

Theater: Mild Threepenny; Blazin' Raisin for Denzel

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THE THREEPENNY OPERA * 1/2 out of ****

A RAISIN IN THE SUN *** 1/2 out of ****

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ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY AT LINDA GROSS THEATER

I love The Threepenny Opera even though I've never seen a good production. I grew up with the Broadway cast album from 1954 featuring Lotte Lenya (I think Rolling Stone, of all places, had it on a list of great albums -- a token nod to musical theater -- and I got hooked.) Kander and Ebb clearly loved Kurt Weill and I've often imagined it as the Cabaret or Chicago of its day, a gloriously sleazy work filled with humor and pathos and cynicism. (Cynicism ages much better than optimism, Rodgers and Hammerstein excepted.)

A great production of it will feel completely of the moment, as if it were composed yesterday, not in 1928. Despite formidable talent on stage, the Atlantic Theater's new staging of this show (the version with English adaptation by Marc Blitzstein) sadly does not. Some shows immediately create a sense of place and time. Others feel like people playing dress up and never let you forget for a moment this isn't real. The great Martha Clarke directed and choreographed and I fear when so much of a show is unfocused and lacking in a guiding spirit that the blame must fall squarely on her shoulders. When the chorus and almost every minor part feels slapdash and unconvincing, something has gone terribly wrong.

This missed opportunity presents a work that feels like a cross between a revue and a fully written musical. Macheath (Michael Park) -- that powerful player in the underworld -- has returned and he's soon wooing and marrying Polly (Laura Osnes), with the minor inconveniences of a pregnant wife (Lilli Cooper) and the love of every prostitute in town including Jenny (Sally Murphy) hardly worth bothering about.

Macheath fears no one (he has the police commissioner in the palm of his hand) but he hasn't counted on Polly's scheming parents (F. Murray Abraham and Mary Beth Peil). They're soon bribing whores and conning the cops into arresting Macheath and before you know it he's got a rope around his neck and scant hope of survival.

The production of a show so cheap and lacking in resources it is called a "threepenny" opera is meant to be tatty. But nothing here from the set design to the costumes to the lighting that (intentionally?) sometimes struggles to spotlight a singer) feels clever or inspired. It would be unfair to list all the work that falls short, since Clarke is clearly the one that failed them, though Abraham and Peil seem especially at sea here.

But certain moments let you glimpse the greatness that can be had. On the plus side, Michael Park (forever Jack Snyder of ATWL but with a growing and impressive body of theater work) has the presence and oily charm for Macheath. If nothing else, we understand the sexual heat that has drawn Polly away from her family. As Polly, Osnes seems indifferent and above her doomed romance. It's not quite clear what's driving her beyond lust or why her parents seem so determined to thwart it. (Is it a question of thieves trusting other thieves least of all?)

But boy can Osnes sing -- her version of "Barbara Song" after their wedding was inspired and moody and fascinating and vivid, everything most of the show was not. Similarly, Murphy shone during "Pirate Jenny," a

number which -- along with "Ballad Of Mack The Knife" -- has become a standard. It was the best sort of character-driven performance that shocked you awake with her anger, bitter dreams of revenge and illusory importance.

Far more often, we are bored, ho-humming as chorus members get it off in faux sexual desire during big numbers, with couples and threesomes and same-sex pairings that ultimately feel timid and dull. Some parts were broadly comic, others felt like sketch comedy and still others strove for realism, with the overriding sense that no one was on the same page. This Threepenny felt short not just of "funds" as the title demands but of imagination, which its rich material deserves.

A RAISIN IN THE SUN *** 1/2 out of ****
ETHEL BARRYMORE THEATRE

The top-notch cast in this revival of A Raisin In The Sun is unassailable. It's a shame the great Diahann Carroll didn't feel up to making this a well-deserved victory lap. But surely she along with everyone else will be cheering along the marvelous LaTanya Richardson Jackson, who has blown me away in Joe Turner's Come And Gone and other shows. Now Jackson is 14 years younger than Carroll but with a dash of grey in her hair, I had no problem picturing this contemporary of star Denzel Washington as his mother. It's the theater! You wouldn't cast her to be his mother in a movie or TV show, but onstage? Why not?

