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Review: Crumbs From the Table of Joy

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BY DEVIN C. BAKER



IMAGE COURTESY OF MUSTARD SEED THEATRE

Mustard Seed Theatre
Fontbonne University Black Box Theatre
6800 Wydown Boulevard
314-719-8060

\$20, \$15 students & seniors

through September 12

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The voice in the opening darkness belongs to Alexis White, in the central role of 17-year-old African-American Ernestine Crump, a studious dreamer with her eyes on graduation and her heart in the escape of the movie house. The hymn is in mourning of her recently deceased mother. Her father Godfrey (Chauncy Thomas) has moved Ernestine and her sister Ermina (Alexis's real-life sister Tyler White) from rural Florida to Brooklyn, his grief over the loss of his wife so profound that he has given himself completely to the will of charismatic preacher Father Divine. Godfrey shoehorns the family into the puritan strictures of his living messiah, obsessively scribbling questions for an anticipated one-on-one with Father that never comes. Enter sister-in-law Lily (Patrese McClain), a juke-joint maven from back home, come to provide "guidance" for the motherless sisters...and set up uninvited residence. Her wild ways, drink and dalliance with communist ideology put her at odds with Godfrey, as Ernestine laps up her every utterance as gospel. Meanwhile, she clearly has designs on becoming more than simply a surrogate for the girls—she and Godfrey have history. Conflict sends Godfrey tearing from the house and into a spontaneous marriage to Gerte (Jill Ritter Lindbergh), who is white. And German. In 1950.

Subtlety is decidedly not the watchword of this play. Inasmuch as it was originally commissioned as part of a program aimed at teens, that's not surprising, but neither is it altogether a bad thing. By presenting the heady topics within the framework of a character-driven family portrait, Nottage successfully softens what could come off as didactic pummeling. Additionally, by structuring the scenes around Ernestine's narrative addresses to house, we're reminded that these are events as interpreted through the eyes of a sheltered teenager, a time of life when shades of gray are hard to see. As Ernestine, Alexis White is an able tour guide through a turbulent period, her bewilderment as palpable as the depth of her drive to progress after graduation. Opening night, her first narrations came off as more focused on clear enunciation than character, but that passed quickly. Her performance smoothed into a nuanced depiction of an unsure young woman balancing her devotion to her father with the draw of her aunt Lily's tantalizing tales of a workers revolution, and seeking the simplicity and clear answers of the cinema.

As for Lily, Patrese McClain's portrayal is as clear and intentional a characterization as I've seen in recent years. While Lily is written with a broadness bordering on caricature, McClain is a skilled enough actor to balance the hootin', clappin', hip-shakin' side of night-life Lily with moments of softness, introspection, and true affection for the girls. Ernestine and Ermina can't help but be spellbound by her big ideas and perceived worldliness.

Precisely what works for Lily gave me pause when it came to Godfrey. On the page, he's dour, even stoic. Loving, yes, but a man so aggrieved that he's given to bouts of spontaneous bawling; doting, yes, but also described by Lily as uptight. As portrayed by Chauncy Thomas, however, he's downright gregarious. He's easy with a laugh and a broad smile, and often quite boisterous. Acting is, of course, all about choices, and Mr. Thomas's characterization amounts to a very real, believable flesh-and-blood man, just not the one I met on the page. Where this creates problems is mainly when Godfrey and Lily spar over their conflicting ideologies, passions and desires for the girls. When you start too big, there's nowhere to go when the pressure really begins to ratchet up. Further, with Lily by necessity occupying a high-toned, showy space, greater tension could be created by giving Godfrey some headroom to rise up to Lily's intensity.

As mentioned above, Godfrey spontaneously marries a white woman, a German called Gerte. Jill Ritter Lindbergh is handed a near-Herculean task on several levels—or, rather, levels are exactly the problem. Notting has written a character whose features are twofold: white? Check. German right after World War Two? Check. She is a device to expose Lily's prejudice. It's clumsy on the page and the stage, and Lindbergh acquits herself better than most would, given so little textual character development. She finds a soft strength in Gerte, contrasting nicely with Lily's lusty bombast, struggling to achieve something akin to détente with her step-daughters.

Speaking of the girls, I would be remiss if I did not give special mention to Tyler White as Ermina. Any fan of good character acting needs to see this girl do her stuff. Her level of commitment and self-assuredness radiates off the stage, and her Ermina delivers some of the evenings truest moments of humor. What's most impressive is that she avoids the chief pitfall of young actors: she listens when it's not her turn. No excess business, no scenery chewing. When she's on, she delivers and when the focus is elsewhere she's still and attentive. This is a young actor to keep an eye on.

The pacing of the show is good overall, but tends to drag when the actors are called upon to take care of set-changing, which muddies up the blocking and leads to awkward extended gaps in the action. Brian Purlee's set design nicely occupies the three-quarter thrust black box at Fontbonne, creating the illusion of spaces interior and exterior. Period furniture sets the mood, but occasionally obscures some action lower to the ground. Both light and sound deserve note as well, particularly the convincing effect of flickering cinema light and sound during one of Ernestine's Hollywood reveries.

This production, while not flawless, shows what good direction and character development can do when the source material could lead to preachy bombast. Director Linda Kennedy and her immensely talented cast tease a moving family drama full of heart and humor from Lynn Nottage's historical exploration. Yes, at its core, the play's intent is to explore race, injustice and the communist-baiting that polarized post-war America, but this cast and crew don't let that get in the way of what theater is ultimately all about: storytelling. Mustard Seed Theater delivers the goods with emotional depth and some very memorable performances.

Performances are 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, with matinees at 2pm Saturday September 11th, and Sunday September 12th.