

Theater Review: People History is Revived in American Theater Company's 'The Projects'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on May 22, 2015 - 11:01am

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CHICAGO – The legacy of public housing is one of the strangest forces of karma in the City of Chicago. For example, sites that were once some of the roughest and most neglected housing for the poor now contain luxury condos. It is the people of those former hellholes that still remember the sorrowful history of what they once called home. The American Theater Company (ATC) have gathered these stories for the poignant and extraordinary "The Projects."



Play Rating: **4.0/5.0**

The company of actors in the play, in a range of ages, tell the sad truth of survival in these homes, with a history built upon misguided Utopian ideals, but all suffering from the neglect of abject poverty and a sense of abandonment, as the crime and violence became rampant while the city officials watched them smolder. But there were real human beings there, and as the voices rise from the stage participants, it becomes a reminder that the resilience of the human spirit can overcome some of the most heinous circumstances thrust upon them.



'The Projects,' Now at the American Theater Company Through June 21st

Photo credit: Michael Brosilow for the American Theater Company

The history of the Chicago Housing Authority was born in the Great Migration, as deep South African Americans moved to Chicago in great numbers in the early to mid twentieth century, looking for a way out from the oppressive share cropping work of their forebears. The institutional segregation of the Windy City forced ever increasing numbers into horrible slums. The reformation formula, especially in the post World War II era, was to build a series of housing “solutions” for the poor and ostracized, including prison-like high rises. The names of these projects were soon shorthand for poverty and segregation blight – Robert Taylor, Ida B. Wells, Wentworth and Cabrini-Green.

The cast of players take on multiple roles, even those of their white politician fellow travelers. Slipping into and out of their various guises, the stories they tell – based on interviews of actual former project tenants in Chicago, and adapted by ATC Artistic Director PJ Paparelli and playwright Joshua Jaeger – are stark, sad, revealing and sometimes hopeful. After all, home is where you are. The social dissolution associated with poverty and hopelessness is in evidence, including the breakdown of family, polite society and innocence, but on the flip side so is the community, the adaptation and the survival.

The underlying themes of the show are also political. The results that come from trying to stem a housing problem for poor people is never solved by outsiders, yet for years there were mayors like Richard J. Daley, who built the projects up, and his son Richard M. Daley, who ended up taking them down – their cronies profiting on both ends. There is a feeling that all these promises were cynical, that the high-rises of the 1950s/60s era of public housing were designed to keep the growing African American population institutionalized. That fear caused white flight from the city, and the housing crisis evolved into a crisis of neglect, which destroyed the hope that it initially tried to build.



The Ensemble Cast of American Theater Company's 'The Projects,'

Photo credit: Michael Brosilow for the American Theater Company

All of these mixture of emotions come through the oral history, as the ensemble company (listed below) run the gamut of pain and expectation through their souls. There are three “chapters” to the projects evolution – the beginnings, the decline and fall, the epilogue – and the last part felt more tacked on than the proceeding chapters. But the message, and the messengers, have a purity of story telling that will keep you engaged to the very end.

The story begins with an ironic rendition of the TV theme song from the 1970s show, “Good Times” (which was set, amazingly, in the Cabrini-Green Housing) It is sung dirge-like, with the strange list of “problems” associated with that era. Until finally, as if summing up the whole sorrowful history of the projects...”ain’t we lucky we got them, Good Times.”

NOTE: Tragically, this week's news was marred by the unexpected death of PJ Paparelli, the co-author and director of “The Projects,” and the Artistic Director of the American Theater Company. Paparelli's inventive creativity has guided the ATC through its most fertile period, and his voice in the Chicago theater community will be sorely missed. PJ Paparelli was 40 years old. Here is what he said in introducing “The Projects”...

“Sit back. Take a breath. Clear your mind. And let us take you on a journey deep inside of the heart of Chicago. I’m so glad you are here.”

American Theater Company presents “The Projects” at The ATC Theater, 1909 W. Bryon Street in Chicago, through June 21st, 2015 – Thursday-Saturday at 8pm and Saturday/Sunday at 2pm. Featuring Linda Bright Clay, Stephen Conrad Moore, Omar Evans, Kenn E. Head, Joslyn Jones, Penelope Walker, Anji White and Eunice Woods. Written by PJ Paparelli and Joshua Jaeger. Directed by PJ Paparelli. [Click here](#) [19] to purchase tickets and for more information.

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Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 25 2024 - 4:59am*):
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