Theatre Etiquette

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A THEATRE AUDIENCE?

If this is your first time seeing live theatre here are a few tips:

- Theatre is 'live' and the performers are real
- You can hear and see the actors and they can hear and often see you
- Because theatre is live it is a dynamic experience, each audience is different and the actors can feel this and they respond to it

How to get the most out of the theatre experience:

- Arrive on time! Theatre is not like the movies - there are no advertisements or trailers in live theatre! If you miss the start you may not catch up with what is happening or worse...you may not be admitted to the theatre at all!
- Turn off your mobile phone and/or iPod. You won't need them and if your phone rings it will disrupt everyone
- Make sure you go to the bathroom before you go into the theatre. You don't want to be that person who climbs over everyone to get out during the show...you really don't
- An usher will help you find your seat so follow their directions
- How do you know when the performance begins? The lights will dim and/or you might hear a voice-over or sound. That's your cue that it has begun – time to quieten down and enjoy it.
- Because the show is live it is important that:
 - There is no photography
 - You don't speak loudly (remember the actors can hear!)
 - No eating (you're not going to be in there for hours, you can last, plus it's distracting)
 - Stay in your seat
- If the performance makes you want to laugh or gasp or respond in some other way then please do – the performers may be distracted by an audience that is talking too loudly, but they will feed off an audience that is genuinely responding to what they are doing on stage
- At the end of the performance the lights will come up and the performers will take a bow. It's customary at this point for the audience to show them how much they enjoyed their work by applauding or even cheering.
- These tips are aimed at allowing you to get the most out of the performance and for the actors and the other audience members to feel the same. You are all in it together!

Introduction

NILAJA SUN



Sun came to Australia in 2013 with 'No Child', an effortlessly simple piece of theatre that traces one teacher-artist's efforts to put on Timberlake Wertenbaker's (not Justin Timberlake's!) 'Our Country's Good' in a high school in the Bronx. In it the central character is Sun herself, as the autobiographical piece is based on her nine years working in the New York education system.

But, through her unique ability to embody and transform from one character to another, we also meet no less than 15 other people we laugh with and feel for: from an 80 year old janitor who guides us through the story to Ms Tam the somewhat defeated home teacher; from the stoic school principal to a Jamaican security guard to a Russian substitute teacher. Most importantly Sun brings to life her students, at least seven by my count. With lightning precision, she transforms from one to the other as quickly as they can interrupt each other in the chaos of this troubled classroom. It is through Sun's immense talents with voice and body that the audience never fails to identify and empathise with Coca, Jerome, Shondrika, Xiomara, Brian, Jose & Philip. And she needs nothing else. The stage is beset with a single chair; her costume is a simple combination that never changes. 'No Child' (alluding to yet another political promise that would never see the light of day) is storytelling at its simplest: warm, funny, poignant, but pointed with conviction at an education system, and the people within it, in desperate need of sincere attention.

Learning Activities

A CLOSER LOOK

The video clip below has Sun presenting excerpts from 'No Child' as part of a keynote address at a Lincoln Center Education (LCE) forum in July 2016.

<https://vimeo.com/189193861>

Watch the video as a class and take note of the conventions that define her work and performance style:

- A single performer portraying a range of acutely defined characters.
- Rapid fire transformations between those characters (2, 3 or more) that allows conversations to flow effortlessly.
- Humour.
- Pathos.
- Political and social commentary.
- Minimal application of stagecraft:
 - A bare space.
 - Minimal use of props – leading to simple mime.
 - Single non-descript costume.

Whilst there are other different conventions applied to each of Sun's two shows ('No Child's use of a narrator, 'Pike Street's use of voiceover, etc) the overall performance style is consistent.

It is ideal preparation for the students to begin to talk through much of the 4.3 criteria.

For example:

Focus on expressive skills

Break up the class into small groups.

After watching the clip, get one from each group to stand and mimic the assorted characters from the show. Ask the others to sculpt them carefully, trying to identify the starting point – or motif – that helps us quickly identify them.



Pictures courtesy of Getty images

Pike St.
Arts Centre Melbourne
12 – 17 September, 2017

Learning Activities

A CLOSER LOOK

Begin by focussing on the students of the class before moving onto the adult characters:

- Coca
- Jerome
- Shondrika
- Xiomara
- Brian
- Jose
- Philip
- The janitor (narrator)
- Ms Tam
- Nilaja
- The Principal

Challenge - invite them to try and transform quickly through two or even three characters in a quick-fire conversation of 6-8 lines.

