

STAGE REVIEW

# The power of ‘Hoops’

Eliana Pipes’s newest play celebrates the meaning of a certain type of jewelry.

By **Terry Byrne** Globe correspondent, Updated July 15, 2024, 5:09 p.m.



From left: Tiffany Santiago, Kaili Y. Turner, and Karimah Williams in "Hoops." KEN YOTSUKURA

The best theater delights and disarms, making space for us to question our assumptions and see things differently. Eliana Pipes’s “Hoops,” a Company One production at the [Strand Theatre through Aug. 10](#), accomplishes all that and more.

Part dance party, part expose, [“Hoops”](#) is always a celebration of individuality. The fashion accessory of the title serves as both an expression of confidence, visibility, and resilience for Black, brown, Asian, and Indigenous communities and a recognition of the hurdles they face in a society that dismisses them as “other.” Adapted from “The Hoops Project,” Milwaukee artist Nicole Acosta’s collection of portraits and stories of women wearing hoop earrings, Pipes’s script incorporates interviews with some of Acosta’s portrait subjects woven around dance breaks, rituals, and heartbreaking monologues.

“Hoops” opens with DJ Brandie Blaze introducing the story as a collection of “noises, journeys, moments in time.” Blaze serves as our guide, connecting the disparate stories with her original musical compositions that inspire Jenny Oliver’s delightfully loose choreography. Blaze is joined by the other members of the ensemble — Elijah Brown, Albamarina Nahar, Tiffany Santiago, Kaili Y. Turner, and Karimah Williams — each of whom bring distinct personalities and unique flair to the experiences of the many women they portray. Along the way, we meet mothers, daughters, young and older professional businesswomen, and academics for whom hoop earrings have become a necessary piece of armor they don before stepping out into the world.



From left: Kaili Y. Turner, Tiffany Santiago, and Brandie Blaze in "Hoops." KEN YOTSUKURA

In one hilarious scene, a thesis dissertation on the tradition of adornment in pre-colonial Africa is interrupted by another woman's insistence that the use of hoop earrings as statement pieces began with political and musical icons [Angela Davis](#), [Donna Summer](#), and Nina Simone. In another, we watch two girls negotiating over a swap of earrings they call "the sisterhood of the traveling hoops."

Hoop earrings also provide a connection to the mothers and grandmothers who came before, reminding and reinforcing the wearers' pride in who they are and where they came from. One woman wears her grandmother's hoops through chemotherapy, keeping her grandmother close to her during a time of fear and uncertainty.

Two tender stories chronicle hoops as generational wealth: one in which a mother turns her gold earring into money to help provide for her family, and another in which a daughter, separated from her mother during the pandemic, saves her money to



replace a pair of hoop earrings her mother lost.

The stories don't shy from more painful encounters, either, including overt sexism and discrimination that can lead to depression and despair. In one, a young woman describes the pressure to conform to professional attire that excludes large hoop earrings, only to discover that same fashion accessory is culturally appropriated, creating the perception that large hoops are "trendy on Barbie but trashy on me."

Director Tonasia Jones doesn't try to rein in the roller coaster of emotions and experiences "Hoops" portrays, allowing the action to reflect the storytellers' wide-ranging and often raw emotions. The scenes unfold in rapid-fire succession, with Peyton Tavares's simple set, dominated by the DJ booth on one side and a curved platform on the other, clearly delineating areas for intimate confessions or collective joy.



Brandie Blaze in her DJ booth in "Hoops." KEN YOTSUKURA

For all of the women we see in this 90-minute production, hoops provide both security and connection. One of the most empowering moments unfolds when a woman realizes she has shifted her perspective on hoops from serving as defensive armor to expressions of her individual style. And in the show’s penultimate scene, we meet a woman who reminds us that a hoop is a circle, and in many native cultures, it connects the basics of existence: sun, moon, earth, and seasons.

Like the circle, hoop earrings remind the wearers they are complete. Whether large or small, hoops serve as an expression of individuality and a demand to be seen. The production’s rousing ending will send you out of the theater with a new appreciation for the jewel behind a simple fashion accessory.

## **HOOPS**

By Eliana Pipes, adapted from “The Hoops Project” by Nicole Acosta. Directed by Tonasia Jones. Presented by Company One Theatre, in partnership with Boston Playwrights’ Theatre and the City of Boston’s Office of Arts and Culture. At the [Strand Theatre, through Aug. 10](#). Pay what you will.

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