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ST. LOUIS

by Sarah Boslaugh

Crumbs from the Table of Joy

Mustard Seed Theatre

Lynn Nottage should need no introduction to American audiences, particularly since she won the Pulitzer Prize last year for her drama *Ruined*. St. Louis was treated to a Black Rep production of Nottage's play *Intimate Apparel* a few years ago and now Mustard Seed Theatre is presenting her memory play *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*.

Unfortunately, *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* is not nearly up to the caliber of those other works and although it is given a first-rate production by Mustard Seed Theatre even their best efforts can't overcome the creaking joints and obvious devices of this fairly early play (1995) from a writer who went on to bigger and better things.



Alexis White, Patrese McClain and Tyler White

It's 1950 and the Crump family has moved from Florida to Brooklyn. Recent widower Godfrey Crump (Chauncy Thomas) has moved north with his two daughters Ernestine (Alexis White), age 17, and Ermina (Tyler White), age 15, to be closer to the charismatic evangelist Father Divine (whom some might term a cult leader or charlatan). Although the Crump family hasn't crossed any national boundaries, they might as well have, so different are the possibilities for life offered in their new environment. Like immigrant families everywhere, the children in particular have to confront questions of identity and decide which of their old values and behaviors to keep and which of the

new possibilities to embrace.

Two major female influences will disrupt the Crump household. The first is the abrupt arrival of Lily Ann Green (Patrese McClain), sister to the deceased Mrs. Crump and an able antagonist to Godfrey. He's pious and controlled to a fault while she is eager to embrace life and all the experiences it can offer. While he works in a bakery to support the family and suffers racist humiliations in silence, she embraces Communism and refuses to accept the roles she is offered. He disapproves of her influence on his daughters while she thinks he's limiting their choices due to his own lack of courage. It doesn't take long to figure out that these two have a history as well: remember what they said in grade school about what it means when a boy and a girl are always fighting with each other?

The second disruption comes in the person of German emigre Gerte Schulte (Jill Ritter Lindbergh) who by chance sits next to Godfrey on the subway. He's in a vulnerable state and one thing leads to another so before you know it he's presenting her to Lily and the kids as his new wife. The sequence of events as presented threatens even the most determined suspension of disbelief, but you'll just have to accept this character for the plot device she is (and in truth, she becomes more interesting as the play goes on). In the mean time, the other women of the household are less than thrilled with this turn of events: the girls are pained not only because they feel their mother is barely cold in the ground, but also because they're not prepared to accept a white woman as their stepmother; Lily has her own reasons to be upset.

The play is told from Ernestine's point of view and her character is also saddled with the task of serving as narrator and delivering semi-poetic lines which recall Tennessee Williams on a bad day. Judge for yourself the play's opening lines: "Death nearly crippled my father slipping beneath the soles of his feet and taking away his ability to walk at will. Death made him wail like a god awful banshee. Like the 12:01 steam boat mooring."

In her role as narrator Ernestine tells us that she goes through some remarkable changes during the course of the play, but seldom do we get to see evidence of those changes, let alone watch them actually taking place. Narration is an easy device for play construction (it's much easier to tell than to show) but one which tends to bring dramatic action absolutely to a halt. It also tempts the playwright to cram much too much into the story while leaving the audience with very little to do since the narrator has already told us the meaning of everything. For these reasons I've come to dislike plays which feature a narrator unless the playwright's name is Thornton Wilder. Whatever happened to the art of dramatizing a story and letting the audience infer the meaning from what they have observed?

All of the characters have a tendency to deliver speeches as if they were standing on a soapbox rather than engaging in conversation with members of their immediate family, but that's a flaw I attribute more to the script than to the performers. That said, there are some excellent moments in this play (which runs an over-long 2 hours 25 minutes with one intermission) which suggest the talent fulfilled in Nottage's later works. When the characters stop orating and come down to human level, as for instance in act two when Lily shows the vulnerability beneath her bravado, the results can be quite moving. Ermina remains an underdeveloped character but Tyler White does get a few chances to show off her fine comic sense, while Godfrey has lots of chances to bluster and yell but also a few to display real human emotion.

Much of *Crumbs* runs like entirely predictable clockwork as if the playwright were following an outline generated by computer or the dictates of a textbook on dramatic form. This frequently gives the script the feel of a television movie as if the author must carefully accommodate the dramatic elements to commercial breaks and bring the story to a satisfactory conclusion so the audience will tune in again next week. Nottage sometimes breaks this pattern with flights of fantasy which show that she was aiming for more than competent sitcom writing. Periodically something amazing will happen on stage—Gerte will do a Marlene Dietrich imitation on the dining room table or Lily will connect viscerally with music on the radio—then Ernestine will tell you that that's what she *wished* had happened. It gives you hope for Ernestine's future because it proves that she can imagine a life different than the one she is currently experiencing.

Setting aside the problematic nature of the text, the Mustard Seed Production gets every last drop out of this play. Excellent technical design helps a lot, particularly the set design by Brian Purlee which establishes several different spaces for action (living room, dining room complete with a pretty good imitation of linoleum, front steps and a multipurpose area which can be anything from a movie theatre to the subway) and makes the Fontbonne Black Box seem spacious. The thrust staging does present some difficulties: for instance, crucial action in the second act is entirely blocked from view for people sitting in the area between house right and center. Bess Moynihan's lighting design helps shift focus from one area to another while JC Krajicek's costumes wonderfully differentiate the characters and their personalities. The props are also crucial in setting the mood, from the shoes which Godfrey assiduously polishes (this is a family which takes pride in their appearance) to the lace that will adorn Ernestine's graduation dress.

Crumbs from the Table of Joy will continue at the Black Box Theatre at Fontbonne University through September 12. Ticket information is available from www.mustardseedtheatre.com,