Newark this week

Newarkers from around the world act out their journeys

By Regionaid Roberts
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Ping Chung doesn’t know exactly how to categorize his “Undesirable Elements,” which is a theatrical performance, but not a play. He best describes it as “a work in progress.”

The latest progression took the piece to the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, where it was presented Saturday in the rehearsal room for a test run for future performances.

“There were no lights, no set elements, just five people sitting in chairs “weaving a multicultural tapestry” from their oral histories. Four of the five actors live in Newark. Their stories tell of their native lands and their ties to the city.

Chong, born in Tennessee and raised in New York’s Chinatown, created the “oral history project,” as he calls it, in 1983.

I was interested in making a theater piece using different languages,” said the theater director, who founded the Fijl Theatre Company, now the Ping Chong and Company, in 1975. While most of the work is in English, the actors recite poems in their native languages.

The piece already has been presented in 18 cities, including New York, Cleveland and Long Beach, Calif. The next stop after Newark is Chicago.

The Newark version features immigrants from Portugal, Ghana, Uganda and Chile. Each has a connection to Newark.

Although each city brings a different group of immigrants with different positions, they all share common problems in their new homes, said Chung. “When you leave your own place of birth, what do you keep and what do you give up? What does home mean? What does identity mean?”

For Newark, the “Undesirable Elements” were the 1967 riots. “I felt that the Newark riots were the essential part of this project in that it has haunted Newark since it happened and made real damage to the city,” said Chung. “It has taken time for it to revolve itself.”

For more than a month, the five members of “Undesirable Elements” met several times a week, with the script changing at each rehearsal.

Renee de Leon of the Philippines and a number of the original 1967 cast, is the only non-New Yorker in the latest version. Working in theater, she continues to live in New York.

This is such a rich community with a rich culture,” she said, explaining the insight she has gained by working with the Newark group.

Of the four other actors, Linda Rodrigues is the only native New Yorker. She was born in the Bronx, the daughter of Portuguese immigrants. A member of the Newark Public Library Board of Trustees, she is representing her first acting job.

Rodrigues tells the story of her father, Daniel Rodrigues, who left his home in Portugal in 1925 at age 12, never to return.

The poor boy went to Brazil to live with a cousin in search of a better life. Then in 1932 he stowed away on a ship headed to the United States. There were Portuguese people in this city called Newark,” Rodrigues said her father was told.

In Newark, Daniel would meet his future wife, Elvira, a native of Brazil whose parents were Portuguese. The irony of their meeting was that Daniel had been the milkman for Elvira’s family in Brazil.

In 1945, Daniel created the family business, Don’s Friendly Service, which originally sold ice, coal and kerosene and now sells fuel oil. He died in 1993.

Telling her own personal story, Rodrigues said she has remained in Newark “because I did not want to live in anonymity.”

“We’re the place I ever committed, a place where I didn’t have to make a difference.”

Cuban Carlos Davila also feels comfort and commitment to the city. A native of Cuba, he came to New Jersey almost 11 years ago from London.

He lived in various suburbs before settling in Newark. In 1993 he founded the Adriatic Globe Theatre.

“It’s a place where I can express my creativity,” he said of the city, describing it as a place of “detached sense of friendliness” where an outsider can feel at home.

In “Undesirable Elements,” Carlos Davila focuses on his homeland. The year is 1979 and he is 19 years old. “I never forget what happened. Something huge happened. We witnessed this day!”

On June 4, 1983, the former British Cold Coast colony went through a revolution. The dismantling of the government gave the countrymen a sense of freedom. Carlos Davila said, adding that they were given the responsibility of defining their own destinies.

The revolution not only changed Ghana, but Okai-Davies as well. He began a self-evaluation through the arts.

One of the actors, Patrick Samorju, has spent the shortest stay in the city. In 1994, he was doing his own entertainment new television show in his native Uganda. For the past year, he has pursued his acting career living in Newark, which puts him close to New York.

His life-changing story concerned not a revolution, but a relative. Samorju shares the life of his Uncle Willie through the storytelling tradition of his homeland.

His Uncle Willie was a musician who taught him lessons on life. “He was the best flute player I ever heard.”

After suffering a lung illness, Uncle Willie finally gave up on life. “He died in his sleep. But he lived life to the fullest.”

Oscar Marchand, who immigrated from Chile, is also in the cast. He is a counselor in the talent search project at Seton Hall University.
Chong was born in Toronto and raised in New York's Chinatown.

Writer/director Ping Chong oversees a rehearsal of "Undesirable Elements" at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. He describes his play as "weaving a multicultural tapestry" with five actors sitting in chairs. No lights, no set elements, just oral history.

Esmerelda Trinkel-Monsod Walker is one of five performers in Chong's work.