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New York Theater

by Jonathan Mandell

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Rebel Verses. Teenagers on Stage, Not Mean, Not Chill, Just Real.

[NEW YORK THEATER](#) [AUGUST 20, 2019](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

In an arresting moment in “Deluge,” a tall white dancer dressed in black tossed up a short black dancer dressed in red, accompanied by a score that included recordings of some of the most fulsome public comments by Donald Trump and other politicians (“These are animals... Pocahontas...legitimate rape...”)

The dance company whose members wrote, choreographed

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and performed this remarkable piece is called [Loco-Motion Dance Theater for Children](#), and they were performing as part of the 16th annual Rebel Verses Youth Arts Festival, held over the past two weeks at Vineyard Theater.

Rebel Verses, an exciting and inspiring show presenting artists ages 13 to 19 from some dozen youth theater companies, was almost as impressive for what was not on stage as for what was: There were no teenage cliques, no obsession with popularity. It was not the standard depiction of teenagers in even well-meaning shows on Broadway. Those commercial high school musicals don't gel with my memories of high school, or, more to the point, with the actual teenagers you see in the news, like the survivors of the Parkland high school shooting who organized a mass movement for gun control.

It was reassuring that the very first thing I saw at Rebel Verses was a painting of a gun by 19-year-old Nyasia Germany sardonically entitled "Back to School," in the lobby of the Vineyard Theater.

"That's one of the main reasons we started Rebel Verses," Jinn Kim, the executive director of [Developing Artists](#), which organizes the festival, said to me after I told him of my disappointment with the mainstream shows about teenagers. "We wanted to let the audience know that these teen artists are to be taken seriously and they need to be heard."

The dancers, painters, playwrights, actors, poets, rappers, and spoken word artists of Rebel Verses define themselves. In "The Spectacular," a piece developed by the combined Developing Artists and Vineyard Student Ensemble, they declare:

*We are Nike wearing
Trump hating*

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In a later moment:

Isabel Culpepper: I could get shot up in school

Timothy Kim: well I could get shot up outside

Elijah Smith: well I could get shot up for being alive,

*Bryson Brunson: I'm young and I'm black and don't have
health insurance*

All: Bruh, none of us have health insurance

I saw the second week's program, which included performances by some half-dozen of the companies, introduced by the host of the evening, Sean Carvajal (King Lear on Broadway, Jesus Hopped the A Train)

Besides Loco-Motion, Developing Artsts and [Vineyard Theatre Student Ensemble](#), these included:

[Alumni Theater Company](#) of Pittsburgh, which presented a combination live and video welcome, the most thrillingly choreographed "turn off your cell phone" announcement I've ever witnessed.

Poetesses, a group from Jersey City, N.J. presenting three poems collectively entitled Hot Girl Summer. Layla Ferreiro's is astonishing. It begins:

The Hudson River is Latina.
That is, she's brown.
She is not going to speak English to make you more comfortable
If you call her "spic," she *will* drown you
There's a reason red sunrise reflects so perfectly on her.
She sways her way over to Lady Libertad,
Who's as green as the palm trees de su tierra now
It ends:

The Hudson River is Latina and she forgives you.
Every time a marathon makes its way across her skin,
When she tastes rainbow glitter in June,
When one boat holds more languages than she can speak,
She forgives you.
So she rocks you to sleep on the ferry
Hides with you when the hurricane comes
She's been here much longer than you.
She knows you will make mistakes.
She just asks that you don't make them twice
Or else she'll play bachata on saturday morning and make
you clean that shit up.
Sometimes she loves you too much for her own good
But the Hudson River is Latina,
And we stick together.

[MCC Youth Company](#), presenting "Uncensored Glimpse," a series of sometimes humorous, sometimes poignant sketches and spoken-word pieces. In "Inside the Closet," the characters Shame, Anxiety and Sadness battle with Love for control of "the mind of Jared, a gay boy that's in the closet." Rage makes a late entry, and in the finale, Pride makes an entrance: "I couldn't resist coming out!"

In "The Caterpillar's Tirade," Gerald Jeter cleverly melds the life of a student/performer with that of a bug: "I have

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forgotten just how to crawl, inch, creep and worm
But I'll be damned if I don't let it burn and show everyone just
how bright I can be
....I'm sick of being the caterpillar, and I'm sick of sitting in
this cocoon."

[Girl Be Heard](#) of New York City, presenting "Tough Women,"
with powerful, rhythmic monologues.

The program ended with "guest artist" Brandon Victor Dixon
(Hamilton, Rent Live) singing his own song "Today It's
Possible"

*Today it's possible
Whatever's happening in your life
Tonight could make it right
...Despite your pain and your cries
The time has come for you to rise*

"I think it's an incredible program," Dixon said afterwards.

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