Radical Hospitality
Urban Village Church and the most segregated hour in America

Deep grief, dark comedy
Free passage to Ithaca
Washington Heights, Illinois
Anti-jazz in Washington Park
In La Villita

By Maria Nelson

“In La Villita” doesn’t ring quite as well as “In the Heights,” the opening number of its eponymous musical. Otherwise, Quiara Alegría Hudes’s story of Washington Heights, Manhattan could have been adapted into a musical about Chicago’s Southwest Side—and in a few small ways, it was. Bringing the piece to Benito Juarez Community Academy in Pilsen for a concert performance on April 8, director Cecilia Keenan hoped it would resonate with a South Side audience, even as the lyrics described a city hundreds of miles away. Co-sponsored by Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, the Chicago Community Trust, Latinos Progresando, and Benito Juarez, the community showcase entertained a sold-out house of students, families, and community supporters.

The piece, based on the book by Hudes with music and lyrics written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, follows Usnavi (Luis Crespo), who owns a small corner store in the Washington Heights barrio—though a projection behind the scene tells us his bodega may or may not be Chicago’s “La Favorita #2,” at 19th and May. In the background of one scene, a knotty tree in the shape of a V framed the top half of the Willis Tower, obstructed partially by a vibrant mural stretching the length of the projected photograph. With each scene, people murmured as they recognized corners from Pilsen and Little Village in the background.

The story emphasizes a neighborhood feel; everyone in this barrio knows each other. Vanessa (Laura A. Clark), Usnavi’s love interest, befriends Nina (Tatyana Gaona), who recently returned home after dropping out of Stanford; Benny (Eddy A. Domínguez Quezadas) falls in love with Nina while working for her father’s taxi service; Carla (Alexis Pacheco) and Daniela (Marci Portugal) exchange gossip while cutting hair at their barber shop; Abuela Claudia (Elizabeth Gray), grandmother not only to Usnavi but for the neighborhood, observes and imparts advice of “Paciencia y Fé” upon them all.

Even though the piece asked each audience member to make the final leap themselves, the change in setting wasn’t contrived. “In the Heights” speaks of opportunity and collaboration.”

At times during the performance, like when Nina sang, “I used to think we lived at the top of the world, when the world was just a subway map,” Chicagoans were gently reminded that the characters weren’t their neighbors, but New Yorkers. But the crowd at “In the Heights”—both audience and ensemble—had gathered to celebrate their own community.

Argentina Lives

Contempo, the University of Chicago’s contemporary chamber music collective, tackled history and reinvention in an ambitious performance at the Logan Center on Saturday night.

“We couldn’t acknowledge bodies because there were no bodies,” said Gustavo Leone, a Professor of Music at Loyola University Chicago, in the pre-performance lecture on recent Argentinian history. In the 1950s and ’60s, Argentina underwent a series of coups d’état. The unrest continued into the 1970s as death and oppression befell the Argentinean people in the infamous “dirty war.” “You could not find closure,” as Leone acknowledged, “That is the story of that generation of Argentineans and also the story of ‘Antigone.’” In “Antigone,” Sophocles’ heroine resists her uncle’s decree in order to claim her right to properly bury her dead brother.

Contempo then performed Jorge Lidemann’s operatic adaptation of “Antigone,” “Antigona Furiosa,” in which old ideas found new meaning in an Argentinian setting. Alexander Gelman, the Producing Artistic Director of Chicago’s Organic Theater Company, described the piece as working “on the inherent tension between current events and ancient themes. ‘Antigone’ is, unfortunately, eternal. It is a struggle between cynicism and an attempt to survive.”

That perennial battle was highlighted by the bared, lyrical voice of Julia Bentilly, who played Antigone. In contrast, the parts of Creon and his male chorus were bitting and staccato, as if to emphasize their tyranny. As the lights came up, the tension of the opera’s final moments hung in the air. The show was over, but the political story was unresolved.

After intermission, the Pablo Aslan Quintet took the stage, led by Aslan on the double bass. While the unique blend of jazz and tango helped to disperse the gloom, the music that jumped out of their instruments was no modern composition. Aslan transcribed the music of Astor Piazzolla’s self-maligned 1959 album “Take Me Dancing!” in order to bring the forgotten album to a modern, and perhaps more receptive, audience.

