

September 24-30, 2009

## The Provenance of Beauty



### Elmendorf Reformed Church

(see Off-Off Broadway). By Claudia Rankine. Dir. Melanie Joseph and Shawn Sides. With Sarah Hayon. 1hr 30mins. No intermission.

Annie Liebovitz once hypothesized that the long car trips of her childhood made her a photographer, since seeing the world through a backseat window imposed a lifelong automatic framing device. *The Provenance of Beauty*, the Foundry Theatre's contemplative bus-tour-cum-performance that ferries audience members around the South Bronx, promises to have a similar effect. We start out as tourists, strapped with heavy headphones that pipe both our (live) tour guide Sarah Hayon and taped voices reading Claudia Rankine's poetic travelogue. But after passively observing a succession of parks and vanished buildings and menacing prisons, we become roving artists ourselves, trying to force composition on the streetscapes outside. Most bizarrely, we realize that we become the artwork too—a glass tube of largely white theatergoers, cruising low through an unfamiliar neighborhood. We seem foolish, captive, ignorant, odd: the exhibit in a roving museum.

*Beauty* is a provocative, layered work, with one serious weakness. Rankine's text—full of



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Spectators survey the outer-borough view.

pseudoprofound statements like “identity is time passing”—works best when it keeps to plain speaking. The performers occasionally lapse into the preachy, waltz-time swing of the poetry reader, and what has felt fresh begins to dry into staleness. But these moments pale before the larger project, which is nothing less than forcing audiences to desegregate their urban experience—if only for 90 minutes. The South Bronx has revitalized itself despite the rest of us (Hayon's delivery reserves particular venom for quoting real-estate queen Barbara Corcoran, who has called SoBro a neighborhood “close to New York”), and director-cocreator Melanie Joseph shows us its accomplishments. The city as self-healing, vibrant and infinitely diverse? That's a project we can all get on board with.—*Helen Shaw*