Cultural Daily

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America On My Mind: Three Plays

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 25th, 2018

The press release for Nambi E. Kelley's adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, now on stage at Antaeus in Glendale, tells us that this 1939 novel has been adapted for the stage "with theatrical ingenuity." It has. But its ingenuity comes at a price. Kelley's intriguing vision of the play in some ways outstrips the theatre's ability to stretch the edges of this envelope enough to satisfactorily tell the tragic — and classic — tale of Bigger Thomas.

Bigger is Wright's most affecting literary creation and this uniqueness makes its own demands as a manifestation of what it is to be a Black Man in America, then or now. Despite the inroads that have been made since 1939, too much of black life remains starkly unequal. When Bigger commits an inadvertent crime that he fatefully compounds thanks to his own hardened fears, his efforts to diffuse the consequences serve only to tighten the noose around his neck.

Kelley says her play takes place within "a unit of thought in Bigger's mind" and she has created an alter ego for Bigger known as the Black Rat, modeled on the rat that Bigger kills in the apartment he shares with the family. This conceit is focused on a duality suggested by W.E.B. Du Bois' in *The Souls of Black Folk*. The black rat is how Bigger sees himself through the distorting lens of white society. It makes of him a symbol — and a shattered man.

Director Andi Chapman has taken Kelley's script and has run with it, too often at a faster and more confusing clip than it deserves. The results are uneven and the aspired-to effects somewhat truncated, some by choice, and some perhaps by technical or monetary constraints. Her 2015 Ebony Theatre production of *The Gospel at Colonus* was superb, but it spared no expense. The reality at Antaeus is different, and the staging required to fully realize Kelley's impressionistic version of *Native Son* has been simplified at some cost to the production.

Jon Chaffin, right, in *Native Son* at Antaeus Theatre Company. Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography.

Jon Chaffin's Bigger, however, is life size and only some overwriting in the play's final scenes impedes his powerful performance. Once his crime is uncovered, Chapman's direction proceeds at such a gallop that events run into one another like colliding trains. Even Noel Arthur's menacing and well-defined performance as the Black Rat has some difficulty keeping up.

The rest of the supporting company delivers less distinct satisfactory performances, which is not uncommon in plays where the tension is so sharply focused on one or two characters. Edward E.

Haynes Jr.'s unit set of soot-grey wood stands in for a grungy 1939 Chicago, aided by Jeff Gardner's haunting sound design and Andrew Schmedake's somber lighting. Wendell C. Carmichael's period costumes and Adam R. Macias' projections reinforce the grimness of the place and the situation. But the production, performed without an intermission, can use a little more perspective — and better brakes.

Antaeus is not alone these days in pursuing the politics of race and its consequences. Local openings could almost be accused of collusion. There isn't any, of course, but race, immigration and above all hypocrisy are center stage in many places.

The humorous *ICE*, at 24th Street Theatre, and *Ameryka*, second offering in Center Theatre Group's 2018 Block Party at the Kirk Douglas in Culver City, are also focused, in very different ways, on aspects of political deception.

The cast of *Ameryka* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. Photo by Lawrence K. Ho.

Written, directed and designed by Nancy Keystone, *Ameryka* is the collective product of Critical Mass Performance Group, of which Keystone also is the Founder and Artistic Director. Developed with the ensemble, it is a scattershot two-and-a-half-hour riff through American history, with an overemphasis on Poland, its Catholicism, its politics and emigrants, asides that take in such disparate characters as William J. Casey and other sinister covert Americans, Jazz, Native Americans (barely), and Thomas Jefferson with his collection of fine French wines and bifurcated views on how all people are created equal — except slaves. No mention here of Sally Hemings.

This jumble of vaguely connected, vaguely historical incidents is a tedious affair that feels derived from acting school exercises. Its redeeming feature is the resilient and elevating presence of Ray Ford as jazz musician Gene Jefferson as well as a few other characters. Why CTG determined that this overextended show was right for its Block Party remains a mystery.

l-r, Ray Ford and Lorne Green in *Ameryka* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. Photo by Lawrence K. Ho.

But if *Ameryka* is an overdeveloped bad idea, *ICE* at 24th Street Theatre is an underdeveloped good one.

For a number of years now, the 24th Street Theatre's artistic leadership of Debbie Devine and Jay McAdams has made a habit of welcoming the citizens of its largely Latino neighborhood into the theatre by mounting bilingual productions and inviting the community to take part in its activities. The community has embraced this and often reciprocates with an opening day post-performance feast. It's a partnership that lives up to what theatre should be about: a place for mutual understanding, exchanging of ideas and enlarging relationships.

