

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Lackawanna Blues, As Well-Named As It Gets

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 3rd, 2019

Lackawanna Blues, now at The Mark Taper Forum, is the kind of show that you wish you could see in a really small space. A club perhaps. A smaller theatre, certainly. Created almost two decades ago, it is the musical memoir of award-winning director/writer/performer Ruben Santiago-Hudson, who offers it as a one-man show to the accompaniment of Chris Thomas King's blues guitar. King backgrounds the mood of the piece and intermittently accompanies Santiago-Hudson's virtuoso riffs on a harmonica that are delivered with admirable agility.

Celebrated musician Bill Sims Jr., a friend and colleague of Santiago-Hudson, had been scheduled to provide the blues accompaniment with some of his own compositions. When Sims passed away earlier this year, blues guitarist King stepped up, playing both some of Sims' music and some of his own.



l-r, Chris Thomas King and Ruben Santiago-Hudson in *Lackawanna Blues* at the Mark Taper Forum.

Or so we're told. The show is advertised as a "deeply personal work written, performed and directed" by Santiago-Hudson, which is correct. To say that it is "accompanied *throughout*" by the blues musicians' music may be factual, but misleading. It sets up expectations of some collaborative blues events between musician and performer that are not met. What we get are incidental snippets from King's guitar of his and the late Obie-winning Sims' music punctuating Santiago-Hudson's words, but not much more. Yet Hudson's versatility on the harmonica, on the three or four occasions when he plays it to the hilt, makes you, indeed, wish for both more music and more alchemy between him and King.

This short-shrift with the music is a regrettable lapse because, whenever Santiago-Hudson's vivid monologue is not lost to the rafters of the Taper stage (Philip G. Allen did the sound design), his memories of growing up in a small town on the banks of Lake Erie in a boarding-house full of colorful, offbeat characters who are seductively crazy, sweet, dangerous and funny, is very much worth hearing. And more music would add some much-needed support and texture. More interplay between the two men would also have the virtue of animating a show that, in the long run, lacks enough variety.



Santiago-Hudson in *Lackawanna Blues* at the Mark Taper Forum.

Lackawanna is an affectionate tribute to Rachel Crosby, who was a critically important second mother to Santiago-Hudson since he was a baby, after she discovered that his biological mother was leaving him alone in the boarding house room they occupied. She is mostly referred to as Nanny or Ms. Rae in this tale, but is the inherently smart, kind yet firm soul, who runs the boarding-house Santiago-Hudson grew up in, with that proverbial iron fist in a velvet glove.

The show is written in a richly flowing black American *argot* — the kind of stuff we used to get from August Wilson that frequently turns into sheer poetry. It shifts so comfortably between comedy and drama, these brief and not-so-brief sketches of the boarding-house inmates recounting raucous yet often benign events that are rife with imagery, hilarious malapropisms and simply humane exchanges that make life possible when everything else conspires against it.

An achievement? By all means, and yet... In spite of this being a short evening with no intermission, the telling eventually devolves into something of a ramble, with stories that are progressively more disconnected and less prepossessing as it moves along. The Taper stage is not an ideal venue for one-person shows. Or even two-person shows. Performing *Lackawanna Blues* on its thrust, with its width and high ceiling, deprives the material of the very intimacy it cries out for.

Blues indeed.

That Santiago-Hudson decided to be his own director has a lot to do with these disappointments. Michael Carnahan's set is simple to a fault, and bathed in a questionable overall semi-darkness by lighting designer Jan Schriever. That only makes it harder to focus on the solo performer who, in turn, does not offer much by way of animation in his delivery. And since he has directed himself — almost always not recommended — there is little more to say. I'm aware that this is a little late, but one can only hope that Santiago-Hudson might be listening...

Top image: l-r, Chris Thomas King and Ruben Santiago-Hudson in Lackawanna Blues at the Mark Taper Forum.

Photos by Craig Schwartz

WHAT: *Lackawanna Blues*

WHERE: Mark Taper Forum, Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8pm; Sundays, 1pm. Added: 6:30pm performances in lieu of the 1pm. matinees on 4/14 & 4/21. NO public performances 3/19-22 and 4/16.

HOW: Tickets, \$30–\$99 (subject to change), available online at CenterTheatreGroup.org, or at (213) 628-2772 or in person at the Center Theatre Group Box Office at the Ahmanson Theatre. Groups: (213) 972-7231. Deaf community: Info & charge, CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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