



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

Theater: Bringing Life To "The Death Of The Last Black Man;" Off-Key "Falsettos"

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THE DEATH OF THE LAST BLACK MAN IN THE WHOLE ENTIRE WORLD AKA THE NEGRO BOOK OF THE DEAD *** out of ****

FALSETTOS ** out of ****

THE DEATH OF THE LAST BLACK MAN IN THE WHOLE ENTIRE WORLD AKA THE NEGRO BOOK OF THE DEAD *** out of ****

SIGNATURE THEATRE

Here is an early play from Pulitzer Prize winner Suzan-Lori Parks; an earnest, audience-be-damned senior thesis of a play; a work filled with symbolism and repetition and meaning and import (all of it underlined) and how I shudder to think of sitting through a bad production of it. But it has intelligence and humor and a low-key revelation about what we are watching, for those who need *some* sort of plot. And it is positively blessed with a superb production here, filled with a talented cast, great craft and above all the razor sharp direction of Lileana Blain-Cruz. She brings this passionate cry from the heart vibrantly to life and turns what might have been a dirge into an elegy.

It's only 70 or so minutes long, but it's a long 70 minutes, dense with meaning and impact. The eleven members of the cast take their places and pose with purpose: an Egyptian Queen, a carnival barker, a share cropper, a little girl in her Sunday best, a homeless woman and so on. They declaim, they retort, they echo one another and then they start again. It is a funeral mass, a ceremony, a wake, a display of iconography, an intellectual dive into history transmuted into poetry and essay. And it's capped by a solo in which Ham (Patrena Murray) dazzles with virtuosic wordplay filled with begats and begets and these and those that would draw applause if you weren't already so hushed.

No, playwright Parks has not added any new text: the moment where a black man with a noose around his neck says “Can’t breathe” is just sadly topical. However, the words have been re-orchestrated and music and movement keeps the show flowing with ease. Just when you need a mental break, the cast dances in a circle or parades on and off or is placed here and there, popping up behind the slanted stage that keeps them forever off balance. It’s finely tuned. With little plot to hang onto, it’s all the more impressive that Blain-Cruz has kept her cast in such focus — at any moment, you can look at any character and know in your bones what they’re feeling and how they are engaged or not with what is happening.

Roslyn Ruff and Daniel J. Watts hold center stage the longest — her suffering woman and his perhaps-hanged man are deeply felt, no easy task when so many of their lines are abstract poetry or heavily symbolic. All credit to Watts for turning a gasping for breath into such bleak beauty and Ruff for turning a portentous breaking of eggs into the humorous and sad and rich moment Parks surely imagined in her head but has rarely seen captured so well onstage. The rest of the cast is uniformly strong, with my attention always drawn to Amelia Workman’s imperious and sexy Egyptian goddess and Jamar Williams showing excellent physical command of his body, subtle humor and about a hundred different ways of declaring “the death of the last black man in the whole entire world.”

Parks was reluctant to “look back,” to take part in reviving her earlier work, even though that work itself is forever looking back on history and culture in ways both rich and satisfying. Always intelligent, her work just gets better and better dramatically and it will be a pleasure to see more of them staged at Signature in the months to come. I just hope this experience informs and spurs along her work on the monumental nine part epic *When Father Comes Home From The Wars* because parts 4-9 can’t come soon enough.

FALSETTOS ** out of ****

WALTER KERR THEATRE

Oh dear. This is my first time seeing *Falsettos* and I fear — I know — I am making the same tired complaints that some had when it appeared on Broadway in 1992 or the original one acts popped up in 1981 and 1990 with music and lyrics by William Finn and a book he co-wrote with James Lapine. And yet, what else can I say? It stands firmly in the shadow of Sondheim, obviously indebted but never finding its own voice.

One can easily understand the impact it had when the one act *March Of The Falsettos* debuted in the Reagan era: a play about a married man who leaves his wife for his gay lover, only to see his wife and therapist get together and somehow they all work together to raise his son? Its mere existence was surely exciting.

Falsettoland sadly updated their story, this time with the inevitable spectre of AIDS pushing its way in. Again, the subject matter alone thrilled.

Nonetheless, time has not been kind to *Falsettos*. My guest who saw the original insisted that the bar has been lowered so much for Broadway musicals that he'd argue this show now seems a damn sight better than it did back then. I can't say, but I do know that the characters barely register as more than archetypes — the lesbians next door are barely more than just that. Our protagonists Marvin and his new love Whizzer feed off arguing but I have to be told this, not shown. Marvin's ex-wife insists she should hate Whizzer but just can't and again we have to be told that since we have barely seen them together and can't imagine why she can't dislike him anyway. (There's nothing irresistible about this guy, especially to his ex-wife.) When Marvin's son wants to ask Whizzer if he should go to a therapist, we are a little surprised since they haven't said boo to one another yet, much less given us the idea that the kid likes him.

