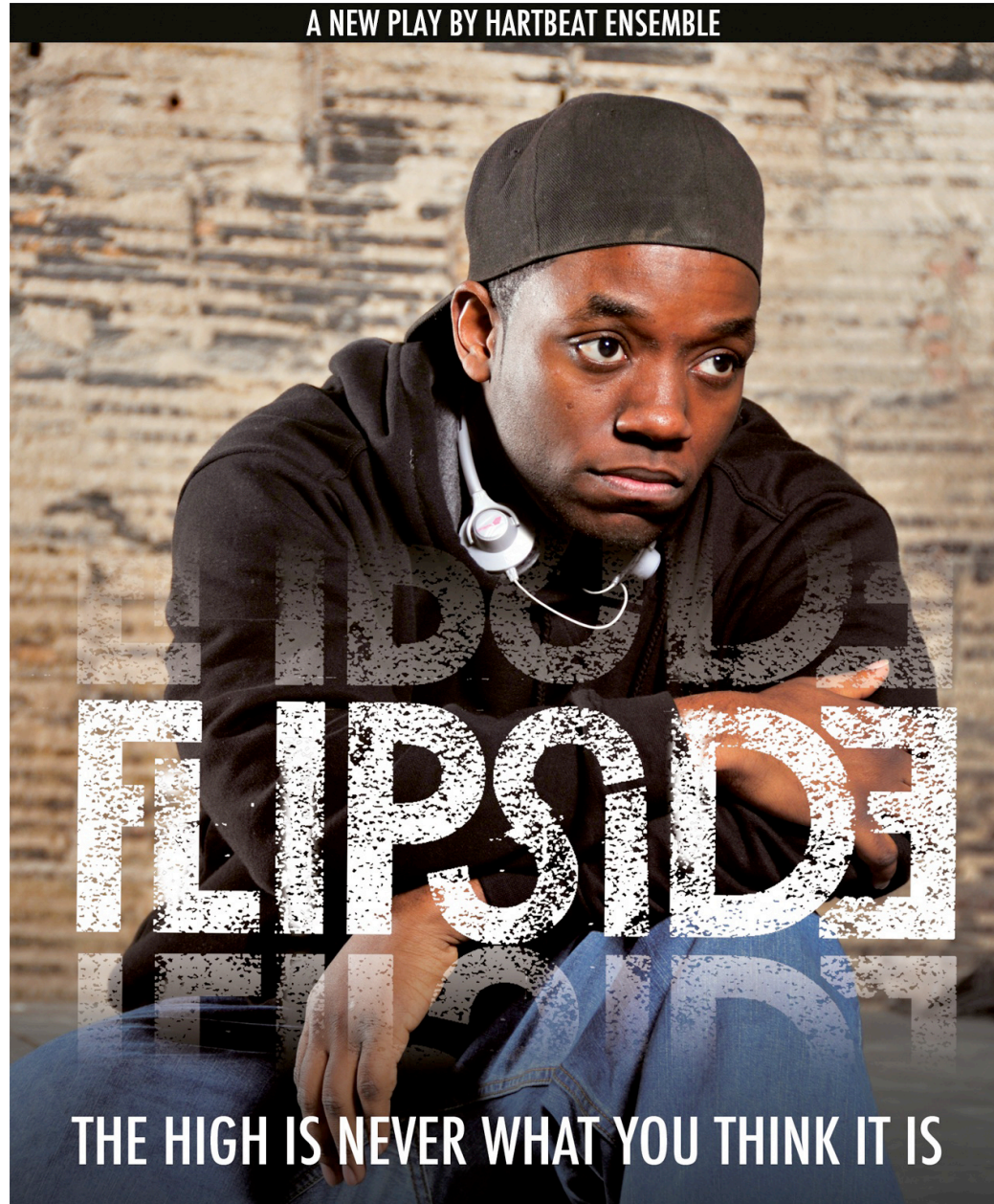


A NEW PLAY BY HARTBEAT ENSEMBLE



**What happens when an urban teen who thinks
he can beat the system meets a narc who thinks
he can save the world?**

Spoken word and an original Hip-Hop score punctuate this story of the personal side of the drug war.

