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Tropic of X is a big, bold swing by Imago Theatre

by [Dave Jaffer](#)

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colonialism, how they suffer, how they find meaning.

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A literature professor of mine once suggested that any work of art that too closely aligns itself with one generation or audience necessarily divorces itself from all others. I've never thought this kind of thing was true. When we get bogged down in matters of alignment, we risk missing the point. And, consider our tools! We have homage, allusion and metaphor so that a thing doesn't have to be a thing to be a *thing*. Yes, artworks always resonate more with certain audiences, demographics and psychographics than with others. They're often designed that way, but they're still meant to reach all of us.

Caridad Svich's *The Tropic of X* is concerned with the losers of colonialism, and how they suffer, how they find meaning within and perhaps because of the suffering, and how some people will always get destroyed so that other people can ride high on the hog. It is a meditation on and exploration of identity and its mutability; it is a rebuke of the violence and endless hunger of colonialism and capitalism; and it is a statement that within these oppressive structures, all we really have is each other. Imago Theatre's production of this work is a statement of its own — but we'll get to that later.

Tropic of X

Maura (Arlen Aguayo Stewart) and Mori (Braulio Elicer) are street kids who exist “in the polyglot Americas, leaning south.” Their day-to-day consists mostly of talking shit to and pitching woo at each other, threatening tourists and occasionally getting high with and talking shit to Kiki, a trans sex worker and drug dealer who is as much frenemy as friend but still decidedly on their side. All three of them are grimy and charming, if vaguely feral; all three of them are most certainly destined to die in the gutter. Meanwhile, Hilton, DJ Cowboy of the Island Airwaves (Gitanjali Jain), delivers her punchy poetic monologues to whoever may (still) be listening.

Maura reps tough but isn't as tough as she seems. Mori reps passive, but really he's tired of the same old verbal jousting and general nothingness day after day. He's light, genial, and playful one minute and then distant and bored the next.

Fierce performances



Elicer breathes considerable life into Mori, creating a commendable performance with openness and malleability.

Stewart has less to work with because Maura is almost all impulse and thinly-veiled insecurity. She wants to love! She wants to fuck! She wants to fight! She wants to get high! She wants to cry! But all she wants is for Mori to love her like she loves him and to need her, which he doesn't, but it almost doesn't matter since he's what she has to tether herself to and where she finds whatever meaning there is to be found for people like her in a place like this.

Still, Stewart's performance is energetic and (suitably) childlike in its enthusiasm. When she succeeds in letting Maura's mask of bravado slip (but not too much) you can't help but feel something.

Maura, Mori and to a lesser extent Kiki (an excellent Victor Andres Trelles Turgeon, who quietly holds everything together), are themselves the thrust of the piece. We experience everything as something that they do or something that happens to them. This begins when we meet Fabian (Eric Davis), who makes Mori submit to his authority in brutal, dehumanizing ways. As Fabian, and later as Frankie, Davis does strong, ugly work. Fabian represents (colonial) need and want and dominance and cruelty. If a regime changes, and it's suggested that it tends to happen "at the end of the alphabet" where Maura and Mori live, Fabian (or *a* Fabian) is there to wield power and control and Frankie (or *a* Frankie) is there to maintain order (while also suffering).

Quality control

As a text, *The Tropic of X* is occasionally brilliant and occasionally overwritten and sometimes a bit much. A lot of the, "Hey, the web is a thing that exists!" dialogue, like references to internet cafes and sites one may be directed to, is grating. So too is the text's addiction to making Maura insist upon herself. Like, we get it. One can't help but think Stewart's performance could have been more thoughtful were the character written more thoughtfully. Kiki's existence in the narrative confirms Svich's ability to wield a soft(er) touch. As written, we almost always get too much Maura, which frustrates.

Svich explores several themes simultaneously in the work, and, while director Sophie Gee does a solid job in trying to keep these themes in balance with each other, a lot of the time the jerky textual transitions all but force Gee and the performers to make choices that serve the text but not necessarily the performance. And the performance is almost over when the set's most stunning feature is utilized. We see that the field of trash we've been staring at the entire night is much more than mere accoutrement.

(It merits mention that I saw the second of two previews before the run "officially" started. That evening's performance clearly showed the performers fine-tuning and the production as a whole getting some kinks out. I suspect that the final, polished product has nipped and tucked somewhat.)

Daring discomfort

The Tropic of X is a big and bold swing by Imago Theatre because it's not a show you mount expecting sellouts and some kind of benignly positive response. Rather it's a show that will be misunderstood and perhaps even under-attended because of the aforementioned alignment issue (among others). The work is about several interconnected things, some of which are uncomfortable to think about both inside and outside of the theatre and many of which work against finding an audience here in Montreal. Its concerns, geographically and geopolitically, feel very far away (literally and temporally) and its main characters are easier to pity than identify with because the people making up a typical audience here represent the structures that destroy people like Maura, Mori and Kiki.

No one wants to be a Fabian, but in this part of the world we've got more than a little Fabian on our hands. Perhaps the true genius of *The Tropic of X* is that it really and truly wants you to know that. ■

Tropic of X runs at Centaur Theatre (453 St-François-Xavier) from Jan. 29–Feb. 8, various times, \$25/\$20. See the details at Imago Theatre's [website](#).

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by **Dave Jaffer**

Contributor

Dave Jaffer is a Montreal-based writer, editor, and critic. He owns and runs a media and communications consultancy called WordNorth.