Commissioned from playwright Leon Martell, the bilingual *ICE* is as much a play on words as on thoughts and emotions. It is a lighthearted comedy, still rough around the edges, aimed at children of all ages, myself included.

l-r: La Troca, Jesus Castaño-Chima and Tony Durán in *ICE* at 24th Street Theatre. Photo by Cooper

Bates.

ICE's protagonist is a discarded ice cream truck — *La Troca* — that has seen better days. It's been purchased by Chepe (Jesús Castaños-Chima), an ambitious if penniless *mojado* (wetback) who, after being threatened one time too many by employers who took advantage of his illegal status to cheat him out of wages, decides to branch out on his own.

Chepe is determined to turn the broken down *Troca* into his American Dream: a gourmet taco truck that will make him rich. But *La Troca* resists. It refuses to run, it plays its tinkly ice cream ditty in defiance of the angry blows Chepe delivers to try to thwart the funny music.

Since Chepe also is a baseball addict and huge fan of Fernando Valenzuela and the Dodgers, he lures his Tijuana cousin Nacho (a delicious Tony Durán) to cross the border with some special Sinaloa tomatoes, his mother's special salsa recipe and his special knowledge of cars, to help realize Chepe's dream. The idea is to win a contest at Dodger Stadium on the 4th of July as "the most American food truck" and prove to ICE that they belong here.

And this is where the play, just like the truck, breaks down.

Events drag and are too loosely connected. Chepe guides a blind guitar-playing priest (Davitt Felder), who arrives in the neighborhood in search of his church and parish and helps him find both. Nacho shows up with tomatoes and recipe, but no evidence of knowing how to fix a motor. Nacho and Chepe play baseball as they did when they were kids; Nacho does juggling tricks with the tomatoes.

Salsa? Tacos? Nowhere in sight.

The blind priest wafts in and out of the action, sometimes with purpose, sometimes without. He also leaves near the end of the play after an argument with his monsignor, but it's not clear if he's leaving for another parish or leaving the priesthood altogether, since he's now dressed in civilian duds.

Eventually, ICE members do show up, but again, why do they send Nacho back to Mexico and not Chepe? (I really missed Nacho.) It's really not clear why the priest came and went or how ICE and Fernando Valenzuela come to inhabit the same decade since ICE was created in 2003 and the play takes place in 1988, and does it matter? Finally, why does Chepe suddenly succumb to *La Troca*'s wishes and decide to sell ice cream and joy to children, instead of tacos? In my view, he's missing a bet. He should should sell both and make the children doubly happy.

So too many questions and loose ends remain. BUT. There is a charming fairy tale in there somewhere, struggling to get out. I'm sure of it. Sooner or later, playwright Martell and director Debbie Devine, who knows how to do these things, are bound to find it.

I say, the sooner the better.

Top image: l-r: Jon Chaffin, Matthew Grondin and Noel Arthur in Native Son *at Antaeus Theatre Company. Photo by Cooper Bates*

WHAT: ***Native Son***

WHERE: Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center, 110 E. Broadway?Glendale, CA 91205.

WHEN: Fridays-Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays, 2pm;? also Monday, April 30, May 7, 14 & 21 ONLY. Thursday, May 31 ONLY, 8pm. Ends June 3.

HOW: Thursdays, Fridays & Mondays**:** $30, Saturdays & Sundays: $34 available at 818.506.1983 or www.Antaeus.org.

PARKING: Glendale Marketplace garage, 120 S. Maryland Ave. First 90 minutes free, then $2 per hour.

WHAT: ***Ameryka***

WHERE: Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd., Culver City, CA 90232.

WHEN: Today & Friday, 8pm.; Saturday 2 & 8pm; Sunday 1 & 6:30 p.m. Ends Sunday.

HOW: Tickets, $25-$70 (subject to change) available at 213.628.2772, online at www.CenterTheatreGroup.org, or at the Center Theatre Group Box Office at the Ahmanson Theatre or at the Kirk Douglas Theatre Box Office two hours prior to performance.

PARKING: Free three-hour covered parking at City Hall with validation (available in KD Theatre lobby). $1 every 30 minutes thereafter.

WHAT:*?ICE*

WHERE:?24th Street Theatre,? 1117 West 24th St.,?Los Angeles, CA 90007-1725.

WHEN: ?Saturdays, 3 & 7pm; Sundays, 3pm. No performances May 26 & 27.?Ends June 10.

HOW:?Tickets $24, available at (213) 745-6516 or www.24thstreet.org. Under 18: $10; seniors, students & teachers: $15; North University Park residents (with ID): $2.40. **ALL tickets for gala fundraiser Sunday, May 20 ONLY: $240.??**

PARKING:?Secure lot on the southwest corner of 24th and Hoover: $5.

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