

What Will People Think? by Joe Hefferon

I almost began this review of a one-woman show written and performed by Anthoula Katsimatides with a cliché, 'last night I had the pleasure of...!', but it strikes me as more of a humbling experience I feel honored to have attended, and I would dishonor such a terrific show by starting with a hack line. Yet...

Her show has all the trappings of a complete production: laughter, music, memories, sadness and hope. Well-written and thoughtfully directed. It was indeed a pleasure.

Anthoula's show traces the brief history of her family from the poor volcanic island of Nisyros, where her parents were born, through her small family's accomplished yet tragic history and finally to her reconciliation of old-world rules with the lion-hearted actress aching to be an individual.

Anthoula is a funny, scrappy and passionate Hellenic woman, who tells her story in a way that grabs you by the shirt and dares you to look away. In the classic comic/tragic manner, Anthoula brings you in closer by sharing a laugh about family rules, then punches you in the heart with chunk of reality that had more than a few people in the intimate setting of Theater Row <http://www.theatrerow.org/> reaching for tissues.

The audience seemed to be experiencing her pain together, maybe dissipating it a little for her—a sort of collective effort of support, an emergent behavior of the group, sharing in her charisma, the cursing, the tears and the unanswerable questions. This kind of thing doesn't happen by accident. Anthoula made it so.

Rule Number One: Preserve, promote and perpetuate your Hellenic culture, because 'what will people think' if you don't. No worries, Anthoula—you did your family, and your culture, proud. Watching Anthoula perform her story, I felt as though I got to participate in rhetorical history. I found myself inching forward on my seat as if it would bring me closer to the energy. She often speaks in Greek during the show, but it is so perfectly in context that even the unwashed like me can get the jokes. If you've ever seen Eddie Izzard perform you know that's no easy task.

The order of the other rules is immaterial, mostly because they are of equal value, and subordinate to a central question every good little Greek woman must ask about her actions, "What will people think?"

It's a question that plagues more than a few ethnic cultures. It can prevent you from doing something stupid but can also be stifling. It prevents families from searching for help for the pregnant teen or the alcoholic son because the family tries to keep the dark secret in-house. It inevitably destroys it like a parasite from the inside out. Anthoula worked for many years to sort through it all and it seems she's finally figured out how to hang on to the goodness of culture and tradition while defying the corrosive parts with honesty and joy. She jokes that when she finally went on vacation alone for the first time it was like 'being on parole'.

Technically speaking? Anthoula is a marvel of efficiency, giving us just enough of the important characters in her life to make us laugh or relate, but more than enough for us to recognize them in an instant. All Anthoula had to do was cross her arms, stretch her neck and thrust her chin just so and we knew 'Baba' (her dad) was about to speak. It was brilliant in its simplicity, giving us precisely what we needed to be entertained.

The show, which ran about 50 minutes, was peppered with music, videos, snippets of dance and sudden sadness. All of it perfectly timed to enhance the book, or portend the drama. When that telephone would ring...oh boy.

It was never good news. We relived her horror of learning of her brother Mikey's suicide from her brother John's call and an audio of what could only be described as a New York cop's voice, reading from the report of the cause and manner of death. Direct, clinical, heartrending. You could feel the silence in the audience. Whenever she spoke of death, her father's or Mikey's or John's (hang on), she donned her black veil and lit a candle. The room fell into darkness and we heard the most beautiful and haunting Greek lament, sung by a men's choir. It played just long enough to make the point, give you chills and yes, well up. Hey, it's family.

Within moments we were smiling again as Anthoula told us how her brother John pulled her from the crevasse of sorrow and made her, and us, appreciate life. We laughed, danced and tossed back a shot. "Life is friggin' awesome, Anthoula." John worked for Cantor Fitzgerald in the World Trade Center and was killed on Nine-Eleven. Heart punch.

Anthoula worked for Governor George Pataki, who asked her to be a part of the healing for families of victims of the attack as Vice President for Family Relations of the Lower Manhattan Development Corp. <https://www.911memorial.org/Anthoula-Katsimatides>. He must be an insightful man to know that only such a resilient and loving woman like Anthoula could struggle with her own grief while giving countless hours to helping others deal with their own. She pulled it off, of course, and through friends and chance, found herself expressing her acting genes. We're lucky she did. I predict great things from her. It's her time.

Anthoula is a naturally funny woman, with a deep, clear voice that holds your attention. I've met her before, here <http://womeninbusiness.about.com/od/joe-hefferon-series/a/Profile-Of-Anthoula-Katsimatides.htm>. She had the audience in hysterics, but the laughter also served to counter her vulnerability, the woman who is one more sudden family loss from giving up. We pray she won't have to.

In the HBO drama series, 'True Detectives', Matthew McConaughey's character says, "The world needs bad men. We keep the other bad men from the door." It's a simple truth. Here's another. The world needs strong women. They make us work harder, force us to see the light and push us to be better than we were yesterday. They make us desire more while reminding us to be grateful for what we have. Some of them make us reach for our swords to follow her through the battle, to fight alongside her. To protect her. Thanks for the honor, Anthoula.