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New York Minutes

STREET HEAT DURING THE RNC

A Stage for 9/11 Grief

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"I think this commission should point fingers." So said a bereaved family member of a September 11 victim in response to 9/11 commissioner Richard Ben-Veniste's plea on the first day of hearings that the proceedings not "point fingers." That indignant quote was just one of many dramatized in *Testify*, a short reading of moving excerpts from the 9/11 commission hearings and the summary of the 9/11 commission report.

Testify was compiled and directed by Tomi Tsunoda of Brooklyn and performed by her theater company, breedingground, as part of the Unconvention, a theatrical response to the RNC. I went to see *Testify* just after Bush delivered his speech on Thursday night. (While the timing may have added poignancy to the subject it probably hurt attendance as the majority of likely audience members were either out protesting or home.)

Tsunoda said she chose the project in order to bring the wealth of information contained in the 9/11 transcripts to people who otherwise might never see it-- especially New Yorkers. While Tsunoda and the performers read the quotes straight, rather than attempting to impersonate the speakers, they managed to convey the fury and frustration of the 9/11 survivors and family members through their choice of evocative passages. For example, a trader from Cantor Fitzgerald, who was in the elevator when the first plane hit and was severely burned by a fireball and hot jet fuel, said of his dead colleagues: "They can no longer speak for themselves and I am left with the unchosen task of speaking for them. But neither they nor I have a choice."

Much of the reading, however, focused on the bureaucratic and political failures on every level up to and including September 11. Tsunoda said, "the families became experts because no one else was asking or answering the questions." So it is that a homemaker who lost her son recounts for the

New York Minutes features reports from the streets by a roving team of *Nation* writers. Through a revolving series of timely

dispatches, this special weblog highlights some of the hundreds of counterconvention protests and events greeting Bush and his supporters as they descend on New York City for the RNC.



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committee how the INS improperly granted visas to 15 of the 19 hijackers and the airlines allowed them on the plane with weapons. Victims' families even addressed such obscure questions as why Donald Rumsfeld's assistants did not tell him sooner about the attacks that day.

The calm and essentially non-partisan tone of the event was in stark contrast to the taunting and shouting between protesters and delegates that was going on just down the block after the end of the show. Cast and audience alike went down to join the commotion. While a sober consideration of the political and practical problems that exposed the nation to 9/11 may not get one's heart pounding the way yelling at a smug Republican does, the show was by far the more important and thoughtful demonstration.

Ben Adler

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