


[Print Page](#)

"Crumbs from the Table of Joy"

Mustard Seed Theatre

Thursday, September 2, 2010 10:00 AM CDT

Play: "Crumbs from the Table of Joy"

Group: Mustard Seed Theatre

Venue: Fontbonne Black Box Theatre, Fine Arts Building, 6800 Wydown

Dates: September 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12

Tickets: \$15-\$20; contact 314-719-8060 or www.mustardseedtheatre.com

Story: When his young wife dies, Godfrey Crump is filled with despair. He finds solace in the words of the enigmatic Father Divine, whom Godfrey believes preaches from somewhere in Brooklyn. So, Godfrey packs up his two teen-age daughters, Ernestine and Ermina, and moves from Pensacola, Florida to Gotham in the year of 1950, searching for solace and a new life near the source of his inspiration.

Even though they've moved north, the Crumps still experience their share of bigotry. Their challenges are exacerbated when Godfrey's sister-in-law Lily Ann unexpectedly arrives at their doorstep one day and moves herself into their abode. Lily Ann, who is not very good at holding a job, is an avowed communist, something that rankles Godfrey's neighbors in the era of Senator Joseph McCarthy's "red scare" witch hunts. While younger daughter Ermina seems to be acclimating to their new world, older and more idealistic daughter Ernestine frequently escapes their troubled existence by slipping into a fantasy movie world where happy endings trump depressing everyday life. When Godfrey unexpectedly arrives home one day with a new, and white, German wife, the Crumps' lives are ratcheted up to a new level of tension.

Highlights: Playwright Lynn Nottage has written a Pulitzer-Prize winning drama, "Ruined," another fine work titled "Intimate Apparel" and some awful tripe called "Fabulation." Fortunately, "Crumbs from the Table of Joy" reveals "Fabulation" to be an aberration of her gift for well-constructed stories that are peopled with believable characters and dialogue that rings true to a listener's ears.

First produced in 1995, "Crumbs" is given a literate and sensitive interpretation by director Linda Kennedy in this season-opening production for Mustard Seed Theatre. Kennedy's measured guidance keeps the story interesting, and her splendid cast crackles with chemistry and camaraderie that ensures a moving interpretation of their characters and the work's intriguing plot.

Other Info: Chauncey Thomas anchors the production with a beautifully calibrated performance as the tortured Godfrey. Indelibly pained by the death of his first wife, Godfrey withdraws into a world of piety and unquestioning devotion to the mysterious Father Divine, attempting to squeeze his daughters into this confined definition of fulfillment.



Thomas expertly captures not only Godfrey's fragility and fears, but also his natural desires that erupt when the lusty Lily Ann arrives. He paints Godfrey as a decent man clutching at any semblance of salvation he can find in his quest for happiness.

Patrese McClain provides a powerful counter-balance to Thomas' churning Godfrey as the headstrong, self-centered Lily Ann. She steamrolls through the other characters at first like a runaway train, but she also brings vibrancy into the sheltered lives of the Crumps that offers stark contrast and a look at life's possibilities for her nieces.

Alexis White does a good job conveying the confusion and loneliness of Ernestine, particularly in her benign fantasies depicting a happy, loving and lively family. Her sister, Tyler White, is amusing as the more direct and realistic Ermina, a young woman who isn't afraid to speak her mind regardless of the consequences. And Jill Ritter Lindbergh, as Godfrey's new German wife Gerte, is solid in her portrayal of a kindly immigrant who brings her own brand of sadness and loneliness to this forlorn group, determined to somehow carve a cohesive family unit out of the disparate souls cramped into their tiny world.

Brian Purlee's set design suitably conveys the simply adorned Crump apartment, although the larger-than-life-sized portrait of Father Divine is exaggerated even for Godfrey. JC Kracijek's costumes put us squarely in the post-war era, while Bess Moynihan's lighting shrewdly bolsters moments of brevity and sadness with appropriate illumination. Terell Randall Sr.'s sound design richly accentuates the proceedings, particularly in the effect of a subway train, and Thomas Stevenson's props nicely fit Purlee's comfortable set apart from that jumbo-sized portrait.

'Crumbs from the Table of Joy' is a simple story that is told exceedingly well in Nottage's affecting script and with Kennedy's deft directorial touch. Like the parable of the loaves and fishes, these 'crumbs' provide a bountiful feast for reflection.

Rating: A 4.5 on a scale of 1-to-5.

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