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PUBLIC THEATER

The Public is the place to be for theater-lovers in New York right now. Last week they premiered [The Fortress Of Solitude, the best new musical of the year](#). And now they're debuting Father Comes Home From The Wars, Parts 1, 2 & 3, which [ranks with An Octoroon](#) as the best new play of the year.

It is bold, hugely entertaining, moving and thrillingly ambitious. Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks bids fair to create a sprawling multi-part epic to plant alongside August Wilson's monumental Century Cycle, one of the great achievements in theater history. Parts 4 through 9 (? or more?) can't come fast enough for me.

Some of these sections and others have been workshopped before and seen by friends and the entire work here is presented by the Public and the American Repertory Theater. But this is my first experience seeing any portion. Tipping its hat to The Odyssey, what we have here are three parts set during and after the Civil War. In Part 1: A Measure Of A Man, the slave Hero (Sterling K. Brown) is debating whether to follow his master into battle. Even the suggestion that Hero might have a choice in the matter speaks to the nuance and richness of the world and characters Parks creates. Hero is owned by the Colonel (Ken Marks) and feels a bond of sorts with the man after a lifetime of forced servitude. He wants his freedom of course, but on his own terms, preferably being freed by the Colonel for his valued work. Running away? That would be akin to stealing, he thinks.

His best friend is the smart and caustic Homer (Jeremie Harris) who did try to run away, was caught and paid the price by having his foot chopped off. Hero also has a wife in Penny (Jenny Jules). Penny desperately wants Hero to stay at home. His father figure The Oldest Old Man (Peter Jay Fernandez) understands the call of battle and wanting to be tested and measured in the crucible of war...even if it is fighting on the side of the South. And the other slaves are placing their bets as to which way Hero will go.

In this impeccable production directed by Jo Bonney, the performance style of Part 1 (and Part 2: A Battle In The Wilderness) is slightly stylized. Actors often address their lines to the audience as they move about the intimate upstairs space where we are seated on three sides of the stage. Neil Patel's scenic design includes a rough cabin where the slaves live and most of the action takes place in front, with a ramp along the back where characters often enter and leave in a modestly ceremonial style. Like An Octoroon -- which also dives deep into the racism tangled up in the DNA of the US -- Father Comes Home From The Wars derives an oratorical power by drawing on theatrical history as well, from 1800s melodramas where actors often addressed their thoughts to the audience all the way back to the storytelling of Homer himself.

None of this is precious or stilted. It's just the way the story is told and soon feels perfectly natural. The costumes are a low-key jumble of eras, never calling attention to themselves but unmooring the action from a

strictly antebellum world. And Hero vacillates like Hamlet, determining to head off when talking to the Old Man and promising to stay when talking to Penny. Homer, his friend, stirs up the pot, angry with Hero over a betrayal, attracted to Penny himself and a truth-teller, which is always a dangerous thing.

In Part 2: A Battle In The Wilderness, Homer is with the Colonel. Separated from their troops, they are laying low for a while while holding a Yankee officer (Louis Cancelmi) prisoner, a bounty that is sure to impress the Colonel's fellow rebels and earn him a medal or promotion. The slaves' quarters simply lifts up into the rafters and they introduce a rough wooden cage where the prisoner is kept to set the scene.

This is where the complex, painfully twisted relationship between master and slave is brought to life. The Colonel wants to think he admires and trusts Hero, though of course you can't admire someone and keep them in bondage. Still, the Colonel boasts of Hero's value to his prisoner and a complicated dance ensues. The prisoner doesn't want to enrage the Colonel but also can't bring himself to denigrate a fellow human being. Hero is proud of his skills and his service, but doubt is growing as to whether the Colonel will ever keep his promise and free Hero after the war is over. (He's broken that promise before.) And the Colonel wants to overwhelm this Yankee with his arguments, insisting they're not that different after all.

A simple act -- sending Hero to get wood and water -- is fraught with tension. Will he run away? Will he return? Will the prisoner's mild taunting drive the Colonel to kill him or is Smith too valuable to throw away? And which troops will be near them first: the Rebels or the far superior forces of the Yankees?

The entire evening of three sections ran some 170 minutes. But Parts 1 and 2 felt of such a piece that they would have been a wholly satisfying evening on their own. The devastating climax of Part 2 told us everything we needed to know about Hero, about how broken he was inside.