Jazz tango hadn’t caught on in 1959, and in 2013 it hasn’t yet fared much better. But maybe that’s all right. Art, as well as history, has no definitive beginning or end. As long as stories are being shared, in Aslan’s words, “It all kind of circulates between you and us.” (Olivia Borov Haviland)

Monologuing

The crowd at last week’s installment of Solo Saturdays, a monthly storytelling and standup show in the South Loop hosted by the Chicago Solo Theatre, was a respectable mix of polite twenties and seemingly long-married couples. Appropriately, our performers started with respectable themes. Thematic leaps were frequent but initially comprehensible: the distance between prize-winning cows and professorial guide dogs, for example, was on the shorter side. But nothing readied me for the deep, yawning chasm between Galvín the Labrador and Charles the Sex Slave. Like: I did not see that monologue coming. And I couldn’t tell if the audience had either. Or, at least, not until these tales from the erotic underworld had drawn their first laughs. To my surprise, this respectable crowd was not so easily creeped out.

Solo Saturdays convenes at The Venue, a smallish auditorium space at 16th and Dearborn. The building houses, among other things, a church, an elementary school, and the Overflow Coffee Bar. When the theater’s doors opened at 8pm, the café was still doing brisk business. Naturally, everyone believed the elementary school’s classrooms were dark and locked. Imagine our collective surprise, then, as a subtly lifting quotation from the third sketch’s vampish mistress—“Hey, kiddos”—was suddenly punctuated by a little boy’s faint, delighted scream. How happily accidental, how squirmingly excellent were the bright giggles that accompanied our protagonist’s scandalized description of a toy-closet for the homosexual. As it turned out, none of the five performances were straightforward comedy routines. For each moment of high enthusiasm and gratuitous side-splitting, there was some dark undercurrent or bold bait-and-switch that made us privy to an unfortunate reality. Jokes were made at the expense of a confused boy at the state fair, but also a father-son relationship and a sclerotic patient’s self-esteem (the latter avenged by a reciprocal “violation” of a jumbo bag of Skittles).

As the thin walls had juxtaposed the obscene with the innocent, the soloists themselves paired the sobering with the merry, the upsetting with the uplifting. The first performer’s monologue included a line from her curmudgeon of a lit professor: “The darker the night, the brighter the stars; the deeper the grief, the closer to God.”

Dancing!” in order to bring the forgotten album to a modern, and perhaps more receptive, audience. Jazz tango hadn’t caught on in 1959, and in 2013 it hasn’t yet fared much better. But maybe that’s all right. Art, as well as history, has no definitive beginning or end. As long as stories are being shared, in Aslan’s words, “It all kind of circulates between you and us.” (Olivia Borov Haviland)
program comes close to a systemic response. It is instead "a small statement of what we believe is of ultimate value," she says. "I feel more like Robin Hood," she adds, noting how she uses the resources of the rich to give to the poor. "I don't know what you do about that," Elder concedes. But she and the rest of the Odyssey Project faculty—there are four others who help teach the course at the center—do know how to teach the humanities. And, around a core of canonical texts, they have built a community of learning founded on the immediate, the practical, and the personal. Discussions draw from lived experiences, and differing opinions are encouraged. The prevailing attitude in the seminar room is that the questions matter because their answers matter. The conversation moves with a healthy sense of urgency.

Elder remembers how another student chose to act on this sense, inspired by what she learned in class to break out of an abusive relationship. "I go around telling people she broke up with her boyfriend because she read Hegel," she remarks, pausing briefly to reflect. "But in a sense I think that's true." Still, the students don't expect to see change happen overnight. They come to the program with a very real sense of the wrong in the world, and they're no strangers to obstacles. As one student put it, they aren't "ignorant to life." Many, in fact, are simply grateful to be given an opportunity they thought had passed them by. "At twenty, you might still be able to go to college; at forty, you just hope your kids will be able to go," Elder explains.

But thanks to the Odyssey Project, the students can hope for a little more. By the end of this month, for instance, four graduates of the program will begin holding Saturday sessions on writing instruction. Many people are initially drawn to the yearlong humanities course because they want to improve at writing; some actually choose not to enroll after they find out the course instead divides topically into four subjects. The faculty had tried to come up with some way of instituting writing instruction, but it had never gotten off the ground. This would be the first structured, sustained program for writing, and when Elder brought it up in class, several students perked up.

