

THE THEATER MIRROR, New England's LIVE Theater Guide

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"What Happened in Boston, Willie"

Reviews of Current Productions

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"Set in Sand"

Reviewed by by Julie Levene

Mark Twain once said, "Courage is the mastery of fear, not the absence of fear." In *Set In Sand* at the Boston Playwrights' Theatre, we witness the plight of middle school students and their teachers whose survival skills demand the mastery of fear, because fear is a part of their everyday, every hour, every moment of existence.

Pete Donovan (played by Terrence P. Haddad) is a discipline officer who has to face verbal abuse, property damage, and threats of physical violence on a regular basis. When one of the hardest-working students, Christopher Robinson (Daniel Araujo), enters his office bleeding from the head, Pete has to gather the facts, call the guardians, and confront the assailant, Damarcus Frey (Kerlee Nicolas). Damarcus lashes back with fervor, demanding his stuff back and calling in his big gun, Bigs (Danhai Jackson), to come to his defense. What ensues is a game of might-makes-right with characters jumping each other all over a boundless checkerboard with neither end nor victor in site. And the audience is left wondering if Pete will fold, if Principal Fitzpatrick (Jason Warner) will resist the urge to give up, if Damarcus will seal his stigmatized fate as a criminal, and if Chris will survive long enough to realize his unlimited potential.

From the Mametesque exchanges between Boston public school teachers in the opening moments, to the impassioned diatribe on the ideal versus the real state of inner city schools between a Senator and ! a school administrator towards the end, and the litany of expression by inner city youth weaved throughout, *Set In Sand* is a bold indictment of the educational system and a necessary slice of theatre for a city known more for its world-class universities than any concrete jungle of elementary or secondary education.

This seems a slight departure for playwright/director Brian Tuttle, but then again, not really. Tuttle typically produces work that highlights the truth behind the American dream gone awry, or the angst of the postmodern generation, and his writing is usually poetic and provocative in a way that leads you to a state of introspection and reflection. His plays deliver the news of the human condition to audiences much like a doctor explaining negative test results to a patient and

then presenting the plan of treatment. Except in a Tuttle play, the test results show the potential for pain and depravity in the human heart, and the treatment is compassion.

But *Set in Sand* is only a slight departure, because it is poetic and provocative, and it does present frailness, and the need for compassion, but instead of a slow and gentle nudge awakening audiences over the course of two hours, this play delivers a blow to the head with a bike lock, literally and figuratively, and the audience is brought to a level of heightened awareness right from the opening moments and led through the repercussions of the violence with a different kind of poetry. This play presents the in-your-face poetry of real life, not ! unlike the lyrics of the rap songs that connect the scenes. This is theatre greeting you with a punch and leaving you with a problem, a good problem, which is how to respond to the fact that life is in jeopardy and change is necessary.

This diverse cast is cohesive, with both fourteen-year old actors and seasoned adult thespians. 11:11 regulars Jason Warner, Alice Curley as Mrs. Cole and Cynthia Wegel as the Senator deliver earnest and energetic performances in their significant supporting roles. Wegel's monologues of empty promises and good intentions typify the all-talk, no-action platform. In stark contrast, Cassandra Meyer as Miriam portrays the true spirit of teaching as she earns the admiration of the students, and the audience. Danhai Jackson as Bigs is ominous in his threatening role. And Jeannie Lin as Mrs. Applegate has a strong turn in her journey from hardened to hopeless. But the strong backbone of the production is provided by Daniel Arauo as Chris, Kerlee Nicolas as Demarcus, Hieu T. Nguyen as Stefan, and Terrence P. Haddad as Mr. Donovan, who all turn in stellar performances in their unique and challenging roles.

Tuttle states in the program, "I'm not sure why this play was written. Maybe it's because I have no idea how to react. I have no idea what to do or what I can do." Sitting through *Set In Sand*, and being a voyeur in a world one might drive by on the way to the theater but rarely, if ever, experience first-hand, I too have no idea what I can do. It seems too great an enemy for any one person to attempt to disarm. But it may be that this play was written to put society on high alert that there is an internal terrorism at work, insidious and cancerous, and like a moth, it's eating away at the fabric and essence of "the American dream." Ignorance may be bliss, and knowledge power, but attention to the problem and plight of urban youth is necessary. Accolades go to 11:11 for doing their part on the long yet hopeful path toward solution.

Set in Sand at Boston Playwrights' Theatre

Written & Directed by Brian Tuttle, 11:11 Theatre Company (www.1111theatre.com)

February 17-18 at 8pm, February 19 at 3pm, February 24-25 at 8pm

Tickets: \$15, \$10 with student ID, 2-for-1 Teacher Discount

"Set in Sand" (16 - 25 February)

11:11 THEATRE COMPANY

@ Boston Playwrights' Theatre, 949 Commonwealth Avenue, BOSTON, MA

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