

Griffith Shines in ‘Demerara Gold’



Playwright Ingrid Griffith in one of her acting roles.

Ingrid Griffith, Demerara Gold, Unpublished

A review by by Frank Birbalsingh

Demerara Gold, a play by Ingrid Griffith based on her own African-Guyanese family’s experience, is just the ticket for a Guyanese/Caribbean diaspora that spreads from large, North American cities like Toronto and New York in the North, to Miami in the South. The chief characters are Ingrid and her sister Dawn, seven and nine years of age respectively, their parents Earl and Gloria, and two grandmothers who look after Ingrid and Dawn after Earl and Gloria migrate to New York, and try to get US visas for their two girls to join them. Ingrid and Dawn eventually get their visas and join their parents, but only after eight years of their parents’ manipulation of sponsors, forgery and switched identities.

As an audience of fellow immigrants, we quickly identify with the hopes and dreams, joys and sorrows of each member of the family, either Earl who struggles to cope with displacement in a hostile environment, away from familiar Guyanese surroundings, or his daughters, mere adolescents, confused by their own special problems of growing up and forming relationships among people with different customs and values. But Demerara Gold, as its name implies, is about the human drama of success in finding inner resources to overcome whatever obstructs Ingrid and her family. While the play truthfully reveals both the social, economic or political motives that drive Caribbean immigration and the double edged benefits on offer in North America, in the end, it celebrates the triumph not defeat of Caribbean immigrants. Before she left Guyana, Gloria had given each of her daughters a finger ring made of gold from the Demerara mines, but when she became despondent because of the long wait for visas, her Granny advised Ingrid that: “it’s not the gold on your finger, it’s the gold in your soul and the strength of your spirit” on which she must rely. The symbolism of gold takes stronger hold of Ingrid since she sometimes dreams of a woman with a long neck who looks like an African carving, while her body is draped in gold seaweed. An image of the woman appears again at the end of the play when she urges Ingrid to SHINE like DEMERARA GOLD suggesting that Ingrid possesses the inner resources with shining qualities of Demerara gold to prevail over her difficulties.

Demerara Gold itself draws on resources of Caribbean theatre which is strongly influenced by African folklore and dance, for example, Jekonunu in Jamaica, carnival in Trinidad and masquerade in Guyana, which evolved spontaneously out of forms of social, political and religious ritual and dance that express resistance against colonialism in the West Indies. Historically, this is seen among African-Caribbeans, whether slave or free, and among Indian-Caribbeans through hosay in Trinidad and tadjah in Guyana.

In a burst of inspired originality, what Ingrid Griffith does in Demerara Gold is to transform these performative influences into an astonishing spectacle of dramatic pyrotechnics. Hers is a highly individualistic, virtuoso performance in which, single-handedly, she takes on the roles of eighteen characters. It is an histrionic feat that calls for unusual speed, agility, dexterity, and razor sharp reflexes in response to changes of scene that may demand lightning quick adjustments to voice, tone, posture or expression. Relying only on the single prop of a chair on a bare stage, for instance, Ingrid simulates such items as a bunk bed, verandah, car seat etc in a dazzling display of improvisation, creativity and versatility. By any standard, Ingrid’s versatility as an actress/playwright is nothing less than breath taking. Any Guyanese immigrant audience will readily identify with her story of coming of age and its inspiring, positive message of honesty, heartbreak and humour. Her story comes not only out of a Guyanese heritage of slavery, indenture and colonialism, but also out of a successful struggle for freedom and independence; and after independence, Guyanese continued to excel in sport, art and literature, while they also established thriving communities worldwide. Ingrid’s performance in Demerara Gold is an unforgettable re-enactment of this historic heritage of Guyanese finding symbolic Demerara gold wherever they exist. For all the wonder of her dazzling solo performance, however, Ingrid’s monodrama remains collaborative. Her team consists of Margit Edwards as Director, Mary Catherine Donnelly as Dramaturg, Coach, Amanda Chang as Lighting Designer, and Alysia Christiani as Promotional Designer.

(Ingrid Griffith has appeared in classical and contemporary roles in theatres in and around New York City. She is a member of Times Square Playwrights and American Renaissance Theatre Company. Ingrid currently teaches Introduction to Theatre and Public Speaking in the Communication and Theatre Arts Department at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.)

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Sunday, November 1, 2015
Time: 6:30pm

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