

# Theater: Bootycandy Is Delicious, Frustrating Fun

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**BOOTYCANDY** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS**

Bootycandy -- a series of scathingly funny and sometimes disturbingly raw set pieces -- has the vital messiness and ping-ponging energy of a first play. That's both compliment and complaint since Bootycandy is not writer-director Robert O'Hara's debut as an author. It's often hilarious and deeply serious at the same time, a bracing combination that immediately makes O'Hara a playwright whose work I won't want to miss. But Bootycandy is so good in parts that it's frustrating to see what might easily have become a great play sprawling out into simply a good one. Still, the excellent cast and high humor make Bootycandy worth your time.

While it's tempting to emphasize the sketch aspect of the show, most of the pieces build on the story of Sutter, a gay kid growing up in a world that doesn't quite know what to think of a young black boy who likes boys. They have a cumulative impact and are generally the strongest element of the show. In the first scene, Sutter (the excellent Phillip James Brannon) is asking his mom (the very funny Jessica Frances Dukes) the meaning of words like "period" and "blow job" while getting ready to go shopping with her.

Later scenes show Sutter -- in full-on Michael Jackson regalia right down to one sparkly glove -- telling his parents a man followed him home from the library. What did you do, they attacked, soon coming up with a litany of things Sutter should do or not do (play sports, bend his knees when picking things up, avoid performing in musicals) that silently amounts to "not be so gay."

And in one of the show's freshest and most off-kilter scenes, Sutter is in a bar with a drunken childhood friend (Jesse Pennington) who has married his sister, describing what he'd like to do with him sexually. It's sexy, funny, amusing and disturbing all at once. A later scene in which Sutter and a friend play along with another drunken white man before pushing towards a violent climax is less convincing but equally adept at keeping the audience off balance.

Interspersed among these tales of Sutter come other, less specific sketches. Whether funny or not, they distract from the fascinating story at hand and ultimately detract from the power of Bootycandy. "Dreamin' in Church" is an obvious but amusing sketch about what might happen if the preacher addressed rumors about the sexual proclivities of the boys in the choir with righteous indignation and some high heels. Lance Coadie Williams -- the show's secret weapon as he portrays so many varied roles with such razor precision -- elevates the stereotype of a sermonizing man of the cloth with his gleeful attack. Williams is also wonderful as Sutter's low-key stepdad, drag queen pal and aging grandmother.

While "Dreamin' In Church" and another hilarious one with four women talking on the phone are funny on their own, the less germane set pieces ultimately prove detrimental. A skit about a roundtable of black playwrights has one modest joke (a clueless moderator) and the meta realization that some of the (lesser) sketches are supposedly written by the four playwrights depicted, including a goes-nowhere sketch about a guy talking a would-be mugger into leaving him alone. Least amusing of all is an "un-commitment" ceremony between two women that drags on and on and should obviously have been cut, despite the fact that the talented women of the show Benja Kay Thomas and Dukes as the couple Genitalia and Intifada give their all and do in fact squeeze some laughs out of it. The jokey names alone show how unworthy this piece is of O'Hara's talented mind.

Similarly, the meta device of the playwright's roundtable and even worse the tired conceit of stopping the show while the actors confront the "playwright" over his choices feel uninteresting.

On the other hand, O'Hara has great taste in collaborators. The cast is truly excellent from top to bottom, though Brannon's subtle work may get unfairly overshadowed by the scene-stealing hilarity offered up to the rest. Clint Ramos devised and excellent turntable set and great costumes that manage to be funny without being jokey. Other tech elements are superior as well, especially the hair and makeup of Dave Bova that works with the actors so well I almost expected more than five actors to come out and take a bow at the end.

Those bows are well deserved. It's simply that the core of Bootycandy is so fresh and vital, so delicious that we can't be bothered with anything less. Neither should O'Hara.

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