Now it has a shaky revival, with actors that mostly seem far from ideal for their roles, a set that has one strong idea and then abandons it and an overall color scheme that puts you to sleep.

Christian Borle stars as Marvin, the apparently selfish man who has left his wife for his lover and kind of drives everyone around him nuts. He feels tamped down and unspecific, a tad unusual for an actor who usually fills up the stage with ease and confidence. Whizzer is played by Andrew Rennels, the appealing star of *The Book Of Mormon*. Whizzer is meant to be infuriatingly charming, the sort of man who finds monogamy tiresome until he suddenly finds himself in love with a man who is deeply involved with his ex-wife and son. I take it Whizzer is meant to be a boy toy with a mind of his own, but I couldn't really get a handle on him — is Marvin driving him away, is Whizzer just not ready to settle down, is he selfish himself or merely young? Stephanie J. Block is the ex-wife with low self-esteem and she comes off best — “I'm Breaking Down” is clearly the show's highlight and Brock does her level best, though it always seems more like the *idea* of a show-stopping comic number rather than the real deal.

Little of the action makes sense. Everyone is desperate for the son Jason (a fine Anthony Rosenthal) to see a therapist, though I'm not quite sure why. (Because he prefers playing chess to playing baseball? Then I need therapy too.) And Act Two has the very unfortunate effect of playing today as cliché by insisting that dying can ennoble everyone. At least the songs got a little stronger. Act One has almost nothing of note beyond “I'm Breaking Down,” with “March Of the Falsettos” almost bizarrely odd. But act two boasts of several tunes that are strong melodically and pretty memorable, including the kid's “Miracle of Judaism,” Marvin's love song “What More Can I Say?” and the amusing tune “The Baseball Game” (“we're watching Jewish kids who can't play baseball play baseball”) far and away the winner. One can see here the talent of Finn developing towards his big hit *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*.

The set by David Rockwell is fitfully bold. Act one begins with a big grey cube that actors slowly pull apart, moving the pieces here and there to form a table or couch or chairs and so on. Fine, these folks are building their lives, creating a home. It didn't overwhelm but it didn't distract. Unfortunately, the combination of the sets (including rather mundane backdrops that modestly raise and lower a NYC skyline) and lighting and costumes is dull and grey to a fault. And it felt abandoned in act two, where a more permanent home set and hospital room bed pushed aside the grey cube conceit for good.

Surely a better case could be made for this work. But nothing can change lyrics that strain to rhyme and stop you dead in your tracks time and again. It was noble and ground-breaking and intellectually inclined and that's more than most musicals can say. Unfortunately, it will have to be enough.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

Skeleton Crew ***

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

The Grand Paradise ***

Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2

Something Rotten ***

Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2

Broadway & The Bard * 1/2

Prodigal Son **

A Bronx Tale: The Musical **

Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **

Nice Fish ***

Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***

Hughie **

Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2

Straight ** 1/2

Eclipsed ***

Red Speedo ***

The Royale ** 1/2

Boy ****

The Robber Bridegroom ***

Hold On To Me, Darling ***

Blackbird ** 1/2

Disaster! *

The Effect ** 1/2

Dry Powder ** 1/2

Head Of Passes ** 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2

The Crucible (w Ben Whishaw) ***

Bright Star **

She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***

Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ***

RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2

Nathan The Wise ** 1/2

The Father **

American Psycho **

Waitress ** 1/2

Fully Committed ** 1/2

Long Day's Journey Into Night ***

A Streetcar Named Desire (w Gillian Anderson) ***

Tuck Everlasting **

War **

Paramour * 1/2

Troilus & Cressida (Shakespeare in the Park) ** 1/2

Cats (on Broadway, 2016 revival) **

The Encounter (Complicite on Broadway) **

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (at Two River Theater) ***

Oh, Hello ** 1/2

Heisenberg ** 1/2

The Dudleys ** 1/2

Holiday Inn * 1/2

A Life ** 1/2

Love Love Love ** 1/2

The Radicalization Of Rolfe (FringeFest NYC) ** 1/2

Sweat * 1/2

The Death of The Last Black Man In The Whole Entire World aka The Negro Book Of The Dead ***

Falsettos **

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.