

ARTSKNOXVILLE

HAYLEY WILSON | MARCH 25, 2024

Review: CBT's 'Anon(ymous)' Frames the Odyssey through the Lives of Refugees

Packed with as many action-filled moments as somber reflections on global conflict, playwright Naomi Iizuka's *Anon(ymous)*, which opened last Friday at Clarence Brown Theatre's Lab Theatre, is a rollercoaster ride of lightness and darkness, of hope and despair. This thoughtful and resonant production offers an important observation: amid the struggles of survival when you're tossed about by a seemingly uncaring world, destiny and sense of self can be a centripetal force that holds you together and pulls you toward home.

Directed by CBT Associate Artistic Director Katie Lupica, this production makes a timely statement: that refugees—the people around the world that suffer the most—disappear in our Western world—

they become anonymous. The play transforms the ancient story of the delayed homecoming of the Greek hero Odysseus into an eye-opening tale of the trials and tribulations many refugees face around the world. Anon (played by the pensive Hogan Wayland) washes ashore after a shipwreck separates him and his mother in their attempt to escape their war-torn homeland. While Anon searches for her across the United States, his mother Nemasani/Penny (played by Riya Golden) toils in an exploitative sweatshop owned by the predatory Mr. Mackus (played by Trevor Schmitt-Ernst), who pressures her into marrying him. In secret, Penny sews a death shroud for Anon, who she believes to be dead, in an attempt to stave off her unwanted suitor. It's a beautiful modernization of a classic tale that draws attention to the unbreakable bonds of families, the love between parents and their children, and the unspeakable burdens and suffering that refugees face.

The Odyssey's other timeless characters also find their way on stage. Laura A. Snyder's Calista, the Calypso figure, is the perfect spoiled nepo baby who can't believe that Anon would willingly leave her island wonderland of flat-screen TVs and endless snacks she shovels into her mouth from a woven beach bag, all provided by her unseen yet powerful daddy dearest. Naja, the play's Athena, (played by a shimmering wet-suit-clad Katelyn Mundt), sweeps Anon away to safety to his next location, where he meets Nasreen (played by Aliah Mahalati) and her immigrant restaurant owner parents, Ali (played by Tyler Glover) and Ritu (Sarah Wahrmund), who serve as the welcoming Phaeacians who help Anon/Odysseus recount his journeys and re-spark his desire to find his mother.

"THE SOCIAL COMMENTARY IS AS UNIVERSAL AS THE SOURCE TEXT, YET SPECIFIC IN ITS GOAL OF DRAWING AWARENESS TO OUR CURRENT GLOBAL REFUGEE CRISIS."

These 'flashbacks' include train-hopping the NYC subway system with found friend and fellow refugee Pascal (played by Jordan Goskowicz) as they avoid the lotus-eater-esque drug users who inhabit the underground tunnel system (evoked only by eerily distorted shadows that seem to reach out to capture Anon and Pascal); a part-time job turned nightmare in



Cast of *Anon(ymous)* – Photo: Ella Marston, Clarence Brown Theatre

the butcher shop of Mr. Zyclo (played by Garrett Wright), our Cyclops figure with a taste for human flesh and fine wines (apparently it pairs well with Chianti—any *Silence of the Lambs* fans out there?); and hitchhiking a ride with the eerie trucker Strygal (played by Trevor Schmitt-Ernst in a double role) who is harboring more migrants in his trailer in horrific conditions; and bar owner Serza (double-cast Sarah Wahrmund) urges Anon to stay, to drink, to keep partying, trying to distract him from his greater goal. And the cloth-draped, metal scaffolding set created by scenic and projections designer Sophie Smrcka and Props Director Monica Gardiner works beautifully to suggest multiple settings: the washed up beach Anon first finds himself in is stripped away as the tale progresses to become the back alley to a curry restaurant, a subway tunnel, and, most shockingly, a meat cooler where carcasses of ambiguous flesh hang eerily in the background.



Cast of *Anon(ymous)* – Photo: Le Anna Jacobson, Clarence Brown Theatre

The brilliance of this production is that hardly any characters are actually named on stage. It's up to the audience—whether *Odyssey*-savvy or not—to piece together which characters are which figures in Homer's epic. And even if you're not that familiar with the Greek text, this production works well without those obvious references, because what these figures represent in the modern day—a truck driver who transports migrants in a stifling trailer or a seedy bar owner who refuses to shut down the party—emerges despite the reference text. The social commentary is as universal as the source text, yet specific in its goal of drawing awareness to our current global refugee crisis. It shows us that these stories of heroic escapades and seafaring adventures can mean something entirely different when told from the perspective of someone who is not a king or a legend, but a human being suffering the ills of war, famine, and displacement. Of particular note is a scene that conveys the underworld, where not only Anon, but the audience itself, is confronted in near total darkness by the disembodied voices of numerous refugees who didn't survive the journey Anon makes; they plead with the audience to honor their names, to tell their families that they love them, miss them, and remember them fondly; to not let their lives and legacies slip into anonymity.

It's moments like these where the emotional resonance of the whole cast works together to create a production both memorable and thought-provoking. Lupica's choices for visual, auditory, and verbal storytelling pulled their weight in organizing this production with lots of moving parts, like double-cast characters, multiple scene changes, and timeline shifts. Cleverly designed cues, like a chime to denote divine intervention and costume changes from color to black and white to suggest certain characters have become ghosts, held this production together in their small but significant ways.

I left the theater thinking about my own role, though small, in this global crisis, and I hope other audience members left with the same feeling. Clarence Brown Theatre's production of *Anon(ymous)* was a poignant and bittersweet reminder of our own place in the world, and an invigorating nod to how our most beloved tales can take on new resonances if we open our eyes, ears, and hearts to the ways others tell them.

Anon(ymous) by Naomi Iizuka runs through Saturday, March 30 in The Lab Theatre, with showtimes on Tuesday-Saturday at 7:30pm and matinees on Saturday and Sunday at 2pm. Tickets and information