

## St. Louis Eats and Drinks With Joe and Ann Pollack

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### Crumbs From the Table of Joy

One of the problems with being a young playwright is a determination to gather everything you want to say into the play you're writing. The result may be entertaining, but it also brings extra length, too many words (thank you, Peter Shaffer), some artificiality in setting up straw men and knocking them down and the use of familiar devices.

And so it is with "Crumbs From the Table of Joy," by Lynn Nottage, which opened last night at Fontbonne as a production of the Mustard Seed Theatre, to run through Sept. 12.

Alexis White charms as Ernestine Crump, a high school senior, but seeing her blighted Brooklyn life through a series of scenes from Joan Crawford movies is too old a tactic and one which runs out of gas too quickly. Ernestine is new to Brooklyn in 1950, moving from Florida with her father, Godfrey (Chauncy Thomas) and two-years younger sister, Ermina (Tyler White), after the death of their wife and mother. Godfrey works nights as a baker, has become a controlling, heavy-handed father who spends a lot of time writing notes to himself.

He recently has fallen under the sway of Father Devine, a right-wing, rabble-rousing, haranguing preacher whose radio shows carried a lot of influence in the days before and during World War II, rather like Rush Limbaugh in a clerical collar. He insisted that his followers live pure and clean lives, but his failure to practice as he preached caused his downfall.

Things are slightly dysfunctional, but then Lily (Patrese McClain) shows up and all bets are immediately off. Hugged by clothes a size or two too small which emphasize her curves and her sexuality, she arrives carrying four suitcases, predicting just how much baggage she is bringing. She's the sister of Godfrey's late wife, but she's also a bad bump on the road to understanding. She drinks and smokes, goes to Harlem in search of men, speaks out as an independent woman and, at the same time, claims to be a Communist revolutionary ready to take to the barricades. McClain is excellent in the difficult and not very well written part, because in addition to all the other conflicts, there's underlying tension between Lily and Godfrey that obviously goes back a long time.



Nottage, who won a Pulitzer Prize a year ago for "Ruined," and whose "Intimate Apparel" was performed here a few years ago, has grown a lot since "Crumbs," first produced in 1995 and written before she was 30, like dragging poor Gerte into the action like a dog drenched in a rainstorm. Too much coincidence, and a poor sound design made what was supposed to be a subway sound more like a freight elevator. Jill Ritter Lindbergh works diligently, but the character demands too large a leap over a chasm of unbelievability.

"Crumbs" shows sparks, and Linda Kennedy directs intelligently. The acting is good, and Tyler White is delightful as an adolescent, all elbows and knees. Tyler and Alexis are real sisters and they are always a joy. Thomas works hard to give Godfrey some reality, and often succeeds.

**Crumbs From the Table of Joy, by Lynn Nottage, produced by the Mustard Seed Theatre Company at Fontbonne University through Sept.**

**12**

--Joe

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