

VUEWEEKLY

Arts - Theatre

Escape Velocity

April 3, 2014 • by Mel Priestley • Add Comment



Activism can take many forms; Nikki Shaffeeullah chose theatre.

"Through live performance you have the power to engage people in a visceral way that you can't necessarily [do] through theory or lecture or conversation," says the recent University of Alberta MFA graduate, whose practical thesis work spawned the artist-activist ensemble Undercurrent Theatre, which has in turn led to *Escape Velocity*, a new performing-arts festival set to take the stage at Azimuth Theatre.

"I'm trying to facilitate methods that can create thoughtful, reflective work that is accountable not just to the artist, but to the community we represent, to the audience that we present to," Shaffeeullah says.

Escape Velocity takes its name from the main performance of the festival, which will also feature smaller performing arts pieces and an interactive installation in the Azimuth lobby.

"Because of the way that stereotypes in media and the art and in mainstream discourse tends to frame gender-based violence as being something that exists exceptionally only in certain communities—particular, certain cultural communities—it makes the conversation around gender-based violence have a racist lens to it," she explains. "Scapegoating it and saying it's only Muslim communities or Latino communities or indigenous communities that have to deal with this—that hurts people from everywhere, regardless of their culture, because misogyny and violence exist everywhere. So we wanted a way to explore these issues that acknowledge cultural particularities while resisting mainstream stereotypes."

That these are huge, difficult issues hardly needs mention. Shaffeeullah acknowledges that often when faced with the enormity and pervasiveness of such problems, people have a tendency to simply give up, or reject the notion that they might be partly at fault themselves—and of course, willing ignorance only perpetuates the problem. As a product of a self-selected group of artists with the input of the general community, *Escape Velocity* offers an opportunity for revealing, and hopefully beginning to dissolve, the audience's ignorance, a process that's cushioned slightly by a fourth wall.

"When you start really looking at these things, in both specific ways but also in large systemic ways, you can't help but find yourself implicated and guilty of contributing in one way or another," Shaffeeullah says. "A lot of people are uncomfortable with that, but it's part of the conversation; we have to learn to navigate that discomfort, so hopefully theatre is a way that people can start to navigate that productively."

A particular example of the sort of issues being addressed in *Escape Velocity*, and something that has also gained increasingly mainstream attention in recent days, is rape culture; mainstream discourse has focused on university campuses across North America, though the problem is far more widespread than that. The festival therefore offers a prime chance to delve into this topical issue—though the works are certainly not limited to this subject alone.

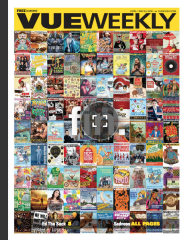
"We look at reasons why people seek help or don't seek help; how institutions serve or hurt us in those conversations; we look at how desire is constructed and the relationships between desire and power; how things get better or worse through generations," Shaffeeullah says. "Ultimately we look at support and how we can support each other in a world with gender-based violence—it's also about the love aspect, and family and friends taking care of each other and moving forward in positivity."

Until Sun, Apr 6 (7:30pm; 2pm on Saturday)
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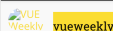
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