Cultural Daily

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The Best Immediate Family

Sylvie · Wednesday, May 6th, 2015

Ah, families. We love'em, we hate'em, they give us joy, they give us pain. And there are no real options. Put up with them we must, good, bad or indifferent.

But there's one *Immediate Family* now on the Mark Taper stage at the Music Center that is bursting with exuberance, guaranteed to give you plenty to laugh about and a few things to think and feel, as it delivers one of the most entertaining theatrical joyrides in many, many months.



l-r, Kamal Angelo Bolden, Cynda Williams (background), Bryan Terrell Clark, Shanésia Davis, J. Nicole Brooks and Mark Jude Sullivan in ?I*mmediate Family*.

Brace yourself, because like so many families today, this one is anything but traditional. The action (there's plenty of it) all takes place in the family home. The parents are gone, but their portrait dominates the living room now inhabited by their children. We're talking here about a bunch of grown-up siblings. Evy (Shanésia Davis), the eldest, is an opinionated teacher/activist and self-appointed guardian of this brood, even if her siblings never asked.

Tony (Kamal Angelo Bolden), the youngest, is barely out of high school and moving right into an early marriage — this very weekend in fact. That's why everybody's there. There's Nina (J. Nicole Brooks), who is anything but your traditional girl-next-door, whose wacky sense of humor and wild get-ups grab center stage any time she walks into a room. And then there's Ronnie (Cynda Williams) the stately half-sister just arrived from Brussels, a kind of 100-proof fairy godmother who descends on this clan to set them all straight, even if, again, they never asked.

Last, but hardly least, there's Jesse (Bryan Terrell Clark), the brother Evy dotes on — and the most elusive. Jesse's been away for five years; this is his first time back and he shows up with a friend, Kristian (Mark Jude Sullivan), a photographer whom he's corralled into taking pictures of his baby brother's wedding. The descriptions stop here.



l-r, Cynda Williams, Bryan Terrell Clark and Shanésia Davis in *?Immediate Family.*

Playwright Paul Oakley Stovall's plot revolves around the fact that Kristian is, of course, a lot more than a friend to Jesse and Jesse is afraid to let his family in on the secret. What makes this piece so heartwarming is that many other "secrets" locked inside this family also surface, and when enough "secrets" emerge, nothing's a secret (or a threat) any more. It makes for excitement, fun,

sometimes sheer hilarity and a good number of bittersweet and breathless moments. Stovall achieves all that without minimizing the play's serious undercurrents and, as uncontained as this comedy often gets, it never loses sight of that central point.

Words alone will never do justice to the explosive physicality of Phylicia Rashad's loopy and spirited staging of Stovall's play. Even though the piece is not new, it is new-*ish*, and was previously directed by Rashad at Chicago's Goodman Theatre, with some of the same cast members who resume their roles here**.** Her intense, fast-paced production clearly benefits from that history, including the spot-on casting and a vitality so febrile and delirious that it leaves you limp and glad to be alive.

l-r, Bryan Terrell Clark, Shanésia Davis, Mark Jude Sullivan (background), J. Nicole Brooks, Cynda Williams and Kamal Angelo Bolden in ?*Immediate Family.*

Every cast member has his or her moment in the spotlight, but J. Nicole Brooks as Nina, the wild bohemian lesbian from next door, takes her place at the top of the list. She's the siblings' childhood buddy — their "play sister" — whose uninhibited antics, unique verbal locutions and parade of eccentric outfits earn a distinctive recognition all their own. Her costumes (unrestrained, even for designer Esosa, who understands "extreme") look like something delivered by aliens in preparation for an invasion of the planet. Call them out of this world, call them fantabulous, although Nina would undoubtedly come up with her own made-up words sure to be a whole lot more descriptive.

While he must share it with Rashad, the credit for all this mayhem must go to Stovall. His voice is never trivial and is as fresh as it is true to the hippest black *argot* of the day that everyone in this cast knows how to speak, from Clark's skittish Jesse, to Davis' stern Evy (she softens in spite of herself), to Bolden's surprising Tony, to Sullivan's unexpected formality as Kristian and to Williams' sly Ronnie, the semi-sister, who conceals abundant wisdom under a hefty consumption of liquor. Never a dull moment with this collection of cut-ups. As families go, this is the one to join.

In addition to snatches of Joshua Horvath's lively offbeat original music, John Iacovelli's spacious living room/kitchen/garden setting, well lit by Elizabeth Harper, gives off the just the right level of middle class comfort, while allowing plenty of room and private spaces for everyone to scramble, play, whisper and fight.

l-r, Bryan Terrell Clark and Mark Jude Sullivan in ?I*mmediate Family.*

The best news, though, is that the Taper has a real winner on its hands. Something to crow about.

Top image: Mark Jude Sullivan and Cynda Williams in Immediate Family *at the Mark Taper Forum.*

All photos by Craig Schwartz.

WHAT: ***Immediate Family***

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays 2:30 & 8pm: Sundays 1 & 6:30pm. NOTE: NO public performances May 12-15. Ends June 7.

WHERE: Center Theatre Group at The Mark Taper Forum, at the Music Center, 135 No. Grand Av., Los Angeles, CA 90012.

HOW: Tickets $25-$85 (subject to change), available in person at the box office, online at www.CenterTheatreGroup.org, by phone at 213.628.2772. TDD: 213.680.4017. Groups: 213.972.7231.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, May 6th, 2015 at 10:33 am and is filed under Theatre, Fiction
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