

Audience Guide

Polaroid Stories

By Naomi Iizuka

Compiled by the Cal Rep Graduate Managing Team

What POLAROID STORIES Character Are You?

To take the quiz, click [here!](#)

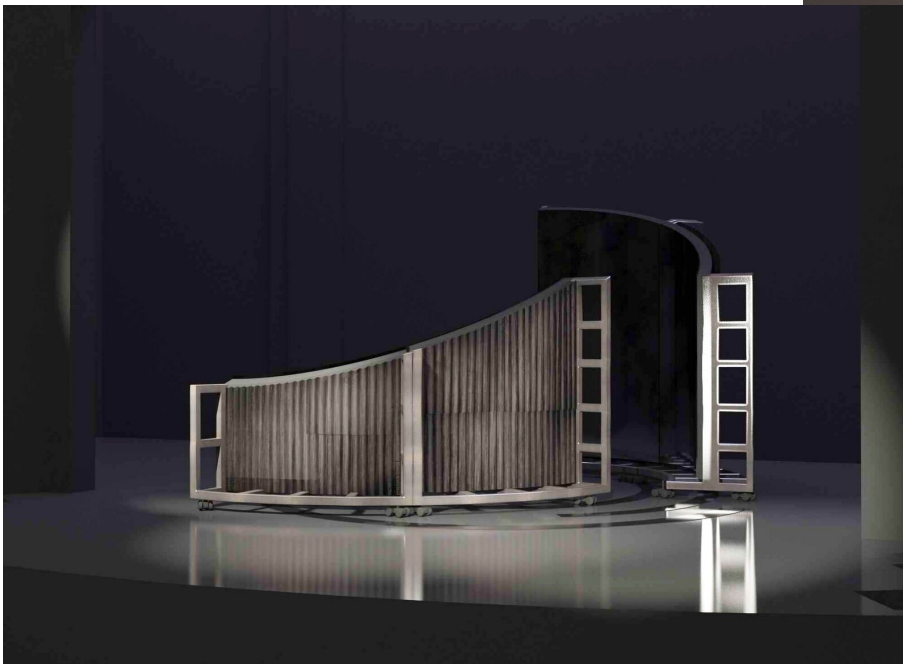
You can consult the [Dramaturgical Notes](#) section of this document for more information about your result.

About the Play...

Naomi Iizuka radically adapts and retells Ovid's ancient classic *Metamorphosis*, with homeless youth crafting stories both for their physical survival and for the transformation of their souls. In this contemporary collage of classical mythology and real-life stories of street kids, the play weaves a world where myth-making and storytelling are vital weapons for the characters to survive a system that erases and ignores them.

POLAROID STORIES (written in the late 1990s) mixes poetry and profanity – along with verbatim interviews Iizuka conducted with homeless youth and young sex workers – to tell a kaleidoscopic tale of young people living on the streets, fighting to escape the vice grip of poverty and addiction, and finding love and light within this darkness. *Polaroid Stories* is a messy labyrinth of addiction, violence and the serpentine paths of the heart.

In our production the costume designer imagines a group of young people who put their resources into how they look. Perhaps this costume design, along with the scenic design, elevate the experience of the play or make it more “epic” and “mythological”...



From the LA Times... March 31st, 2017

Los Angeles County's homeless population has soared 23% over last year despite increasing success in placing people in housing, according to the latest annual count released Wednesday.

Officials acknowledged, for example, that last year's increase at least partially resulted from the introduction of a special effort to locate hard-to-find youth.

Youths made up the fastest growing homeless age group with those 18 to 24 up 64%, followed by those under 18 at 41%.

Those numbers didn't surprise Heidi Calmus, who works in the Hollywood branch of Covenant House, an international homeless services agency.

Calmus said the agency sees **100 to 150 new homeless youth in Hollywood every month**. All the shelters have waiting lists, and permanent housing is impossible to find, even with a rent voucher.

"The system is overwhelmed," Calmus said.

The following article is taken from The University of the Arts and the Ira Brand School of Theater Arts. Cal Rep does not claim ownership of it nor the author's intellectual property.