One of those students, Janice Smith, told me she came to the program shortly after leaving a sanctuary for victims of domestic violence. With composure and quiet aplomb, she described how for the program had given her a much-needed emotional outlet. "I didn't like to write because I didn't think I could do it," she told me, but at the Odyssey Project, they made sure she kept up track, "It's a blessing." At fifty-one, she now hopes to go back to school and eventually become certified as a licensed practical nurse. A friend and classmate also spoke of making progress in the wake of domestic violence. "I'll be straight and to the point," she said from behind me, with such buoyant assertion that I immediately turned around. "Just being in a classroom setting...I feel more motivated and more self-confident." Her tone was proof of that. The Odyssey Project may only be a "small statement," but for its students, it's big enough.
Radical Hospitality

Urban Village Church and the most segregated hour in America

By Meghan Murphy

There’s a palpable dejection to his voice, but it’s a subject that he can speak on line on the racial divide in American Christianity as a matter of fact. “White parishioners are in their churches, black parishioners are in their churches.”

E leven o’clock on a Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America.” It’s a provocative statement, but Jerome Adams quotes Martin Luther King Jr.’s line on the racial divide in American Christianity as a matter of fact. “White parishioners are in their churches, black parishioners are in their churches.”

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Sunday morning introductions. Simple, almost catchy, it’s a phrase that stands firm and defiant against the prevailing state of religion in Chicago.

Phrases like “doing church differently,” “remixing faith,” and “radical hospitality” are repeated consistently throughout Sunday’s worship like mantras, sometimes even like prayers. Congregations, the church believes, must be radical in their acceptance of others and open and affirming in their leadership, in their sermons, and in their commitments to justice, equality, and diversity.

But how does this play out on 60th Street, at the south end of Hyde Park’s multicultural and liberal reach? Surely, in a spiritual landscape as diverse as the South Side, there are numerous open and progressive churches in opposition to those that stick to the prosperity gospel and which are explicit in their rejection of gay and lesbian Christians.

McGinley and Adams would disagree. For Adams, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” sentiment that echoed through the history of the First Church of Deliverance was not enough. Silent, shameful acceptance was not enough to help him through his battle with addiction and disease.

As McGinley confidently stated, “We try especially to be a space where LGBTQ people of color can have a space to worship, and not have to check either their racial identity or their sexual orientation at the door. They can bring all of who they are and not feel ashamed about any of that.”

By the end of April, Adams and McGinley hope to establish a small workshop addressing issues around “cultural competency” and LGBTQ issues. “We need to understand the language. There’s such a lack of understanding of language around and within the gay culture. And that would be something that’s open to the entire congregation,” Adams explained. “That’s where healing begins, especially for people who have come out of situations where they’ve been hurt by the church.” It’s part of an effort that rests jointly on the entire congregation and small groups of individuals, in which decrees of openness and acceptance must be actively translated to the individual sitting in the pew.

Multiculturalism, too, stands as a primary force in Urban Village’s move to the South Side. McGinley worked at the McCormick Seminary on an initiative called the Common Ground Project, striving to support religious leaders of color. Worship Pastor Zach Mills, whose background ranges from print journalism and scholarly bylines to teaching homiletics at the University of Chicago Divinity School, also works for the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Teaching, empowering African-American ministers to engage thoughtfully with Chicago politics.

“So the vision was initially to be intentionally multiracial,” said Reverend McGinley, “and to have church leadership that reflected that commitment.” Urban Village’s other three locations are rooted in predominantly white neighborhoods and, as McGinley described, many parishioners of color were raising questions about what inclusivity really meant. What does it mean to say that you’re inclusive, and to say that inclusivity involves racial diversity, while your congregation remains predominantly white, rooted in predominantly white neighborhoods? How does that work?

McGinley, then, saw a move southward as a logical way to assuage those concerns. “So it really was an intentional decision to say that we really want to live what we say we are.” “Intentional” is one of McGinley’s words; she throws it around carefully, but often. There is a sense that, for her, if inclusivity and diversity are not intentional, they can be easily lost.

