

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Black Identity Through Theatrical Lenses

David Sheward · Wednesday, June 19th, 2019

The 2019-20 Off-Broadway theater season begins with a quartet of productions exploring African-American identities through a variety of lenses—out-of-the-box deconstruction, autobiographical satire, traditional musical, and Shakespeare. The most original and frightening is Jackie Sibblies Drury's Pulitzer-Prize winning *Fairview*, now at Theater for a New Audience's Polonsky Shakespeare Center in Brooklyn following its run last summer at Soho Rep. This refreshingly different examination of how we perceive race begins conventionally enough, almost like a sitcom. In Mimi Lien's well-appointed, blindingly white living-room set, the Frasers, an upper-middle-class African-American family, prepares for the matriarch's birthday party. Sisters quarrel over dieting, spouses bicker about grocery shopping, mother and daughter clash concerning college plans. All mildly amusing and somewhat routine, except for the occasional reflection on how the family members see themselves—foreshadowing the play's main theme of identity.



Heather Alicia Simms and Roslyn Ruff in *Fairview*.

Credit: Gerry Goodstein

The comic action reaches a climax with the hostess fainting due to a cake burning in the oven and the lights black out. Then things take a decidedly bizarre and scary turn. The play begins again with the cast silently replaying the first act over the voices of four unseen white observers commenting on the proceedings and discussing the topic “If you could be any other race, which one would you chose?” At the performance attended, you could actually feel the audience grow increasingly uncomfortable as the disembodied white speakers spewed insensitive racial assumptions and stereotypes. To avoid spoilers, what happens next will not be revealed, but suffice it to say Sibblies Drury brilliantly turns theatrical convention inside out in a series of *coups de theatre* inventively staged by Sarah Benson and performed with double-edged precision by a cast playing both the cliched comedy and their awareness of being watched. Mayaa Boateng is particularly impressive as the daughter Keisha who steps outside this looking-glass world and into a new world of self-reflection.

Michael R. Jackson also inverts audience expectations and conventions with his autobiographical musical *A Strange Loop* at Playwrights Horizons. While Sibblies Drury mercilessly probes cultural and racial biases, Jackson turns the glaring spotlight on himself, an African-American, plus-sized gay man, a demographic usually relegated to comic relief supporting roles, particularly in tuners. The protagonist Usher (a dynamically funny and intense Larry Owens), battles with his unruly thoughts (embodied by a sharp and versatile ensemble of six) as well as a racist, body-shaming culture as he struggles to complete his musical theatre piece, an autobiographical work called *A*

Strange Loop about a heavy-set, black gay man named Usher. The title refers to the scientific phenomenon of self-referential systems which repeat endlessly. It's also the title of a Liz Phair album, one of Usher's favorite "white girl" singers. The piece abounds with similar ironic references. Usher's not only has the same name as a famous pop star (like the author), but his day job is serving as an usher at *The Lion King* and his family members all have the same names as the royal feline clan in the Disney smash hit.



L Morgan Lee, James Jackson, Jr., Jason Veasey, Larry Owens, Antwayn Hopper, and John-Michael Lyles in *A Strange Loop*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

A Strange Loop asks as many hard and fidget-inducing questions as *Fairview* and, for the most part, Jackson achieves the perfect balance between hilarious satire and probing self-examination. For the first three-quarters of the show's intermissionless running time, riotous comedy sequences mix with bitingly truthful dramatic moments. A cute meeting with a potential boyfriend in the subway turns into a cruel fantasy. A devastating parody of Tyler Perry's mawkish movies (stunningly performed by Owens) is followed by an unforgiving family portrait. Historic figures such as Harriet Tubman, James Baldwin and Zora Neal Hurston chide Usher for not being the right kind of "n" word.

But in the final vignettes when Usher confronts his tradition-bound parents on their homophobia, his points are made and then repeated too many times, culminating in a bold but repetitive gospel parody with the refrain "AIDS Is God's Punishment." After the initial shock wears off, Jackson lets the outrageous number, expressing his anger at being rejected by his community's church, outstay its welcome. Despite these flaws, *Loop* is a powerful and startlingly fresh work directed with pace and punch by Stephen Brackett featuring a screamingly funny and insightful book and score by Jackson, a daring and noteworthy new talent.



