

FORT GANSEVOORT

The New York Times

Arts | Theater

January 9, 2020

By Laura Collins-Hughes

A Show Reminds Young Audiences: We All Got Here From Somewhere

“Cartography,” a multimedia work inspired by migrants’ stories, presents their journeys as universal and heroic, not merely tales of suffering.



Christopher Myers, left, and Kaneza Schaal, right, meeting with seventh and eighth grade students at Central Queens Academy in Flushing to talk about their show “Cartography.” Credit...Mark Wickens for The New York Times

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Kaneza Schaal and Christopher Myers were in Munich, Germany, a few years ago, working with some of that city's many migrant children, when they led them in a storytelling exercise: making sound portraits of the places they came from.

First Schaal and Myers channeled the rhythms of Brooklyn, where they live: subways, taxis, R&B. A girl from Nigeria enlisted the others to conjure a marketplace in her hometown.

"Then a little boy from Mali," Myers said, "with all the mischievousness of a 12-year-old, starts us off with these very abstract sounds: rack-rack-rack, rack-rack-rack, chicka-chicka-chicka-chicka-chicka-chicka!"

Before telling this anecdote, over lunch recently at a French-Malaysian restaurant on the edge of Manhattan's Chinatown, he and Schaal had checked in with each other, to be sure they wanted to mention it. In creating "Cartography," their new theater piece for young audiences, they mean to get beyond narratives that cast migrants as malicious threats, on one end of the spectrum, or woeful victims, on the other.

Myers is a warmly gregarious raconteur, though, and his take was pity-free, full of admiration for the child's ingenuity. The sounds he was making, Myers explained, were "machine guns echoing through the night."

"And then you realize," he said, "that in that playful little-boy game, there was also all of the weight and all of the tragedy and all of his reason for being in Munich. And told in a way that isn't about the pornography of horror or the lurid fascination with tragedy, but from the point of view of a 12-year-old boy who has been on a greater adventure than most adults have ever been on."

"Cartography," starting performances on Friday at the New Victory Theater, is not your typical children's fare. Inspired by Schaal and Myers's work in Munich and intended for ages 10 and up, it is a show about migration, and it is as nonlinear as its creators believe everyone's migration story to be. A huge part of their point is that each of us has one, even if it is many generations back.

Schaal, whose father was Rwandan and immigrated to the United States, said the play is an attempt to "centralize the hero's journey in everyone's story" at a time when newcomers are often depicted as resource-depleting job stealers. That is a shift in the narrative of a nation that long celebrated its own sense of welcome.

"How," Myers asked, "did we move from Superman as the ultimate immigrant, from another planet, to now everything is an outside threat?"

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Written and designed by Myers, directed by Schaal and conceived by both of them, “Cartography” presents a group of fictional young migrants. The play is set partly in a waiting room like so many that migrants pass through, where they fill out forms, whittling the details of intricate lives into facts terse enough to fit in the space provided. Another section takes place in an inflatable raft, the kind that desperate people pile into, trying to reach a new land.

In an interactive interlude, audience members are invited to take out their cellphones and add their families’ migration histories to a map of the world, which lights up onstage with a profusion of far-reaching paths.

Less apparent to spectators but also built into the production is sound-sensor technology that responds to the actors’ voices. Allowing them to control the level of the sea projected on the set, it inverts the experience of migrants who find themselves, perilously, at the mercy of the water they cross.

“Cartography” is the third theatrical collaboration between Schaal, who comes from the world of experimental downtown performance, and Myers, an author and artist from the world of children’s books. The first, “Go Forth,” in 2016, was inspired by the Egyptian Book of the Dead and Schaal’s mourning for her father. Then came “Jack &,” a piece about re-entering society after prison. Starring an amateur actor, it was part of the 2018 Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

That show, Schaal said, was her take on community theater. “Cartography,” developed in part at the New Victory, is her first foray into children’s theater, and she has not dumbed it down. Sunny and cerebral, Schaal is dismissive of assumptions about what kind of work is for whom.

“Young people can be at the center of a contemporary art conversation,” she said, “and young people can be primary viewers of contemporary performance.”

Wherever they have taken “Cartography,” which so far has toured to Cleveland, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., with dates in Abu Dhabi and Toronto coming up, Schaal and Myers have worked with student groups.

When they do that, they tell their own migration histories — Schaal reaching way back, comically, in her maternal ancestry.

“I say, ‘Do you all know that big boat of white people who came, called the Mayflower?’” However new to the country the children might be, she said, they understand what she means. “So,” she tells them, “my family came a few boats after that.”

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As for Myers, he traces his ancestry on one side through a Bavarian grandfather who spoke no English when he got to New York; on the other side, through slavery.

“Even if it’s a forced migration like my father’s family,” he said, “we’re also as American as Ellis Island.”



Myers and Schaal with a student, who was asked to show where his family came from on a world map. Credit...Mark Wickens for The New York Times

Last Friday, in a packed lunchroom at Central Queens Academy, a charter school with programs tailored to the needs of students from immigrant families, Schaal and Jackson stood before a group of seventh and eighth graders. They asked a few to come up and show their migration histories on a giant map: journeys that started in the Philippines, in Egypt, in the Dominican Republic. They also offered all of the students, and their families, free tickets to “Cartography.”

The gradual process of becoming American emerges as a theme in the show. But migration stories, which can be sources of both pride and pain, are not always a comfortable topic of conversation within families. Myers and Schaal hope to ease that.

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Late in the performance, the adult actors playing the young migrants step out of character to deliver monologues as themselves, people with recent roots elsewhere: Syria, El Salvador, Rwanda, Lebanon. As they speak of forging American lives, their words serve as a kind of map for any migrant children, or children of migrants, in the audience — a way they might envision themselves in their own futures.

That remaking, Myers said, is “at the center of every migrant’s story,” and every child’s story as well.

“Young people are constantly asking themselves, ‘Who am I now?’” he said. “That is also the question of migration.”

Cartography

Jan. 10-19 at the New Victory Theater, 229 West 42nd Street, Manhattan; newvictory.org.