THEATER REVIEW

Personal Stories Of Hartford's Drug Scene

By **FRANK RIZZO**
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The show: "Flipside."

The place: HartBeat Ensemble's new playing space on the first floor of the Hollander Building, 410 Asylum St. in downtown Hartford.

What is it?: The socially-conscious, community-centric theater company wanted to do a show about the War on Drugs.

So it's preachy, good-for-you theater?: Surprisingly, not. And for a collaborative theater group the play is sharply-focused, dynamically staged (by Gregory R. Tate) and wonderfully and clearly acted.

Based on interviews with a Hartford teen named Bo and an undercover narcotics agent named Nick, Julia B. Rosenblatt creates a solid piece of theater that transcends the limits of theater-by-committee. It feels like it was written by a single voice. The characters are well-drawn with good specificity, the dialogue is far from cliché and there's plenty of nuanced shadings in the performances.

On the down side, I can't but help feel I've heard this story before or that the audience is well ahead of the plot. Also, some of the multi-casting is just an overload. And one scene with a little old lady drug runner is entertaining — and well played by Rosenblatt — but out of place. (If there were several more of these world-of-Hartford-drugs scenes, it might have felt less jarring.)

But what makes this work more than run-of-the-mill outreach theater is that instead of hammering "messages," the script is fairly subtle, well-crafted and zeros in on



HARTBEAT ENSEMBLE

CINDY MARTINEZ AND CHINAZA UCHE play lovers in the HartBeat Ensemble production of "Flipside."

real and complex people, especially in the relationship between the narc who's hooked on saving the world and the intelligent urban youth who goes down the wrong path despite his better judgment.

That last part sounds like an "After School Special": In a way, it is. But the difference is in the details. The characters' home lives and their slowly developing relationship sets it apart from more broadly drawn works with the same themes and subject.

Also enlivening the work was the free-feeling yet solidly designed structure that jumps in time and place, with scenes woven nicely together with poetry by Cindy Martinez and music by Martin Carillo. (Additional poetry is credited to Mind Evolution and MIRA.)

But most of all I liked the performances: terrific all. Chinaza Uche (from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts) as the struggling Bo is a find. Brian Jennings shows old pro chops as the guilt-ridden narc. I was also under the spell of Taneisha Duggan, Martinez and

Rosenblatt as the chorus and in oh-so-many other roles.

Who will like it?: Teenagers, parents, teachers and even some theatergoers who might be wary of shows "ripped from the headlines." (Profane language might not be appropriate for children but there are no naughty bits and many high schoolers would connect with the show.)

Twitter review in 140 characters or less?: Hartford drug scene gets personal perspective with fine and focused "Flipside." Good theater trumps good intentions every time.

Thoughts on leaving the parking lot?: What a fine space the Hollander is for in-the-raw theater. I've said for years, all you need is plain old intimate space (it doesn't have to be pretty) to put on good small-scale theater. This venue is so much better than the problematic Charter Oak space.

Running time: One hour and 30 minutes. No intermission.

Runs through: Oct. 29, Thursdays through Saturdays at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$15 to \$20. Suitable for ages 13 and up.

Info: www.hartbeatensemble.org.

► Did you see it? What did you think? Share your thoughts or a review on Frank's blog at www.courant.com/curtain.

► Read Frank's blog on theater, the arts and entertainment at www.courant.com/curtain and catch him talking about what's on stage on FOX/CT's 'Morning Show' on Fridays during the 9 a.m. hour. And be the first to know by following Frank on Twitter at www.Twitter.com/ShowRiz.