The intense segregation of Chicago presents a challenge for a church that seeks to be intentionally multicultural, community focused, and theologically progressive all at once. It’s not just the hour of church that’s segregated in Chicago; the city’s churches remain largely divided along the lines of race, neighborhood, and denomination. As Adams explains, the neighborhood segregation of Chicago, enforced by binding racial covenants on real estate, confined black residents to black churches in the early twentieth century. As real estate opened up and neighborhoods became sharply divided by class and race, churches on the South Side stayed largely split along the historic color line. And McGinley acknowledges this. “The lines are strict,” she remarks, with a steely hint of resolution. The challenge of segregation is embedded in her mission. Space must be built rather than expected; it must be intentionally created and carved out on corners like 60th and Dorchester so that people are able to bear first-hand witness to the benefits of inclusivity.

This inclusivity extends beyond race, of course. The congregation runs the gamut in terms of age, socioeconomic background, and education. And just as the leadership is inter-denominational, so too are the congregants. “We’ve got folks who come from Catholic, Episcopalian, very high church backgrounds,” said McGinley, “and then folks
who come from Pentecostal, charismatic congregations.”

The people who have been burned by the church, who have questions that other congregations refuse to answer, who claim identities that other institutions deem unacceptable. The crowd that assembled that first day at the site on 60th was shockingly with emotion, “that’s what I imagine Heaven will be like.”

“WOO-P-WOO!” That’s the sound of socially conscious rapper KRS-ONE delivering a public event. This line that began as a catchy, memorable representation of police brutality and institutionalized racism. Through the destabilizing magic of popular culture, it’s now another rallying cry for reintegrated collegiate party-giving (experts call this the Napping Effect). If you’ve ever wondered about the man behind the addictive whoop, come to the Shrine on April 22 and hear his voice in person. KRS-ONE will perform with reggae artists Mykal Rose and Stereo Carl. Close your eyes during the concert and you can be in three places at once: Chicago, Jamaica, and the Bronx circa 1983. The Shrine, 2109 S. Wabash Ave. Sunday, April 28, 7pm. General Admission $45, VIP Bottle Service $330. 21+. (312)753-5700. theshrinechicago.com (Jack Nuenke)

The Dillinger Escape Plan
A metal-tinged “mathcore” group with the finesse of a jazz ensemble and a penchant for ridiculous time signatures, The Dillinger Escape Plan has distinguished themselves from the beginning as a force to be reckoned with. They play angry, blistering music that verges on hardcore punk, metal, and screamo, but that also bears hallmarks of experimental jazz. Frontman Greg Puciato’s raw roar of a voice soars over incredible live performance. The Shrine, 2109 S. Wabash Ave. Sunday, April 28. General Admission $45, VIP Bottle Service $330. 21+. (312)753-5700. theshrinechicago.com (Jack Nuenke)

**neighborhood happenings**

**MUSIC**

**Medley: A Collage Group Show**
Say “collage” and most people will picture grade school art projects and fringed covers in cheap white glue. “Medley,” in its second iteration, subverts those preconceptions. These works by high school student interns are casual compound pages, the artists in this show, all of whom work extensively in the medium, stretch the limits of what can be considered collage. Works range from complicated patterns woven

**Cruzar la Cara de la Luna**
By Mario Yolanda struggles to educate a diverse group of students, to balance the boundaries between documentary portrait of post-revolutionary Afro-Cuban culture and the diversity was there to an extent, it was oh so overwhelmingly apparent on the street. Incredibly Poignant to the issues impacting the Woodlawn community; “These troubling narratives...”

“Brandt Juicen Community House. 2450-2510 S. Michigan Ave. Friday, April 19, 10pm; Saturday, April 20, 2pm and 7pm. 801. (773)714-3071. brandtjuicen.net (Meggan Mazzy)

Within Reach Film Screening
From Buddha to Forest Spping, countless individuals have understood the notion of afternoon meditation, and through the process, they begin to forge a vision of a possible future in which work is collective, not private, and community is at the heart of sustainable living. More than just a search for a sustainable home, their journey is a manifestation of the universal yearning for deeper meaning outside of fleeting material possessions. Overflow Coffee Bar, 1550 S. State St. Sunday, April 23. 7pm suggested donation. (312)524-6527. overflowcoffeebar.org (Amelia Dmowska)

