

# Review: ‘Cartography’ at The Kennedy Center

By David Siegel - January 12, 2019

With its premiere of *Cartography*, The Kennedy Center continues to be a welcoming venue for theatrically devised civic discourse on often fraught issues. *Cartography* is a unique live documentary about young people searching for asylum as harrowing times and hostile environments overtake their lives.



The cast of *Cartography*, playing January 11-13 at The Kennedy Center. Photo courtesy of The Kennedy Center.

*Cartography* takes on “ripped from the headlines” issues related to the migration of untold millions around the world, as conveyed through the stories of five young people. It is a solid production, mapping the transitions of those struggling to navigate their way into new worlds with their homelands no longer safe.

Lovingly created by author and illustrator Christopher Myers and director Kaneza Schaal, and produced with New York-based company Arktype and Thomas O. Kriegsmann, *Cartography* explores a world alive with transitions and movement by characters speaking their minds; representing those often made purposely invisible by others.

*Cartography* is inspired by the creative artists’ work with young refugees and migrants. The production melds together its talented cast of five along with excellent wave-filled sound design and memorably crafted set design using about 30 regularly moved about cardboard boxes, vivid lighting (Cheslie McPhilimy), and several shiny NASA Mylar “blankets” along with a small rubber raft created before the audience’s eyes. There are also clever wonders of contemporary technology, including one scene that is a critical interactive part of the event using cell phones (Joshua Ott, Interactive video).

The very personable ensemble includes Janice Amaya (Salvadorian-American), Noor Hamdi (son of Syrian immigrants), Victoria Nassif (Lebanese-American), Vuyo Sotashe (native of South Africa) and Malaika Uwamahoro (born in Rwanda).

Without giving away too much of the actual performance, *Cartography* begins with the five characters stepping into view, one by one, each speaking their own language. No one understands the other, at least at first. Over time, the five build bonds as they suffer and learn together. They go through experiences as a group and solo, both humorous, but most often serious and all too real. They are at the mercy of others including any number of unseen men in suits at any number of border crossings with fences and walls to deal with. There are unintelligible forms to complete and food and bathrooms to be found. They are threatened and mistreated. But their will to survive becomes stronger and stronger, their resilience grows even in the face of overwhelming odds.

As the journey of the ensemble begins to come to a conclusion, the five characters take the stage front and center, one by one. Each speaks their minds directly to The Kennedy Center audience. They are honest and authentic telling stories of their homelands and families and why they made their journey. I, for one, did not want to miss one syllable of the powerful words each masterfully spoke. I wanted to mull over what they said then at the performance—and still do.

*Cartography* is sophisticated education and entertainment for those age 12 and up. Family audiences are clearly welcome. The creators and The Kennedy Center are to be well acknowledged for their additional works, including accompanying guides for **students** and for **teachers and parents**, to deepen engagement and understanding of the issues *Cartography* raises.

*The cast of Cartography, playing January 11-13 at The Kennedy Center. Photo courtesy of The Kennedy Center.*

*Cartography* is part of The Kennedy Center's *The Human Journey* series. *The Human Journey* is a collaboration between the Kennedy Center, the National Geographic Society, and the National Gallery of Art. *The Human Journey* invites audiences to investigate the powerful experiences of migration, exploration, identity, and resilience through the lenses of the performing arts, science, and visual art.

A wonder of theater-making, *Cartography* is a production full of cracking story-telling with booming contemporary musical interludes between scenes. Its amusing takes on cultural values

are joys; from the angst of missing spicy home cooking, how privileged people overuse soap, to how accents, attire and shoes can help or harm when trying to cross a border.

*Cartography* delivers a fine evening to bring an audience closer to a complex contemporary issue. With *Cartography*, bold headlines in today's newspapers or cable news disappear. What emerges to replace the headlines are real people hoping to become visible and heard; to make their personal case for entry and admission. Most of us or our families likely started out the same way. I know mine did in the very early years of the 20th century.

Running Time: 75 minutes, with no intermission.

***Cartography*** plays through January 13, 2019, at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Family Theater, 2700 F Street NW, Washington, DC. For tickets, call (202) 467-4600 or go **online**.

---

---

#### David Siegel

David Siegel is a freelance theater reviewer and features writer whose work appears on DC Metro Theater Arts, ShowBiz Radio, in the Connection Newspapers and the Fairfax Times. He is a judge in the Helen Hayes Awards program. He is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association and volunteers with the Arts Council of Fairfax County. David has been associated with theater in the Washington, DC area for nearly 30 years. He served as Board President, American Showcase Theater Company (now Metro Stage) and later with the American Century Theater as both a member of the Executive Board and as Marketing Director. You can follow David's musings on Twitter @petty nibbler.

FOLLOW US ON INSTAGRAM

**@DCMETROTHEATERARTS**