■ Theater

On the 'Flipside'

The Hartbeat Ensemble's original show is as good as everyone says it is

By Karen Bovard

A compact, 90-minute show, *Flipside* is centered on a chance encounter between an undercover cop and a young drug hustler. The creators — a skilled team from Hartford's own Hartbeat Ensemble — distilled hundreds of hours of interviews with more than 40 people from Hartford, surrounding suburbs, and Boston into compelling theater that goes beyond cliché. Though it grew out of interviews, this is not a static piece: movement, music, spoken word, physical acting, and rapid character transformations by a contemporary version of a Greek chorus surround the two central characters with lively theatricality.

The complexity of those characters is one reason *Flipside* works so well. An early scene in which Bo, the hustler, talks with two friends about wormholes helps establish his smarts, his curiosity and the way his capacity for wonder has survived the confinements of his life. A school dropout, he's contending with a mentally ill mom who can be violent, a sick dad, and a younger sister who needs protection. As played by the remarkable

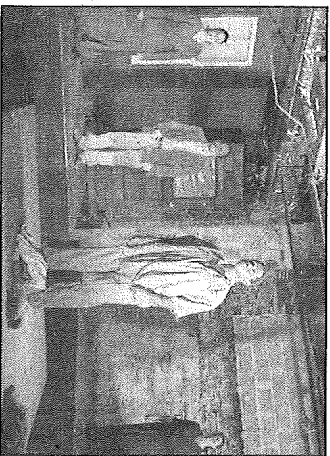
Flipside

Through Oct. 29, The Hollander Building, High Street side entrance, 410 Asylum St. (860) 548-9144, hartbeatensemble.org

Chinaza Uche, Bo exudes ag-grieved dignity. Even when most stuck, reduced to monosyl-

lables, the character's intelligence is clear. Uche is big but subtle, when he listens on stage thoughts flicker across his face in some kind of actor-generated magic. I'd love to see him on film.

Local actor and teacher Brian Jennings plays Nick, the cop, whose dedication to his work costs him big time at home, as he neglects his wife and daughters. He's haunted by questions about whether his work is actually doing more damage than good, and flashbacks to a big case in his past — based on real events in CT — lend his anguish substance. Jennings can also flip into song, and comes to life most in a quick insertion of a bit of Judas from *Jesus*



LARRY BILANSKY PHOTO

A scene from Hartbeat Ensemble's *Flipside*.

Music is just one of the things the chorus of women provide, singing in tight harmonies, using some original melodies plus quick covers of familiar songs that help place the events in time. Julia Rosenblatt, one of Hartbeat's three founders, took the lead in creating the script. She's effective in a variety of roles, including the cop's wife and a Glastonbury grandma whose life has taken an unexpected turn. Cindy Martinez, a new member of the Hartbeat Ensemble who is locally trained, supplies poetry and lyrics and delivers most of the spoken-word work in the piece. Taneisha Dugan provides a powerful third to the chorus, alternately smoldering and silly as required by her shifting characters, which include a West Hartford teen who makes some stupid and tragic choices.

Director Gregory Tate, another of Hartbeat's founders, directed this piece with a sure hand and the ability to call forth the best from his performers, who actively collaborated in shaping the show. *Flipside* debuted last spring and played a limited run to sold-out houses. Tweaked a bit since then, it's been revived for just a few performances. This is the first show Hartbeat is mounting in its new, raw space, donated by Common Ground in the Hollander Building downtown. The grittiness of the setting suits *Flipside* just fine. This show gets a big thumbs up from me for artistic merit — which isn't always the case with theater that's generated from a commitment to social change. ■




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Flipside

nytheatre.com review

reviewed by *Julia Lee Barclay* · August 14, 2012

Flipside is one of those rare theatrical experiences that is equal parts intelligent, funny, moving, important and innovative. The extraordinary company HartBeat, an ensemble out of Hartford, CT, created this piece in workshops, devising it as a group, working with a drug dealer to get his story. Equally compelling is the story the piece tells of the policeman who eventually arrests him.

