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Saturday, May 2nd, 2016

Talya Chalef's Port Cities NYC holds a mirror up to the history of New York City, highlighting the economic and social systems of oppression that still haunt public consciousness. It is a lot to unpack.

The experience begins aboard a ferry at Pier 11 on the southern tip of Manhattan. An audio file, downloaded in advance, is the soundtrack for your voyage across the East River. New Yorkers that frequent nontraditional theater may be familiar with these conceits— This is Not a Theatre Company brought their own headphone-guided Ferry Play to the Fringe Festival in Summer 2015, and iPod Artist Zachary Grady's immersive multi-track performances have been presented by Ars Nova, Broadway Bares, and the Spring Street Social Society.

Port Cities' audio experience is more filler than feature— a short narrative interlude, followed by 20 minutes of haunting melodies and rolling waves by sound designer Cameron Orr. It was a beautiful palate cleanser, but perhaps a missed opportunity to bring the show's themes into focus.

Touching down in Red Hook, we were asked wait for a second ferry with stragglers, then escorted to the Waterfront Museum & Showboat Barge for a more proscenium-style performance. The space is perfect for theater, and Port Cities' design team excelled at activating it with lights, projection, and milk crates (a scenic motif).

Swaddled in Port Cities' freewheeling narrative were precious few salient moments— introducing Colonial New Amsterdam as a cutthroat game of Settlers of Catan; a slam-poetry diatribe against institutional racism then and now, delivered masterfully by Nathaniel Ryan; and a wistful call to worship story shared with one's lover. Leah Barker, Marcus Crawford Guy, and Elizabeth Gray joined Ryan as cast, each offering nuanced interpretations of Chalef's text and choreography.

Though each element of Port Cities was executed with care, it never became more than the sum of its parts. After more than an hour waiting for the show proper to begin (at the pier, on the ferry, on the dock) the 45 minutes of dense socio-political banter never found a satisfying end.

Port Cities NYC is the first of five installations linking cities along 17th Century Dutch trade routes. Perhaps the structure of this piece will make more sense in that context.

Pro Tips: Bring your own headphones. Make sure the F and G are running back to Manhattan, or you may be stranded.

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