El Refugio
In contrast to more popular belief, take any genuinely radical shift in the way things might meet with active opposition or indifference, and even those leading the change may not recognize the ways in which the status quo endures. Though I had been attending the Loop location of the Alliance for a Greater South Loop, the following is the journey of one such couple who give up everything except what they can pack on their bicycles—including their substantial house, corporate jobs, and expensive cars—as they travel 6,500 miles across the country searching for a sustainable home. While exploring multiple encampments, co-op houses, and communes, they begin to forge a vision of a possible future in which work is collective, not private, and community is at the heart of sustainable living. More than just a search for a sustainable home, their journey is a manifestation of the universal yearning for deeper meaning outside of fleeting material possessions. Overflow Coffee Bar, 1550 S. State St. Sunday, April 23. 7pm suggested donation. (312)524-6527. overflowcoffeebar.org (Amelia Dmowska)

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To BliStering, Nineteen-Minute-Long Jam, During Which the Eighty-six Year-Old Musician Switched Between a Bowled Violin-Uke, an Acoustic Harp, a Trumpet, and an Instrument of His Own Invention—a Electrified Thumb Piano That He Calls a "Sun Harp"—Kelan Phil Cohran Finally Addressed His Audience. "We Opened Up with That Piece...So That You Would Not Think That This Is a Jazz Band."

It was true. In his performances this past month at Hyde Park Records and the Washington Park Arts Incubator, Cohran appeared less like a jazz musician and more like a spiritual guru, using instruments as the means of practicing a form of deep meditation. Cohran's music is characterized by intense, trance-like improvisation built over looped, repetitive riffs and rhythmic figures. Cohran's chops are superb, though sometimes the music falters: his concentration breaks, and the trance ends. But Cohran never appears to mind. When whatever instrument he's been playing wears out its use, its magic, he just puts it down, picks up another, and the trance begins again. "You only really get what you want out of the instrument about one out of seven times," he explained.

Cohran has been perfecting this form of ritualistic performance for the past five decades. During the late fifties, he made his name as a trumpet player in Sun Ra's legendary avant-garde group "Akestra," which Cohran claims coined the phrase "space age" before Sputnik's launch brought it into vogue, yet "spaciness," for Cohran and Sun Ra, was never to be equated with laziness or absent-mindedness. Cohran speaks of his years playing with "Sun" as a musical boot camp which required "practicing on oxidation (in which an element, usually metal, reacts with oxygen, producing a change in color) to develop his prints. The daughter focuses more on social chemistry—how moving bodies can express emotion. Both artists love impressive experience across mediums, including but not limited to video, performance, and ceramics. This evening performance, which includes dances, live music and monologues, is not one you want to miss. Chicago Art Department, 1952 S. Halsted. 2014-06-27. 7pm. $12 in advance, $15 at the door for students; $25 in advance. $25 at the door for general admission. (312) 725-4225. chicagodepart@chicagodepart.org [Sight Line]

Forbidden

While the Renaissance Society comes to the end of another season, William Pope, Jr. at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has moved back to painting. In a solo show entitled "Adversity," catalogues the work of a man who has successfully moved between fashion designer and fine art. In the show, Pope, Jr. captures a moment of a shifting political climate, both within and outside of the art world. Pope, Jr.'s work is not only political, but also a commentary on the impact of art on society.

Pope Jr. has been active in the art world for many years, and has exhibited his work in numerous galleries and museums. His work is characterized by a strong attention to the social and political issues of our time. In "Adversity," Pope Jr. explores the challenges of the contemporary world, and the role that art can play in addressing these issues.

The show features a variety of works, including paintings, sculptures, and installations. The paintings are characterized by a bold use of color and form, and are often based on political and social events. The sculptures and installations are also significant, as they often incorporate found objects and materials from the surrounding environment. The works are both visually striking and thought-provoking, and provide a powerful commentary on the issues of our time.

Pope Jr.'s work is currently on display at the Renaissance Society from May 18 to July 28. The show is free to the public, and open to the public from 10am to 5pm, Monday through Saturday. More information about the show can be found on the school's website, or by contacting the school's galleries and museums.