Ask them to analyse each of these characters through Sun's expressive and performance skills:

- Expressive skills:
 - Posture
 - What defines them on stage as they stand or sit?
 - What are we drawn to/notice – the defensively crossed arms, the lean to one side, the stooped shoulders, the diminutive stance, the
 - Facial expression
 - What is the dominant feature Sun brings to bare: wide- eyes, raised eye brows, bare teeth, quivering bottom lip, furrowed brow, mouth agape, sniffly nose?
 - What is the dominant expression and mood given off?
 - Voice
 - Does accent help define?
 - Can you differentiate beyond accent, in terms of pace & rhythm, pitch & inflection, volume, tone and pronunciation [where it seems to come from – the nose, the throat, an open mouth]?
 - Is there something in the language they use – a key expression or line you can use to highlight the character?
 - Are there key noises we identify – a whimper, a laugh, a groan, a wheeze, or silence?

Learning Activities

A CLOSER LOOK

- Movement – around the space (if at all)
 - What part of the body leads them (chest, nose, feet, groin)?
 - How comfortably do they move in this space?
 - Is heavy or light, sudden or sustained, direct or random (indirect)?
If you like these terms you should explore Rudolf Laban's movement theory.
- Signature gestures
 - What idiosyncrasies do you notice: a cheeky wink, a sniff up the sleeve, scratching arms, looking to the ground (avoiding eye contact), pushing glasses back, pulling jocks from bum crack, a high five, a bored finger tap?
- Motif – Sun often uses the same motif to transform into a given character. In 'Pike Street' Manny's best friend Tykeen almost always slides back into his character with a smooth streetwise grace till he stands side on, legs over-spread, bouncing with the vim of someone who's had too many energy drinks. Later he will be focus in on the inhalation of his spliff.
Invite the students to find the key 'motif/s' that allow us to quickly identify any of the characters in 'No Child'.

With all this in mind come up with a short description of on of the characters that captures these characteristics and anything you might interpret in terms of:

- Relationships
- Status
- Given circumstances
- Motivation.

Synopsis

PIKE ST.

Sun returns to Melbourne with 'Pike Street', another self-penned one-hander from a woman who considers herself 'an actor who writes plays about her experiences', not a playwright.

The setting is nearby, the Lower East Side, or Loisaidas the locals would call it, and on the fifth floor of a 'walk-up' or tenement building. Evelyn Vega, loving mother, is preparing for the onset of Hurricane Dolores, an allusion to Sandy, the hurricane that swept through New York in 2012 killing over 50 people and causing untold damage.

Evelyn's main concern is for Candi, her 15-year-old daughter, struck down by a brain aneurism at 11 and dependent on a respirator and dialysis machine to survive. And so, Evelyn has turned to the healing arts that her late mother was renowned for, to give Candi a chance to breathe, to swim, to live. But she must also deal with a power company that keeps her on hold, her quick witted and lascivious widower father, Papi, her selectively forgetful aging Jewish neighbour, Mrs Applebaum, and her soon to return soldier-hero brother, Manny.

As the hurricane draws nearer family tensions surface but the bonds prove stronger than any possible resentment. We also meet other New Yorkers including Manny's best friend Tykeen, an admiring young passer-by, and a Yemeni store owner. 'Pike Street'.

Through these crisply portrayed characters Sun has sympathetically embodied the multicultural neighbourhood of Montgomery Street where she grew up. We see how family and community turn to each other when the system isn't there for them and we experience the tragedy and beauty that can come from it.

For a detailed scene by scene breakdown go to 'A Longer Walk down Pike Street'

Contextual Background

WHERE IS PIKE ST.?

Who isn't emotionally abusive in New York City. With every year you live here, it's like you graduate to the next level of abusiveness. Emotionally abusive, check. Verbally abusive, check, you become mayor – politically abusive, check. (puff) You get old and find Jesus – spiritually abusive (puff) check (exhale).

Tykeen (Pike Street – p25)

Pike St. 60 Pike St. 10002. Under the Manhattan Bridge? Uh, next to what used to be Pathmark?

Evelyn (Pike Street -p2)



60 Pike Street Manhattan – google Maps – accessed 14.04.2017

Born and raised on Montgomery Street, just three blocks west of Pike Street, Sun, part African American, part Puerto-Rican, began developing the play in response to the stories of devastation that emerged from her neighbourhood following the wave of destruction caused by Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

Contextual Background

WHERE IS PIKE ST.?

'the real Pike St. is a literal and figurative dead-end that stops at the East River, beating down its inhabitants with both physical elements and emotional fatigue.' - Traven Rice, December 2, 2015, the Lo-down

Whilst there are signs of gentrification in the area the community remains one of diverse multicultural backgrounds and a history steeped in poverty. The working-class poor can find themselves living only a few blocks from the wealthiest Manhattanites.