Of course that brings me to Washington. I called him the star, but he's part of an ensemble here, too smart to tilt a show in his direction when it has so many great roles for women. Now he's about 20 years too old to play a 35- or 40-year-old man... on film. On stage? I never thought about it for a second, or at least I wouldn't have if others hadn't brought it up. That's the beauty of theater where a young man can play an old man... or an old woman... or a cat, for that matter. In this realistic setting, of course, the demands are different and Washington meets them with ease. He's a driven, hard-working man hitting his middle years, dreaming of more for himself and his family, aged perhaps a little before his time and determined to take a chance on himself rather than just settling like his father and his father's father. At least, that's how he sees it.

Like all classics, Lorraine Hansberry's Raisin feels utterly relevant for today, with working class people realizing no matter how hard they struggle, they're falling further and further behind. Walter Lee Younger (Washington) is a chauffeur, his wife Ruth (a terrific Sophie Okonedo) is worn out with worry, his sister Beneatha (Anika Noni Rose) is determined to be a doctor and shares a room with their mom Lena (Jackson) while his son Travis (Bryce Clyde Jenkins) sleeps on the couch.

It's so exhausting just getting up in the morning (you have to race the neighbors for a chance to get into the communal bathroom) that it's a lot easier to see where you're not headed to than how far you've come. But help is on the way: thanks to a life insurance policy that kicked in when Walter Lee's father drove himself into an early grave with work (there's a bittersweet reward for you), Lena is about to receive a check for the life-changing sum of \$10,000. Walter Lee wants to open a liquor store with two other friends, Ruth can't help being drawn to Lena's suggestion they buy a home of their own and everyone but Walter Lee knows some of that money will definitely be sending Beneatha to medical school.

Here's an interview with Denzel Washington on ABC:

It's a rock solid play, classic in its structure and setting and prescient in so many ways. Hansberry died way too young at the age of 34, but she left behind a substantial body of work, not least of which is this her most popular work. Assimilation, a burgeoning sense of female empowerment, the insidious, self-fulfilling effects of grinding economic hardship and addiction, each new generation's almost desperate need to reject the one before as they forge ahead -- all of it is here in a richly rewarding piece that is first and foremost a gripping story.

Director Kenny Leon doesn't miss a beat here, blessed with a major work and a cast to deliver it. Tricky smaller

parts like Beneatha's well-to-do boyfriend George (Jason Dirden) and the hard to pull off student from Nigeria Joseph Asagai (a very good Sean Patrick Thomas) come off perfectly. David Cromer also strikes just the right note of friendly prejudice as Karl Lindner, the white representative of the neighborhood association the Youngers are moving to who wants to welcome them with a check and a request to move right away again. And I'm not one for entrance applause, but it was fun to see the remarkable Stephen McKinley Henderson receive it for his small turn as Bobo, a friend of Walter Lee's with some bad news to impart.

But it's Walter Lee and the three women in his life who garner our attention most of all. Jackson is wonderfully grounded as Lena, amusing as she stumbles to chat with Asagai in a way that won't embarrass her daughter and fiery when reacting to that same daughter's proclamation that God is dead. As that burgeoning atheist (which Hansberry was as well), Rose is wonderful. If I were a theater actress about her same age, I'd truly hate Rose because at this point she must be getting every role even remotely suited to her. In a marvelous Broadway debut, the Oscar nominated Okonedo (the film *Hotel Rwanda*) is taut and tired, so believably exhausted by fighting with her husband and trying to keep the peace that we're not surprised when she collapses - we're surprised she was able to stay standing for so long.

And Washington long ago proved he was born to the stage. His Walter Lee is proud and determined and a little foolish and a little too proud at times and funny and smart and wholly human. His drunken scene is a standout, not because it's so funny (which it is) but because the fierce desperation he feels is so painfully present at the same time. Only two things are lacking on his resume: more movies about Easy Rawlins and even more theater.

They weren't messing around here. Wynton Marsalis helped select the musical cues played at certain moments of the show. An interview by Studs Terkel is playing when the audience enters the theater. I'm not sure I needed the glimpse of blue sky at the finale, but the set design by Mark Thompson was otherwise flawless. (I loved how Jackson as Lena slipped into blackness at the end of the first act.) The lighting by Brian Macdevitt, costumes by Ann Roth and sound design by Scott Lehrer never called attention to themselves, which is sometimes the best compliment one can pay.

The same can be said of Leon's direction and Hansberry's writing, both of which are confident and true. To think in a few weeks, Leon will be directing a new musical inspired by the poetry of Tupac Shakur, another artist taken to soon. Leon looks set to be having a heck of a year.

Here's Langston Hughes reading the poem that inspired the title of this play.

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