

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## An Emmett Till That Resonates On Zoom

Sylvie · Wednesday, October 7th, 2020

It's been too many months since any of us have set foot in a real theatre to see a real stage show, surrounded — elbow to elbow — by fellow members of the faith. But even as we still see no palpable sign of a Covid-free new day, serious theatre gremlins are stirring.

We've seen Zoom theatre and we've mostly seen it falter on its promise. Nice enough at times, and certainly wanting to please and fill the vacuum. It has improved over months of lockdown, despite struggles with costs and other impediments. And it has served to remind us that SoCal's theatre community is not to be underestimated in its resilience and resourcefulness, even in the face of almost insuperable odds.

Live and learn new ways to do things is the driver — things that may prove useful even in a post-pandemic future, because every new thing learned finds its uses at some point. After all, we've been exposed to the London Globe's and NT Live's offerings online — many of them, if not all, exciting as well costly and complex to produce. But they do open a door to a potential future secondary source of income.

At this moment, the *Together LA: A Virtual Stage Festival* that runs through Oct.17, is giving a burst of energy to theatre-makers striving to survive (more information is available at [TogetherLAFestival.org](https://togetherlafestival.org)). It helps to band together as a community and have a reason to get up in the morning. But the peril to live theatre is far from over. Venues large and small remain ever more endangered by the Covid lockdown, as well as by an ill-timed threat from the upcoming election (see AB5 / Prop 22, which could magnify costs for the smallest of the companies that may be unable to sustain them). The only certainty these artists have is that the future is uncertain.



Lorenz Arnell as Emmett Till in The Fountain Theatre's Zoom production of *The Ballad of Emmett Till*.

I have not watched many of the theatrical offerings online, partly because of their odd hours and partly because I did not feel impelled to write about the ones I saw. I did see enough, however, to detect creeping improvement from when these virtual performances first started. When I was presented with a request to review The Fountain Theatre's Zoom version of its 2010 production of Ifa Bayeza's *The Ballad of Emmett Till*, which reunited the original director and the original cast, there were reasons to consider it.

The first is that I had missed the original production because I was then working for The Denver

Center for the Performing Arts. The second is that the subject matter, based on an incident that is now 65 years old, tragically continues to have appalling currency. And the third is that this Zoom version is a re-enactment of the much-awarded Fountain's 2010 production, featuring the same director, Shirley Jo Finney, and the same cast.

Watching it was a surprise. *The Ballad of Emmet Till* is a beautifully etched choral poem for the stage. (This is not entirely unexpected, as Bayeza, the playwright, is the sister of Ntozake Shange whose *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* also is a choral poem for the stage.) The styles of implementation are similar. Having most cast members play a variety of roles is a little confusing at first, but because of the strong script and the considerable talent of this cast — in alpha order, Bernard K. Addison, Rico E. Anderson, Lorenz Arnell, Adenrele Ojo and Karen Malina White — one catches on as the play unfolds, with the irresistible Arnell playing 14-year-old Emmett throughout and the other actors establishing connections to key roles.



The cast of *The Ballad of Emmett Till* in The Fountain Theatre's Zoom production.

Unlike other Zoom productions I've seen, this one hooked me early, both in the way it was presented and photographed and certainly thanks to the power of the acting on display. We know the story of this horrific lynching, for which no one was held to account, and while Bayeza's writing is playful as it creates the play's building blocks, the ending pulls no punches.

It's impossible not to wish I'd seen this "live" in a real theatre, especially one as intimate as The Fountain, where the recital of Emmett's torture must have been utterly devastating. That power does not entirely translate on Zoom, but you do feel it through the drum beat of his mother's voice.

The head shots superimposed on locales visited, including a giddy car-ride from Illinois to Mississippi, also provide a warm family intimacy and sense of place that only heighten the starkness of the grim events that follow.

Arnell's boundless appeal as the bright, ebullient teen-ager, reaching out to embrace all the joys of a life that was barely beginning, only strengthens his mother's unflinching insistence that his casket remain open for all to witness and never forget the disfigurement done to her boy. It's shattering to watch and listen to, even on Zoom.

This is where the lyricism of Bayeza's language — its rich, nuanced, enviably poetic and evocative river of colloquialisms — becomes the point. It is poetry. If it elevates the innocence of the boisterous young Emmett, that is what art is called upon to do: rarefy without distortion or declension the ugliness and the bravery.



l-r, Karen Malina White, Bernard K. Addison, Adenrele Ojo in The Fountain Theatre's Zoom production of *The Ballad of Emmett Till*.

In the end, one still remains hungry for that jolt to the emotions that only a live face-to-face experience in the dark provides. If you've never experienced that, you've never experienced great theatre. Because extraordinary things can and sometimes do happen when the lights go down — as long as we sentient beings are also *present in the same space to experience it*. We need to hear each other breathe the same unswept dust.

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The sooner we can go back to safely doing so again, the better. Until then, there is Zoom.

***The Ballad of Emmett Till* streams on demand thru Dec. 1. Tickets are \$20.**

*Featured image: The cast of The Fountain Theatre's 2010 stage production of The Ballad of Emmett Till. All photos courtesy of The Fountain Theatre.*

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