No, no, no, we're not going to a shelter. Well, we went to the one at Seward Park the last time it was the 'storm of the century' and the generators were old and tapped out. By the third day, all the hipsters wanted to charge their laptops and phones on the same outlet as my daughter's dialysis Evelyn p9

The following details come from an overview of its district in a 'Lower East Side Ready' report into the impact of Hurricane Sandy on its neighbourhood when it struck landfall at 7.30pm on October 29, 2012, killing more than fifty people and causing destruction and chaos on a massive scale. They are interspersed with the many voices of 'Pike Street' and Sun herself.

- The Lower East Side (LES) in Manhattan is a diverse collection of several neighbourhoods in Lower Manhattan including Chinatown, the East Village, Two Bridges, and Alphabet City.

Papi As for me, get me an arroz con pollo from the Dominican place, an egg foo young from the Chinese place, a rugala from the Jewish place and my numbers from the Arabs.

- The LES is a racially and linguistically diverse neighbourhood with 42% of residents identifying as white 34% as Asian, 23 % as Hispanic or Latino/a, and 8% as Black or African American.

I've always wanted to do a piece about that part of the lower east side ... I mean the diversity is really insane, if you really think about it." (Nilaja Sun - lodown review)

- 51 % primarily speak a language other than English.

*Evelyn Yes, papi she's gone.
Grandpa Oh my God, esa judia!
Evelyn Um, papi, is it possible to not start every morning with racism?
Grandpa You think they see me and they say "That's a man"? No! They say "That's a spic!"*

- 36% of LES residents were born outside the United States.

Contextual Background

WHERE IS PIKE ST.?

<i>Evelyn</i>	<i>It was nice to see you again, Migdalia. I'm going to Delancey. Need anything?</i>
<i>Migdalia</i>	<i>From Delancey? No! What am I an immigrant?</i>
<i>Evelyn</i>	<i>Yes, actually you are, Migdalia.</i>
<i>Migdalia</i>	<i>Yes, but I don't look like one.</i>

- An additional 5 % born in Puerto Rico

<i>Applebaum</i>	<i>Are you Puerto Rican?</i>
<i>Evelyn</i>	<i>Ah, here we go again. Yes, Mrs. Applebaum, I am Puerto Rican.</i>
<i>Applebaum</i>	<i>Ah, welcome to America! (she hugs her)</i>
<i>Evelyn</i>	<i>Thank you, I was born here.</i>

- The LES is one of the less affluent community districts in New York City. 25% of residents live below the poverty line, and it represents one of the highest concentrations of public housing in the country.

Photograph – South Street – Virginia Jones

The report highlights the damage done by Hurricane Sandy (over \$19 Billion) and was critical of the time it took to start repairing key infrastructure, including getting power back to 2.5 million people (it took up to two weeks for some). It was particularly critical of the lack of support for the elderly and the disabled.

Contextual Background

WHERE IS PIKE ST.?



Flooding of the Lower East Side during Hurricane Sandy.

However, it also noted extraordinary community efforts when, in the wake of Sandy, the system broke down, the same sense of community that Sun captures, stretches, strains and ultimately embraces in Evelyn's fifth floor apartment and the streets below, through the likes of The Vega family, Mrs Applebaum, Tykeen Wong Chang and Mohammed, the Yemeni store owner. Perhaps, it is a 10 year old Candi Vegas, before her aneurism, who captures the ambiguity of New York and her beloved Lower East Side

Did you know that this part of the Lower East Side is one of the most underrepresented neighbourhoods in all of Manhattan. We can't have that, people! I heard that when the towers came down, it took the media forever to even report on the effects here. My mom works in the subways. She talks to me every day about the tiled glories of the Columbus

Circle station, the modern art at Rockefeller and even the Renaissance architecture of some secret City Hall station while our own sad East Broadway stop is an eye sore falling apart with every rumble of the F train. How many more tragedies do we have to go through before we rise up against the Man, I mean the system, I mean, ugh bad people? Maybe that man is the mayor, maybe he's your teacher, maybe he's Ronald McDonald beckoning you to a life of fast food and high blood pressure. Come on, mi gente, get up and make something out of yourselves!

Candace 10 year old – p32-3

Want to know more about the neighbourhood?

<http://www.thelodownny.com/>

The Lo-Down is a community website dedicated to daily news coverage, including in-depth reporting on urban issues, real estate, popular culture and – most significantly – the people who live and work in one of the world's greatest neighborhoods, the Lower East Side