The actor Brian Jennings does an excellent job playing an aging police officer, Nick, who was a gung-ho drug warrior in his youth but watched as what he naively thought were 'good' arrests destroy innocent lives. As an older undercover cop, he tries to keep the young drug dealer, Bo, played with precision, humor and grace by Chinaza Uche, from getting arrested but cannot any more than his then-wife could in his earlier days deter him from his obsession with "the rush, the adrenaline chase."

Three women, the talented Taneisha Duggan, Cindy Martinez & Julia B Rosenblatt, act as a Chorus, singing and and playing multiple male and female roles,. Because the story unfolds as a classical modern tragedy, it is apt that they are referred to as a chorus. Rosenblatt also wrote the play, working with the actors to devise it. She has written an excellent text from this material.

The innovation is in the creative staging, which intertwines the dual points of view of the white cop and the black drug dealer, neither overshadowing the other. Using a combination of Brecht and Boal techniques, the performance makes clear the socio-economic mechanisms that makes these men act as they do. Yet, what makes the show unique is that this awareness does not take away from the emotional resonance of the play. It is rare and a privilege to witness a performance that is as smart as it is heartfelt.

The director of this play, Gregory B. Tate, died this summer and the remounted tour was directed by Steven Ginsburg. Both men deserve commendation and congratulations for co-founding this truly astounding ensemble that is creating work of true social importance without sacrificing artistic integrity.

Make sure you get to see this show if you care about seeing excellent political theater that shows with humor and sophistication how people on the flipside of the drug war get involved with what most of us only see on the news.

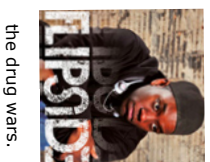
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INFO ABOUT *Flipside*



What happens when an urban teen who thinks he can beat the system meets a narc who thinks he can save the world? Spoken-word and original hip hop score punctuate this story of the personal side of

the drug wars.

Venue: HERE - Mainstage, 145 6th Avenue

Prices: \$15.00 - \$18.00

Performance Dates: August 12, 2012 - August 25, 2012

Box Office/Info: 866-468-7619

Producer: HartBeat Ensemble

Author: Julia B. Rosenblatt

Director: Gregory R. Tate

Get Tickets at FringeNYC
Show Website



CurtainUp

The Internet Theater Magazine of Reviews, Features,
Annotated Listings

A CurtainUp Report

2012 New York International Fringe Festival

by Les Guttman, David Liptert, Kathryn Osenlund, Gregory Wilson, William Coyle

Flipside

HartBeat Ensemble's latest offering is a gem of a production that will hopefully enjoy a long and fruitful post-Fringe life. The ensemble focuses its theatrical work on pressing social and political topics. *Flipside* takes on nothing less weighty than the failure of our nation's drug control policy, arguing that its current logic and implementation destroy far more lives than they help; remarkably, the production accomplishes this without lapsing into sermonizing or sentimentality.

Flipside manages to be poignant, heartbreaking, funny, musical, thought-provoking and thoroughly entertaining in 80 minutes. It examines the failed drug war through a microcosmic world shared by "Bo" (Chinaza Uche), a young African American heroin dealer trying to escape poverty and the crushing effects of his mother's mental illness, and Nick (Brian Jennings), a hardened and wizened undercover police officer who now questions the very work to which he has sacrificed his entire life. Both characters are pawns - of politicians, an overzealous and robotic police hierarchy, and a general public appeased by sensational drug busts that, in reality, do little to change the landscape.

Flipside's authenticity is admirable: to shape this convincing portrait of ruined lives, the ensemble spent three years working on Julia B. Rosenblatt's script and its creators (the entire ensemble had a hand in bringing it to life) conducted interviews and public forums with individuals on all sides of the drug war. Originally directed in HartBeat's home base of Hartford by Gregory R. Tate (who passed away in June of this year), this remounted production is incisively directed by Steven Ginsburg, who had worked closely with Mr. Tate for many years.

Against the backdrop of a Fringe festival that, more and more, seems to present so many predictable and gratuitous productions, my hope is that smart, piercing works like *Flipside* receive the attention they deserve. At HERE-Mainstage Theater. 80 minutes. [Coyle]