

# Theater: Stephen McKinley Henderson Front and Center...Finally

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**BETWEEN RIVERSIDE AND CRAZY** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY AT LINDA GROSS THEATER**

Over the years, whenever actor Stephen McKinley Henderson has stepped out on stage, I would break out into a smile or at least relax, contentedly assured I'd be seeing at least one terrific performance that evening. Playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis is no fool. He probably felt much the same thing and determined to write a play for Henderson, giving this talent the showcase he so richly deserves. What playwright worth their salt wouldn't want to create a role for one of the best actors around?

On that level alone, Guirgis has succeeded admirably. This is no showboating, flashy attempt to chew the scenery. Henderson simply does what he always does: deliver a performance that is inherently truthful, funny, convincing and compelling. Frankly, every time he talks Henderson is the center of attention anyway. It's just here, he gets to do it a lot more than usual.

Somehow, I've been cheated out of seeing many of the plays of Guirgis, including his long, rich collaboration with the late Philip Seymour Hoffman. I finally got on board with *The Motherfucker With The Hat* and now this. Based on that admittedly small sample, Guirgis has a gift for distinctive characters, very funny dialogue and plots that are shambling and rambling, with the dangerous feeling they could pinwheel into all sorts of directions. This messy exuberance is surely a key part of their charm.

That's certainly true here. Walter Washington (Henderson) is a 30-year veteran of the NYPD. His career ended abruptly when Washington was off duty in a seedy bar when a rookie cop plugged him full of holes. Impotent and house bound, Washington is elderly but feisty, kept alive in part by an eight year legal battle with the city over a settlement for his injuries. He's also battling the landlord since Washington enjoys that New York dream of a huge, many-roomed apartment with a lease that drives real estate agents to drink in frustration.

Yes, he's got a son (Ray Anthony Thomas) out of jail who seems to be backsliding into petty crime, filling up their apartment with stolen goods. Yes, his son Junior has a dippy girlfriend Lulu (Rosal Colon) who is sexy but probably not the ideal mate. Yes, his son's dim-witted but sweet pal Oswaldo (Victor Almanzar) is also crashing at their home. Yes, he's got an old partner Det. O'Connor (Elizabeth Canavan) and her rising star on the force fiancée Lt. Caro (Michael Rispoli) begging him to settle with the city and put this lawsuit behind him. But by god he's also got rent control!

The play begins simply with Washington in the kitchen of his home, sitting in the wheelchair of his late wife. He's sharing breakfast and a morning chat with the good-hearted but clearly lost Oswaldo, a guy who clearly relishes Washington as a father figure. Guirgis immediately establishes everything we need to know about Washington. He's savvy but not cynical, willing to lend a hand to this lost soul. He's also funny and sharp, even as his world starts to close in on him. Whether it's a lady from the local church paying a visit or his old pal from the force coming to push him towards a settlement, Washington is more than capable of taking them on. The city of New York? Bring it on. God? He's got a few things he'd like to tell the Man.

You get the sense all these battles are a better tonic for Washington than any medicine and a lot more welcome

to him than a check from the NYPD. But the pressure is building. Lulu claims she is pregnant. The notices from the landlord are coming with increasing frequency. And the city is starting to play hardball. They want the lawsuit to go away and Lt. Caro talks sense while putting on the squeeze: if Washington doesn't settle, he'll get nothing, the city will arrest his son for trafficking in stolen goods, that bust will mean Washington has broken the terms of his lease and he'll lose his home and he'll end up on the street with nothing.

The characters are so rich and the writing so fresh, *Between Riverside and Crazy* might have veered off into high comedy or wounding tragedy. That's surely a credit to Guirgis and the smooth direction of Austin Pendleton. Where we end up at the end is in fact highly unsatisfying on several levels, but it doesn't detract from the pleasures of getting there and a generally excellent cast.

The notable weak link is Thomas as the son who shivers in the shadow of his father. It's a mealy-mouthed character but Thomas stumbled over a number of his lines on the night I attended and never brought Junior to life. In contrast, Almanzar is a treat as Junior's pal. He immediately established a believable chemistry with Henderson, whether spouting off truisms about nutrition, awkwardly asking if he's getting in the way or shamefully relating the nasty comments of his own father. He's so vivid that while you feel Oswaldo is essentially a likable fellow you're also ready to believe when he explodes in anger.

Truly, everyone is strong, from the slyly sexy Colon, to Rispoli's excellent turn as Caro to Liza Colon-Zayas's scene-stealing work as the church lady. And of course Henderson is at the heart of it all, exuding intelligence, stubbornness, fierce pride, regret and decency, even as the play seems to undercut the character he's created.