LaChanze and Elizabeth Teeter in *The Secret Life of Bees*.

Credit: Ahron R. Foster

While *A Strange Loop* is decidedly risky, *The Secret Life of Bees* at Atlantic Theater Company, based on Sue Monk Kidd's best-selling novel, is an unsurprising musical where racial conflict is cast in absolute terms of black and white (forgive the pun) and ambiguity has no place. Set during the early 1960s in the rural South, *Bees* chronicles the adventures of white girl Lily (tender and moving Elizabeth Teeter) and her black housekeeper Rosaleen (fiery Saycon Sengbloh) as they escape Lily's abusive father (smoldering Manoel Felciano). They discover a spiritual home and secrets of their past with a trio of mysterious African-American beekeeping sisters (charismatic LaChanza, prickly Eisa Davis and compassionate Anastacia McCleskey). *Bees* is the kind of show *Loop* and *Fairview* are poking fun at—safe and conventional with the inspiring, integrated heroes overcoming redneck racists. Sam Gold delivers a sleek, proficient production and the book by Lynn Nottage, music by Duncan Sheik and lyrics by Susan Birkenhead are properly uplifting and entertaining, but lack surprise and danger.



Danielle Brooks and Grantham Coleman in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Kenny Leon's free Shakespeare in Central Park production of *Much Ado About Nothing* appears to be just as unchallenging with delightful hijinks provided by a superlative all-African-American cast led by a blazingly witty and strong Danielle Brooks as the merry Beatrice and a virile yet comically vulnerable Grantham Coleman as Benedick, her adversary on the field of love and words. But Leon places the Bard's lighthearted comedy within a serious framework. Beowulf Boritt's lush setting depicts an Atlanta, Georgia townhouse with a huge campaign banner reading "Stacey Abrams 2020." Before she begins expertly doling out Beatrice's tangy observations on love and marriage, Brooks sings Marvin Gaye's 1971 "What's Going On" inspired by incidents of police brutality. The war Benedick and his followers are returning from appears to be one of civil disobedience. They enter carrying protest signs ("Hate Is Not a Family Value") as the play begins and exit the same way at the end when sirens interrupt the happy couples' nuptials. Benedick's comrade Claudio (dashing Jeremie Harris) wrongfully accuses his fiancée Hero (lovely Margaret Odette) of infidelity and rather than weekly taking it, Hero strikes Claudio before forgiving him. Leon has wisely underplayed these contemporary references, allowing them to seamlessly blend with Shakespeare's timeless comedy. Kudos also to Chuck Cooper's fatherly Leonato, Billy Eugene Jones' commanding Don Pedro, and Hubert Point-Du Jour's sinister Don John.

Fairview: June 16—July 28. Soho Rep's production at Theater for a New Audience at the Polonsky Shakespeare Center, 262 Ashland Place, Brooklyn, NY. Tue—Fri 7:30pm, Sat—Sun 2pm & 7:30pm. Running time: one hour and 40 mins. with no intermission. \$55—\$115. (866) 811-4111. www.ovation.com.

A Strange Loop: June 17—July 28. Playwrights Horizons in association with Page 73, 416 W. 42 St., NYC. Tue—Wed 7pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2:30pm & 8pm, Sun 2:30 & 7:30pm. Running time: one hour and 45 mins. with no intermission. \$59—\$109. (212) 279-4200. www.ticketcentral.com.

The Secret Life of Bees: June 13—July 21. Atlantic Theater Company at the Linda Gross Theater, 336 W. 20th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. \$86.50—\$96.50. (866) 811-4111. www.ovation.com.

Much Ado About Nothing: The Public Theater at the Delacorte Theatre, Central Park West at W. 81 St., NYC. Tue—Sun, 8pm. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. Free. (212) 967-7555. www.publictheater.org.

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