Part 3 was a different kettle of fish entirely. It begins with a lengthy monologue by Hero's dog (Jacob Ming-Trent). A very funny, very unexpected, hilariously out there monologue by Hero's dog, to be exact. In an earlier incarnation, the dog was played by a white woman, raising some interesting subtext. That's not present here and at first the mere fact of this raucous beginning throws you off. Ultimately, we understand why Hero's dog takes front and center, mirroring in his relationship the one Hero had with the Colonel. It's a sobering, saddening, but insightful link that drives home the awful nature of Hero's life and how it can break a man down.

Parks illuminates the unbidden ways that human beings living and working cheek by jowl will become enmeshed emotionally. But she demolishes any remaining vestige of the ugly lie of darkies loving their master and raising their children with joy, of slaves being practically one of the family. She does it not by turning the Colonel into a moustache-twirling villain but by making him all too human. Along with the conflicted and, yes, heroic figure of Hero.

She's certainly blessed with an excellent cast and creative team. Steven Bargonetti is an excellent, low-key presence as a musical chorus, beginning the show with some songs, providing subtle instrumental accompaniment throughout as he observes the action or even wanders amidst it at times. All the cast is superior and funny and true. Fernandez -- aided by the hair, wig and makeup design of Rob Greene and J. Jared Jana -- is a trembling, tremor-filled Oldest Old Man of quiet strength. Harris immediately heightens the tension whenever he's present with his razor-sharp attitude and Jules is marvelous as the woman who loves Hero completely but is drawn to Homer in her despair.

Marks is so good as the Colonel, so quietly nasty and self-satisfied and yet human as he preens in his feathered hat, tries to match wits with his prisoner and asks forgiveness of Hero for striking him, even though of course he has the legal right to beat, scar and kill Hero whenever he wants. The moment when he orders Hero on the "auction block" to determine his price and orders the man to drop his pants and Hero refuses? It ripples with tension. I've said little about Cancelmi as the prisoner Smith because it would spoil plot twists to discuss him in full. He has a sly intelligence and the roundelay between the three is a high point of the evening. Part 2 with

these three actors firing on all cylinders is as good as it gets.

And Brown is simply tremendous as Hero. He's magnetic but understated, delivering the full tortured humanity of this man in a way that never softens or excuses the mistakes he makes and his perhaps frustrating inability to do what we so desperately want him to do (fight back! kill! run away!) as a hero.

Part 3: The Union Of My Confederate Parts feels quite different from the more stylistically similar Parts 1 and 2. Until we can see the work as a whole, it's hard to know how this fits in. Perhaps other parts embrace other styles and tones as well. Perhaps Part 3 is an outlier. I don't know but I do know I can't wait to see all the pieces of this work fall into place. I'd call it a puzzle but it's anything but. As it stands now, Parks is assured of having created her most vivid and satisfying work since the Pulitzer Prize-winning Topdog/Underdog.

DISGRACED ** 1/2 out of ****
LYCEUM THEATRE

Unlike a movie or book or album or TV show, you get precious few chances to see even the best production more than once. Snap judgements must be made and once the show is gone you can never return to it again, at least not that particular production with that particular cast. So when you feel indifferent to a play that wins the Pulitzer Prize, it's only natural to wonder if the fault is yours or they made a mistake.

They made a mistake. This isn't an entirely new production of Disgraced by Ayad Akhtar. It is essentially the same as the one that opened to great acclaim at Lincoln Center almost exactly two years ago, albeit with an almost all new cast (the lone, welcome holdover is Karen Pittman as Jory). With direction again by Kimberly Senior, a set design by John Lee Beatty and strong actors that do the work justice, it's top notch all around. The only problem is the play.

Essentially [everything I felt two years ago](#) is reinforced by seeing Disgraced again with a new, fine cast. This work of provocation is meant to excite and arouse your anger, subverting expectations and sending you out of the theater arguing about the issues raised. It's like a Yasmina Reza play with more overt political overtones, classy button pushing for folks who smugly watch The Daily Show and believe they are beyond prejudice or racism or stereotypes. Not so fast, says Akhtar.

The story is straight-forward, a tale of assimilation and race and culture. When are you embracing the culture you live in and when are you merely rejecting your roots? Who among new immigrants is proud to be an American and who is just ashamed of their past?

