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## Multilingual performance of ‘Mother Tongue’ coming to Shea Theater



The Performance Project’s First Generation ensemble will perform “Mother Tongue” at the Shea Theater Arts Center on Saturday, Feb. 1, at 7:30 p.m. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO/ED COHEN

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TURNERS FALLS — When The Performance Project’s First Generation ensemble gathered to put together its materials for “Mother Tongue,” one question was used to guide the performers.

“We ask ourselves, ‘If we had one hour to speak to the world, what would you say?’” First Generation ensemble member and Holyoke resident Charlétte Marrero said.

Inspired by their answers, the seven-member ensemble of young adults from Hampden County will present “Mother Tongue” at the Shea Theater Arts Center on Saturday, Feb. 1, at 7:30 p.m.

According to The Performance Project, “Mother Tongue” is a 90-minute, multilingual, physical theater performance drawing inspiration from the experiences of First Generation ensemble members, their families and communities. Members have a global background, with participants originating from Tanzania, Bhutan, South Sudan and Puerto Rico, as well as Holyoke and Springfield.

“Mother Tongue” uses movement, music, dance and stories told in English, Arabic, Swahili, Nepali and Spanish. Themes of the performance include diaspora, identity, hypermasculinity, transphobia, racism, education, the school-to-prison pipeline, personal liberation and revolution.

Co-Director Julie Lichtenberg explained that “Mother Tongue” has been a touring performance for a year and a half, with shows in western Massachusetts theaters, high schools and colleges.

“They’re brainstorming themes and stories that they want to share, and in that process, they interview family members, they do writing, they write together, they journal, they improvise, they move and dance,” Lichtenberg said of the seven ensemble members. “And eventually, the script is created over that, in this case, 14-month period.”

“Mother Tongue” is unique in that the show is neither comprised of vignettes, nor a single narrative story. Rather, a theme, called “Walking to School,” strings the pieces of the show together.

Marrerro explained that her contributions to “Mother Tongue” include a monologue called “Secrets” that touches on her experience as a child trying to survive in unfit circumstances and lying to Child Protective Services to stay with her family. She said her performance looks at how this experience affects a child.

Marrerro is also performing a monologue about being a transgender woman in the United States, and the legacy of trans women in the country. This piece comes from writing she’s done before that’s been adapted for theater.

“It’s about understanding the legacy of violence against trans and queer people, and also understanding that through dance and movement, I have learned to build my own revolution,” Marrerro said. “I stand here today because there are trans women, especially Black and brown trans women, who lit the path for me, and many of whom were killed for being themselves. It’s my own call to action to myself of being like, ‘I’m dancing my revolution,’ but also this is the revolution — being [and] doing what you love, being who you are in the face of the whole world not wanting you to do and be who you are.”

Ensemble member Moise Jackobo explained that his two contributions in “Mother Tongue” relate to leaving a loved one and leaving Tanzania for the U.S. as a child.

“I am telling a story of leaving my grandma behind and I am also telling a story of just leaving my country behind where I grew up to move to the United States,” Jackobo said.

Jackobo reflected on the process of putting together “Mother Tongue” with other ensemble members, saying he bonded with others who shared similar experiences as immigrants in the U.S. Additionally, Jackobo said he is touched by the feedback the performance gets, especially from other immigrants who connect with their stories.

“Most people that feel connected to our stories are people of color, immigrants like us who came from a different country to the United States,” Jackobo said. “I get feedback like, ‘I never knew I’d be sitting down and getting to hear my fellow immigrants talk about this story.’ So just hearing that, it makes us, the performers, want to do more.”

Both Marerro and Jackobo hope folks come away from the performances feeling inspired. Marerro also hopes people feel called to action in today’s political climate to protect the trans community.

“I want people to see me being proud and being trans and being proud of being trans on stage, and I want them to understand that we are more than victims and we are more than a legacy of violence,” Marrero said. “I want them to think about how important this piece is right now in history, and how it is up to us to change, and to grow, and to fight against it.”

Tickets, on a sliding scale from \$15 to \$25, can be reserved at [tinyurl.com/MotherTongueShow](https://tinyurl.com/MotherTongueShow).

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