

Timely portrait of post-Sept. 11 culture in Portland by Mary Snell

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...what it is is a moving and timely portrait of Portland and Maine through the lives and words of its citizens in a post-Sept. 11 world. The Center for Cultural Exchange commissioned the project and is staging the local premiere this weekend. Don't miss it.

The cultural shift experienced by Americans after Sept. 11 was profound, irreversible. It will be, for generations to come, a defining moment in our history. What Americans lost for the first time was a sense of security. And some feel, because of the war on terror and the passage of subsequent Patriot Acts, we are perilously close to losing our freedom.

When the U.S. Border Patrol made a sweep for illegal immigrants in Portland in January 2004, Bau Graves (artistic director of the CCE) contacted Pottenger about doing a performance piece based on interviews of those ethnic communities most affected by this example of America's homeland security policy.

The result is a reader's theater piece in which representative members of Portland's diverse citizenry (including American Indians, Sudanese, Latinos, Franco-Americans, African-Americans and whites) tell their own stories as an open dialogue, accompanied by a live band performing fiddle, charango, guitar and African drums. A group of civic leaders joins the core performers, testifying in a sense, and adding another dimension to the dialogue.

These are not professional actors, but what you sacrifice in crispness, timing and polish, you more than gain in honesty and emotional immediacy. Edited and shaped by Pottenger to keep the evening moving and engaging, the stories relate how different communities came to Maine, what they fear, what their relationship is to the land, etc.

Although most productions would trot out civic leaders for their promotional value, their voices are vital to this project. We hear about the pride and hope felt by the Mayor of Portland, Jill Duson; about the long family history in Maine of NAACP chair, Rachel Talbot Ross; the almost crushing personal sense of responsibility felt by Fire Chief Fred LaMontagne, head of Maine's First Responders; the need to work together expressed by state Senate President Beth Edmonds.

Music director Greg Boardman, fiddle, is joined by Juan Condori of Boliva, guitar and charango; and by Harun Sheekhey of Somalia on drums. Bau Graves and Phyllis O'Neill are leaving Portland and CCE. What a wonderful parting gift.