The legal battle with the city was always a little confusing for me since so much remained unsaid. Washington was in a seedy bar cops were told to avoid. Fine. But even if he was out of uniform and located in a crack den and getting serviced by a hooker, a rookie cop is still not allowed to shoot you six times when unprovoked. The idea that the city would play hardball with a 30 year veteran of the police force beggars belief. Maybe if we knew Washington was asking for an insane amount of money (say \$100 million) and refused generous reasonable offers we'd understand the stand-off better. As it is, he seems too smart for such a thing, so they seem to be nickel and diming him. But that too is hard to believe and makes the stand-off difficult to understand.

Matters are not helped on the technical side. The sound by Ryan Rumery does its job invisibly (as sound design should), but his music is another matter. Before each act, we hear some overly somber tune, essentially a modestly moody piece repeated over and over again, akin to the film score of Clint Eastwood for *Mystic River* that belabors one tune to death. That's immediately trumped when the show opens by bizarrely jaunty music that seems discordant with the scene-setting music we were hearing and the show that has begun. The second act music is more anonymous but no more effective.

It's a minor cavil since the music plays a minor role. Far more jarring is the ugly set of Walt Spangler. It's an overly elaborate, rotating beast that calls undue attention to itself. Oddly, before the show begins it's displayed in the least attractive manner possible, with the set stopped halfway between one room and the next. The result is that everything looks ugly and off-kilter and not in any meaningful or symbolic sense. Confusion grows since virtually the entire first act takes place in the kitchen, aside from a very brief scene in the living room that might just as easily have taken place back in the kitchen. The second act takes place in the bedroom and kitchen, though again, the bedroom scene might just as easily have been moved back to the kitchen. Further confusing matters is the visibility of the bathroom which is front and center when the bedroom scene takes place. You keep waiting for the action to move there but it never does. There are two modest scenes that take place on a balcony (or the roof, I was never quite clear).

Now things change at the last minute and scenes are cut, so you can't criticize a set for being built and not used. But this rotating, unattractive, calling attention to itself set is indeed a problem. The show could have easily been set entirely in the kitchen with a small space on stage for the roof scenes. Does it matter? Of course. Switching

scenes from room to room when it's not necessary is dramatically unhelpful. So is glimpsing rooms and sets that never come into play. Does the design give a helpful sense of the sprawling, valuable real estate Washington has lucked into? No, in fact, it looks a little rundown and unprepossessing. Here's hoping they consider rewriting the play as a one set piece for future productions that could save on money and have who knows what impact on the show dramatically.

But the real (albeit modest) problems come at the end of the show. If you have the chance to see it, by all means stop reading and go -- it's a sharp evening of theater with a clutch of very good to great actors. If you've already seen it or won't be able to, here are my issues with the end.

### SPOILER SPOILER SPOILER

Numerous big issues remain to be resolved at the end: Oswaldo turned violent and attacked Washington for some money. Lulu is pregnant. The city is pressing our hero to resolve his lawsuit. And the church lady proved to be far more sexy than one would expect, combining some hands-on faith healing of the sexual variety with a plea for money.

After a telling revelation, Washington plays his own hardball with Lt. Caro. All he wants in return for making the lawsuit go away is -- essentially -- the engagement ring Caro gave to his old partner. They're aghast of course but we immediately sense that Caro will do it. Making this happen is more important to him for his career than any sentimentality over a ring. Maybe Washington is trying to impart one more lesson to his old partner, who he trained? I and my guest both imagined he would get the ring and immediately hand it back to her, making Caro look like a schmuck. But whether she learned anything about her fiancée or took it to heart is left unsaid, making this demand a little petty and odd. Which would be fine, except that probably wasn't the intent.

More absurdly, the play proffers a circular, too neat resolution for the younger people. Oswaldo is back living in the apartment, a revelation that is confusing and hard to swallow on its own. Washington might have forgiven him, but to invite him back into his house? No. Now Lulu is pregnant for real...and Oswaldo is her lover. Meanwhile, Junior is playing a puffed-up version of his dad and accepts all this blithely. None of this makes any sense, was foreshadowed in any way (we saw no sexual tension between Oswaldo and Lulu) or is satisfying in the least.

To top it off, Washington is suddenly dressed in a natty suit and ready to go traveling, reborn and ready for life again. The implication is that he was sunk into despair over the death of his wife, feeling guilty that he had fallen out of love and wasn't that sad over her death. His lack of grief -- in a way -- had paralyzed him. Other than some brief comments from the church lady, that hardly seemed the case. Washington didn't seem stuck in a rut or overly depressed for a man of his age who had been debilitated by infirmity and being shot. He seemed lively and energized by his battles with the world, not trapped in gloomy self-laceration. So with that final image of him ready to walk out of his rent-controlled apartment, I was suddenly unsure of what had come before.

It was an unsatisfying denouement to a strong and generally satisfying show. Between Riverside And Crazy is rich, funny and perhaps one or two drafts and a new set from being truly great.

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