



Nilaja Sun.

PHOTO BY CAROL ROSECC

Sun Delivers “No Child...”

by Rob Kendt

WHAT'S IN A TITLE? In the case of Nilaja Sun's acclaimed solo show *No Child...*, it's what's *not* in the title that seems to speak volumes.

“I created the title that way to ask that you open your mind,” says Sun, whose self-penned work ran to packed houses for 11 months off-Broadway before touring to Chicago, Washington, D.C., Berkeley, and, in March, Los Angeles' Kirk Douglas Theatre. “Because a lot of people think, ‘Oh, it's about No Child Left Behind.’ I understand that, but there's so much more to our kids and to their situation than just this law, though that is a huge part of it.”

Based on Sun's own experiences as a teaching artist in some of New York's toughest schools, *No Child...* traces her efforts to stage an in-class production of Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* with a class of high-energy, low-attention-span youths at a crumbling, under-funded Bronx high school. Though the pressure to perform on standardized tests at the expense of all other educational aims — one of the pernicious side effects of the “accountability” mandated by No Child Left Behind — is among the challenges Sun's character faces in *No Child...*, it is not the biggest or the worst. Poverty, violence, abuse and the often over-stimulated drama of adolescence play large roles, as do administrative burnout, turnover and indifference.

“As a teaching artist, you wouldn't even necessarily notice No Child Left Behind unless a teacher told you or you read about it — you wouldn't have direct contact with it,” says Sun, an actor and writer who initially took to educational theatre as a day job but has proven to be a natural at it. “But then you would realize that around April and May, you're not coming in as much because they've got to take their tests.”

For Sun, this test pressure has meant that the welcome she receives in classrooms “depends on the principal, on the administrator who feels, ‘Is this really going to be helpful at this moment? Or is doing *Antigone* or Aeschylus going to get in the way of their passing the test and of us keeping our funding?’ ”

But as Sun started to write the piece on a commission from the New York State Council on the Arts, she began to realize that not



only are the problems of public education larger than any single piece of legislation — the solution may be broader, too.

“When I started writing the play I thought, ‘Well, of course, *No Child* — it’s what’s going on in education.’ And then I thought to myself, how many people really know what life is like for an inner-city teenage kid? If people don’t even know or like teenagers, why would they even care to know about how this law is affecting them?”

Her solution was to ground the story in emotional truths as much, or more, than socioeconomic realities — to show audiences real kids struggling, and to attach faces and bodies to the statistics, all the better to inspire hope that those numbers might move.

“I thought, you know what? I’m going to keep it in my heart, and capture *their* hearts, and see how that might change ideas. Plus, I’m not too much of a heady person — not too much of an intellectual — and I personally would rather see something that affects me in an emotional way.

“So I went at it from that place, and I’m glad I did. I don’t think I would have lasted if I went from a pedantic place, where I’m talking about the woes and the ills of education. Because what can you do from there? You just sigh when you leave the theatre.”

Far from sighing, audiences have seemed elated when they leave the theatre — often after a lively talkback with the writer/performer.

“Sometimes kids will come up to me with tears in their eyes and just be thankful that I’m telling the story. And there was a time when a teacher who had just retired after 40 years told me, ‘You summed up my entire 40-year career in just one hour.’ ”

Critics were just as ecstatic. The New York Observer’s John Heilpern raved that Sun’s “dazzling comic gift of transforming instantly into the essence of someone else is uncanny and effortless,” and that she “raises the tattered banner of faith in the redemptive power of theatre itself, even in the wasteland.” Variety’s Marilyn Stasio called the piece “theatrically riveting,” while New York’s Jeremy McCarter wrote that “Sun’s graceful method ... conveys a

vivid anger about the way these kids are treated without turning the play into a screed.”

The success of *No Child...* has surprised no one so much as Sun herself. “I expected to do this for three weeks,” Sun says, and adds jokingly, “Now I’m going to be like Hal Holbrook, doing Mark Twain for years.”

A member of the Epic Theatre Ensemble, through which the play was commissioned, Sun doesn’t consider herself a solo performer in the vein of Spalding Gray or John Leguizamo, though she cites them as inspirations, along with Whoopi Goldberg and Lily Tomlin.

“I do act with other people,” Sun says. “Every now and then a story will come to mind — usually because I’ve been commissioned to do a solo piece. It’s never because I just say, ‘I wanna do a solo piece,’ because they’re very hard to do.”

She compares what she does to the role of a West African griot, or wandering bard. And as much as she worked to make *No Child...* an engaging piece of theatre, she’s not shy about calling it “a teaching tool, especially for those who’ve never walked into a school. I keep the spirit and the skill of teaching in the show.”

One clue to Sun’s unique approach to her work is a discarded childhood ambition.

“I wanted to be a midwife, but I couldn’t pass chemistry to save my life,” Sun recalls. “Then I thought, if I don’t become a midwife, what’s the second-best thing I can do? Acting. And I thought, OK, I’m going to major in theatre. And then as I really opened my heart to the idea of it, I was like, ‘Ah, yes.’ ”

Sun may lack the science to help actual babies be born and usher mothers through labor. (Could this be one way to read the gnomonic title *No Child...*?) But in nurturing young imaginations against great odds and outsized distractions, Sun employs rigorous care and attention, and a resilient, good-humored empathy, that seem as close to midwifing as a performing artist can get. ●

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