Amir (a handsome, smooth Hari Dhillon) thinks he knows. He's a high-powered attorney who expects to be named partner at his law firm any day now. His beautiful, blonde white wife Emily (Gretchen Mol) is an artist who finds inspiration in the mosaic artwork of the Islamic faith and they banter charmingly about what it means to "submit" to something greater than yourself. Amir's nephew seems one step further into America. He is religious where Amir is most definitely not. But the nephew (Danny Ashok) has also changed his name to Abe so he can better fit in. On the other hand, the nephew wants Amir to help represent his imam, a man being held and questioned about possible ties to terrorism. It's a travesty of justice, the kid is sure, and with the added moral weight of his wife weighing down on him, Amir agrees to attend a hearing.

Then all hell breaks out. Amir is quoted in the New York Times in a way that clearly makes it seem he and his law firm are representing this potential terrorist. His world crumbles. He's questioned about his background by the heads of his firm. (Why did he say his parents were from India when his mother was born in Pakistan? Why did he change his name to one that sounded more Indian than Muslim? Why does his boss think Amir is Hindu?) His mentor won't return his calls. Abe is going off the rails too. And it all explodes at a dinner party three months later. Emily is getting great news: the husband of Jory (Amir's best friend at work) is the Jewish art dealer Isaac (Josh Radnor) and he is putting Emily's work in a major new show. But political correctness falls by the wayside

as Amir and Isaac spar over 9-11 and terrorism and how they really feel deep, deep down inside when they're being honest. Don't ever try to be honest when you're on your third drink.

The problems of the play are many. Except for Jory, every character "reveals" their true nature or suddenly acts entirely opposite to everything we know about them. One character can display a dark side. Another might change dramatically. But when they all do it, it's not insight but just cheap theatrics, the sign of a playwright toying with his creations to get a rise out of the audience.

Amir's defining characteristic is his complete and utter rejection of Islam because of the ugly way he saw it practiced by his family. In the best moment of the show, Amir tells his nephew how the first girl he ever loved was Jewish and when his mother discovered this, she berated him and literally spat in his face saying he'd be dead to her if she ever caught him speaking to a Jew again like that. To his shame, Amir turned around and spat on this first crush. So now he rejects the faith entirely and takes issue with anyone -- even his wife -- who tries to find some nuance and suggest the billions of people who are Muslim might not all be fundamentalist hate-mongers. He'll have none of it. But what does Amir really think? Well, he can't help feeling a blush of pride on 9-11? Really? An act that seemed to confirm his life-long rejection of Islam was actually a moment of joy for him? People can have complex emotions but none of that comes across when Amir reveals what he "really" feels.

Everyone else follows suit. His wife's entire artistic life is wrapped up in how the artwork of the Islamic world is a vibrant part of cultural history and should be embraced and drawn upon. Yet at the end of the play she blithely dismisses that as naive. Isaac the art dealer denounces prejudice but of course deep down he thinks of Amir and all Muslims as animals. (Said in anger of course, after being spat upon, but it's a very deliberate revelation rather than the more natural or obvious reaction of cursing or punching Amir out.) Even the nephew Abe is entirely defined by his desire to embrace his faith but assimilate...until he radically doesn't any more.

It's all so tiresome. When characters aren't reversing everything we know about them the play is piling on revelations about affairs and office politics until it feels more like a soap than a drama with major issues on its mind. And of course they push our buttons even further than that, in a twist that is entirely unearned.

Don't fault the cast. Pittman remains the main laugh getter thanks to a spot-on dry delivery and a character that alone of them all remains true to herself. Mol is fine as the wife though it's hard for her to maintain our sympathy after a major dramatic turn when -- bizarrely - the couch she's on slowly floats offstage. Whatever drama they hoped to evoke is undercut by that odd, distracting choice of stagecraft utterly out of sorts with the rest of the show. Ashok too is fine with his inconsistent part. Radnor disappears entirely into the role of Isaac, a strong accomplishment for someone who has been seduced by the easy rhythms of a sitcom for nine years. And Dhillon commits to his part with admirable dedication.

It's the play that lets them down. It's far from a disgrace -- Akhtar does truly want to tackle the endlessly fascinating issues of racism and assimilation and faith in the modern world. But if he can't have faith in the characters he has started to create before undermining their integrity, how can we have faith in him?

THEATER OF 2014

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