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# "Migrant Voices' underscores courage of Depression women

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*By Sandra Brooks-Dillard Denver Post Theater Critic June 29, 1997 Publication: The Denver Post Page: G-05 Word Count: 577*

Inspired by Dorothea Lange's Depression-era photographs of women, the one-act "Migrant Voices" is moving, funny, often ironic and always interesting.

First glimpsed in a series of dramatic black-and-white slides, the women are brought to stirring life in a series of interwoven monologues.

There is no dramatic arc as such, but the wisdom and pain in this portrait of resilience and courage is as immediate as it was 60 years ago.

The story is told from Lange's point of view; the successful photographer captured those long-ago images and, hoping to make a difference, spread them before the world. "No matter how comfortable you might be, you couldn't ignore the terrible things that were happening," the trouser-clad Lange (Kelly Wensing) tells us as she cradles her camera.

And there were terrible things happening.

In a segment titled "Despair," a young woman (Nancy Thomas) - eyes filled with pain, mouth drawn into a tight slit - speaks of the death of her 3-month old baby, a victim of poverty, hunger and cold.

She tells us she didn't cry as she, her husband and two remaining children buried the child in the frozen ground, and then she speaks of how that night she found herself outside with a rifle stuck in her mouth.

In "Long Memory," an elderly former slave (Catherine Williams) talks of her bitter amusement at seeing white people poor and suffering for a change.

Hands working on the gnarled stick she carries, rag tied around her head, the elderly woman describes showing a young white woman how to pick cotton.

"I always wanted to be a teacher," she says. "But I didn't have anything to teach until now."

Savoring a quiet moment and a juicy orange, the protagonist of "Dreams" (Kathryn Gray) speaks proudly of being a farmer, and of losing her farm in the dust bowls and financial chaos of the Depression.

Forced to move to California, she still misses her native Oklahoma and has dreams from which she wakes up crying.

In her brave little house with its crumpled lace curtain and little vase of yellow flowers, the woman in "Piece of Pipe" (Amy Roeder) draws a sensual picture of how it would feel to take a hot bath, to let her hair down, step ever so slowly in, and finally emerge, so pretty and clean her husband would take her right there and then.

It's this dream that keeps her going. While some of the women take refuge in dreams, and others in memories, the dirty-faced, barefoot little girl portrayed by Lisa Johnson takes her refuge in "Pretending."

If her mental retreats upset her parents and cause them to question her intelligence, that's too bad, but pretense is all she has and she won't give it up.

Directed by Tracy Shaffer Witherspoon, each of the actresses fully inhabits her character, moving smoothly in and out of a series of vignettes that open up like flower petals.

Performed on a deliberately spare stage dressed with homely artifacts including a bucket, a tin washtub and board, a broom, a line of faded wash, and a makeshift tent, this drama's strength is that it makes us want to know even more about these women and to learn from their lessons of survival. MIGRANT VOICES

\*\*\* PLAY BY: Martha King De Silva STARRING: Ensemble DIRECTED BY: Tracy Shaffer

Witherspoon SCENERY: Tracy Shaffer Witherspoon and Roger Winn COSTUMES: Kelly Wensing LIGHTING: Thane Boden SOUND: Jan Gosse PRESENTED BY: Industrial Arts Theatre WHERE: New Denver Civic Theatre, 721 Santa Fe Drive WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday through July 13 RESERVATIONS: \$13, 595-3821

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