

THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



An Evening with an Immigrant

Language: English

Written and Performed by: Inua Ellam

One of the most intriguing performances that I have seen of late is Inua Ellams' *An Evening with An Immigrant*. The show has many accolades to its name, including a performance at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2017. The tale revolves around Ellams' sudden and forced departure from Nigeria as a boy of twelve to his conceptualizing of and performing this play, in his own words, 'all without a country to belong to or place to call home. The show is a ninety minute one man performance interspersed with performance poetry and casually narrated stories from Ellams' life.

The strongest element of the play is perhaps, Ellams' writing itself. Its poignant, funny, personal and the audience walks away feeling like they witnessed Ellams' most vulnerable self. This is rather interesting as it brings to mind the following question – where can the line be drawn between Inua the performer and the Inua who is being spoken of in the many memories that Ellams' presents us with? Or perhaps, a more fundamental one being – is there such a difference? To be honest, such a distinction is rather difficult to draw as Ellams' embodies the sorrow he felt when his family had to shift to Ireland three years after their arrival to England and the mild rage that accompanies his tone when he talks about the racism he faced upon his arrival at Dublin.

It was in trying to answer this question that I found myself at the root question of the performance itself – that of identity. It was not as though that this question was ambiguous in Inua's stories or poems – the theme was clear from the beginning of the performance where Inua walked on to the stage with an *agbada*, a jacket and a *fila*, a cap and removes them to reveal a casual t-shirt and a pair of *khakhi* pants. The divide between the person and the performer made the question of identity operate at a meta level because at every instance and at every level of the performance, I was forced to ask questions of Inua's identity.

What was also striking about this performance was the venue itself. There was not elevated space to demarcate the performer from the audience. A strip of brown tape was the only marker. Inua sat on one side on a chair while most of the audience was

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seated on the floor or on a chair that was as high as Inua's. This, as opposed to a typical proscenium stage, allowed for an intimate atmosphere to be built between performer and audience. What the elevation also seemed to symbolize was stories from the margins taking the spotlight, taking centre stage.

Inua's play has been lingering on my mind a lot since the break out of the world wide pandemic. The outbreak has forced people indoors, in their 'homes,' forcing nation - wide lockdowns. It is on my mind precisely because it makes me think about man made boundaries and the countless numbers who have suffered because of the creation of these boundaries, of nations. Perhaps it is too utopian to think of a world without borders but the play has really made me ask - what's in a line?