Dramaturgical Notes

by Mari Kathleen Fielder

Literary Context

Seneca, arguably considered the greatest of Rome's thinkers and writers, was bowled over by his predecessor Ovid. Specifically, he admired Ovid's understanding of human fault, his ability to turn the negative upside down and illuminate the positive. Seneca summed it up: "[Ovid perceived that] a mole did not mar a beautiful face; it made it more lovely." Of course, Ovid is known primarily for the fifteen books of his famed poem *Metamorphosis*. This poem deals with all the transformations recorded in Greek (and the imitative Roman) mythology and legend from the creation of the world down to the epoch of Roman Consul Julius Caesar, whose metamorphosis into a star marks the last of the series. In subsequent ages, Ovid continued to garner fans for his superb storytelling. Indeed, many of his fans were themselves some of the greatest storytellers of Western literature: Chaucer, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Milton and Spenser to name but a few. Finding source material in Ovid's work became a Western tradition.

The Playwright

Flash forward: contemporary playwrights, themselves quite a literate bunch, have picked up on the tradition, Naomi Iizuka among them. Iizuka studied classics (and law) at Yale University before deviating to playwriting. She studied further at the university level, obtaining an MFA in dramatic writing from the University of California at San Diego, a program now renowned for launching many of America's most acclaimed emerging playwrights such as Heather Raffo and Melanie Marnich. Iizuka's *Polaroid Stories*, first

The Playwright (Cont'd)

performed in 1997 at the Actor's Theatre of Louisville, selects stories, characters and themes from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* but transforms them to contemporary fare, applying them to urban street culture, particularly the subculture of the teenage homeless. Lizuka recognizes another source material as well; a photographic essay by photographer Jim Goldberg entitled *Raised by Wolves*. The title itself references the legendary founders of Rome - - of Western culture - - Romulus and Remus, who were abandoned, suckled and raised by a she-wolf, and thus predetermined toward violent, bestial behavior.

The Play

Polaroid Stories further combines certain Ovid characters and plotlines with the instant photo known as the Polaroid, often called the "instamatic": inexpensive photos known for their color both brighter and flatter than that of everyday reality which eliminated the shadows and subtleties of light and field of distance in more complex photographic processes. Polaroids were instant because, unlike other cameras, they required no professional photographic development, but were delivered within seconds from the camera itself. The Polaroid suggests a moment captured in time but subject to almost immediate revision by another Polaroid: images subject to change again and yet again. It is a potent metaphor for a society consumed by the instant gratification of desire, by speed and the impulse to throw away almost anything - - everything - - to make way for what's next. Lizuka further links the Polaroid to the contemporary world of street drugs to explore the transformations of perception: veering from bright to dark in an instant, from self-confident high to depressive low, from romance to violence, from truth to lie.

Polaroid Stories overtly centers on five of Ovid's stories, with scenes in the text subtitled accordingly. A few examples: "How Eurydice Cross the River of Forgetfulness,," "Philomel's Story, Wordless Song," "Theseus in the Labyrinth." Ovid's stories, while not essential to understanding the play's action, do flesh it out. Here are the highlights...

Philomel and Tereus

Tereus was the son of Ares (Mars), god of war. He married the King of Athens' daughter Procne but became entranced by her younger sister Philomel, who was as beautiful as a nymph. To bed her, Tereus made up a story that Procne died and conned Philomel into a fake marriage. When Philomel discovered the truth and threatened to expose Tereus, he cut out her tongue and imprisoned her. There, the inventive Philomel chronicled the wrong done to her in a tapestry and smuggled it to her sister. Procne, made aware that Philomel was alive, found her, freed her, and swore revenge on Tereus. This revenge took the form of the murder of their young son. Procne then cut up the little boy in pieces and fed him to Tereus in a stew. The sisters fled when the shocked Tereus learned the truth. However, he overtook them and was about to kill them when they turned into birds, the tongueless Philomel into the sad-songed nightingale.

