



No Word in Guyanese For Me from Rainbow Theatre Project (review)

February 13, 2018 by [Kate Colwell](https://dctheatrescene.com/author/kate-colwell/) (<https://dctheatrescene.com/author/kate-colwell/>)

Much like the photo album that plays a pivotal role in numerous scenes of the play, *[No Word in Guyanese For Me](#)*

(http://www.womensvoicestheaterfestival.org/plays/No_Word_In%20Guyanese_For_Me) leaves the audience with poignant images: a pair of Guyanese feet gratefully slipping out of American shoes; timid hands cradling a small doll with natural hair; a sleek scarf snaking sensuously around a leg. The enduring visions from this gorgeous Rainbow Theatre Project production are rendered all the more impressive by their presentation through a sole performer.

From the first moments of the production to the last, we empathize with the heroine Hannah, a young woman who seeks acceptance from herself and her communities for all aspects of her identity. In the same way that labels fall short of describing Hannah, virtuoso actress Ashley K. Nicholas contains multitudes; whether Nicholas channels the societal pressures of being Muslim, gay, Black, an immigrant, or a woman, we care about Hannah as though she were family.



Ashley K. Nicholas as Hannah in *No Word in Guyanese for Me* from Rainbow Theatre Project (Photo courtesy of Rainbow Theatre Project)

Nicholas soars as Hannah, through whose memories we hear a first-person narrative that crosses continents and decades. Returning from her performance in the 2016 staged reading of the play, Nicholas uses dynamic physicality and an extensive range of accents to shape shift from a young girl struggling to adapt to American and Guyanese norms to a woman who can stand on her own two feet. Through slight shifts in her weight distribution and the speed at which she darts around the intimate theatre, Nicholas succeeds in portraying so many members of Hannah's changing communities that we forget she is one person.

The strongest moments of the production arrive when Nicholas' powerful talents are amplified by deft design elements. In a memory from September 11, 2001, Hannah's anxiety palpably reaches the audience via images of black smoke and crackling television static. As we watch Nicholas play Hannah impersonating her father, a Muslim taxi driver working in New York City in the wake of the terrorist attacks, the minimal yet versatile set allows the audience's imagination to wander several levels deep into Nicholas' storytelling.

Diving into another memory in which Hannah worships in a warm Mosque while fasting, E-hui Woo's emotive lighting evokes the electric sensuality Hannah experiences from nearby women. This sensory stimulation repeats in the production each time Hannah develops romantic feelings for a woman, and brings to the forefront a theme that Nicholas conveys so well: that romance and sexuality are expressions of god's love to be embraced, not deviations to be punished.



Ashley K. Nicholas as Hannah in No Word in Guyanese for Me from Rainbow Theatre Project (Photo courtesy of Rainbow Theatre Project)

The cumulative effect of adept lighting, sound, and projection techniques also transports the audience emotionally between the expansive creative potential Hannah finds in a photo darkroom to a cowered space within herself after surviving domestic assault. To weave all these elements seamlessly together speaks to Julia M. Hurley's incredible dedication to detail as director.

No Word in Guyanese For Me



closes March 4, 2018

Details and tickets (<https://dctheatrescene.com/show/no-word-guyanese/>)

But perhaps the most effective design of the production appears in Sadie Albert's costumes. Guided by playwright Wendy Graf's poetic reflections on self presentation, Albert ensures that each costume piece holds huge symbolic weight. Whether Hannah wraps a hijab around her head or dons a beanie; cloaks herself in an abaya or a jacket; exposes banded wrists or bare arms, every onstage costume change speaks volumes about Hannah's transforming identities and relationships.

Any complications the play presents in the form of non-linear time jumps and departures from conventional climactic structure are outweighed by the sheer pleasure of the narrative. In a time when conservative aggression towards the rights of LGBTQ people, Muslims, immigrants, people of color, and women seems to pervade news headlines, *No Word in Guyanese For Me* feels both radical and intimately familiar. This luminous play upholds the Rainbow Theatre Project mission to honor and uplift the gay community and affirm the worth of all people. Simultaneously, the production perfectly fulfills the intentions of the Women's Voices Theater Festival (<https://dctheatrescene.com/2018/01/11/womens-voices-theater-festival-2-months-see-24-plays-women/>) by providing a welcome space for Nicholas to raise her voice and for women in every creative capacity to share their artistic visions.

When Hannah aims her camera lens at the audience, she brings into focus how many precious stories each marginalized person has to share. The tiniest personal details of this production develop into global reflections on human resilience and make *No Word in Guyanese For Me* the gem of the Women's Voices Theater Festival.

No Word in Guyanese For Me by Wendy Graf. Directed by Julia M. Hurley. Starring Ashley K. Nicholas as Hannah. Production Manager: Angelo Merenda. Stage Manager: Deborah Gur. Lighting Designer: E-hui Woo. Costume Designer: Sadie Albert. Scenic Designer: Nola Werlinich. Projections Designer: Brian Douglas. Sound Designer: Crescent Haynes. Production ASM: Brendan Jackson and Hannah Herold. Produced by Rainbow Theatre Project. Reviewed by Kate Colwell.

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About Kate Colwell

Kate Colwell is a professional writer/editor who has explored all manner of what you can do with a B.A. in English since graduating from the University of Virginia in 2012.

Following her grand stage debut as a Pick-a-Little Lady in eighth grade, she has reveled in watching plays almost as much as she relishes writing them. In her free time, you can find her cooking and baking in brazen defiance of recipe books. Follow her on Medium:

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