Dionysus and Semele

“D” stands for Dionysus, the son of Zeus (Jupiter), Lord of the Sky. The married Zeus was an incorrigible philanderer and one of the objects of his roving eye was the mortal Semele, a Theban princess. To seduce her, Zeus granted Semele any wish. Semele asked to see Zeus in all his radiance with his thunderbolt. But the radiance burned up Semele. Semele was pregnant and Zeus snatched the unborn child from the burning body and hid it in his side until it was time for the babe to be born. The child was Dionysus who became a wanderer and, as the god of wine, of fertility, and eventually of the theatre (theatre was born as a phallic rite in praise of Dionysus), found many followers everywhere. Dionysus went to the underworld to seek the mother he longed for and struck a deal with Hades to take her, Semele, to Olympus. She is the only mortal to dwell among the immortals.

Ariadne and Theseus, Theseus and Persephone

Ariadne was the daughter of Minos, King of Crete. Minos had a grudge against Athens since his only son died there. So as not to raze the city, Minos demanded blood sacrifices of Athenian youth who would be confined in a labyrinth with the monstrous Minotaur - - half-bull, half-human. On this particular year, Theseus (the brother of Philomel and Procne and son of the Athenian King) volunteered. During the parade to the labyrinth, Ariadne fell in love with Theseus. She vowed to save him and implored Daedalus, the architect of the maze, to give her its escape secrets. He did. The heroic Theseus pummeled the Minotaur with his bare hands and fled with Ariadne. However, Theseus then abandoned her on an island. There she met Dionysus who fell in love with her. When she died, Dionysus took a crown he gave her and placed it among the stars.

Meanwhile Theseus and his friend Pirithous travelled to the underworld in search of Persephone, the radiant maiden of Spring and Summer who was destined to spend four months of every year in the Land of the Dead as its queen. Pirithous' plan was to kidnap Persephone but the plan was thwarted by Hades, King of the Dead. He seated the adventurers on the Chair of Forgetfulness so that they forgot their mission. Pirithous sits there forever but Theseus was rescued by his cousin Hercules.

Echo and Narcissus

There was a beautiful youth named Narcissus who all the maidens loved. One of the maidens was Echo, the fairest of all. However, Zeus' wife Hera was jealous of Echo, suspecting that Zeus had his eye on her. The goddess, jealous of Echo's joyous chatter, condemned her to never speak again except to repeat whatever was said to her. Echo tried, with her echoes, to make Narcissus pay attention to her but failed. In shame, she hid in a lonely cave and wasted away until her echoing voice was the only part of her remaining. Meanwhile Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in a pool and, so obsessed that he could neither eat nor drink, died in the woods by the pool. Where his body fell there bloomed a new, beautiful flower, the Narcissus.

Orpheus and Eurydice

Orpheus was the greatest musician among mortals. He married his sweetheart Eurydice but she was stung by a viper and died. He descended into Hades to try and retrieve her. The beautiful music he sang and played on his lyre bewitched even the underworld's denizens and the King made him a wager: he could have Eurydice if he would not look back at her until they reached the upper world. Orpheus turned to be sure she was with him when he thought they were safe but Eurydice was still in the precinct of the dead and, so, slipped back, lost to him forever. A desolated Orpheus wandered the Earth alone, singing his sorrow, until he was murdered by frenzied Maenads and torn limb from limb. The Muses found his body parts and buried them at the foot of Mount Olympus where, to this day, the nightingale (Philomel) sings more sweetly than anywhere else.

Themes

It is no coincidence that “D” - - Dionysus, the god of theatre - - starts the play. Polaroid Stories uses stories, be they ancient myths or personal street sagas, to delve into some of the crucial dilemmas of human nature. What is truth? What is a lie? Can they be the same, one shifting into the other? Transformation exists, certainly. Suffering is the lot of humankind, as the ancients told us oh-so-often. But so is transcendence, the hope for something better that keeps us going. Polaroid Stories takes us into the urban jungle where extremes of emotion, of abuse, of violence abound to those just becoming who they will be. It's not so pretty. Or is it? Ovid, and all his fellow storytellers, knew that metamorphosis is always on the horizon and human connection just around the next corner.