

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Political Theatre, The Evil That Men Do

Sylvie · Wednesday, October 11th, 2017

On any level, all theatre is political. Some of it more openly than most of it, and given the direction the country has taken in this difficult year, and everybody's growing frustration, it seems as if there is a new rush on live stages toward dealing with the opprobrium almost as fast as it happens.

Some of this is illusory. Or tacked on. But a lot of it is simply confronting the explosion of simmering anti-Trump sentiment brought on by the daily gush of White House twittering, Congressional scrambling in response, or simply the manifestation of the public's growing irritation with it all.

The result is that local and other theatre voices are making themselves heard. A catch-up tour of some of our smaller stages reveals plenty of evidence and resistance. On display over the past weeks are several productions that address this national (and international) dis-ease, including a protest play from Peru, *La Razón Blindada* (a title somewhat mysteriously translated as *Armored Reason*), that made a flashy appearance at 24th Street Theatre a few years ago and is back for a second round; *WET: A DACamented Journey*, the Ensemble Studio Theatre/LA's production of Alex Alpharaoh's one-man personal odyssey of astounding encounters with our muddled immigration policies, and *Br'Er Cotton* at The Zephyr Theatre, a participating Rolling World Premiere that could hardly be more up-to-date in its political associations since it manages to conclude with a fictionalized event depicted as a consequence of the too-real recent ones in Charlottesville.

The plays are entirely disparate, connected only by general themes of oppression, unrest and discontent as a result of political inconsistency, neglect and self-dealing. The two-character *Blindada* is a dance of endurance that invokes Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as well as Kafka's *The Truth About Sancho Panza*, performed by two actors, three tables and a couple of chairs. According to the program, *Blindada*, written and directed by Aristides Vargas, artistic director of Grupo de Teatro Malayerba from Quito, Ecuador, is based on the testimonials of political prisoners held during Argentina's brutal dictatorship of the 1970s.



l-r, Jesús Castaños-Chima & Tony Durán, *La Razón Blindada* 24th Street Theatre. Photo Juan Tallo.

Stylistically offbeat, the award-winning play feels like a wannabe *Waiting for Godot*, thanks to some stretches of the kind of repetitious dialogue and ambiguousness we find in *Godot*, minus the underlying clarity. It is performed in Spanish with English supertitles, which also demands a

splitting of attention that's not always easy. But the two practiced actors — Jesús Castaños-Chima and Tony Durán — are so adroit as the two prisoners who are never allowed to rise from their chairs and who, on Sunday afternoons, in the single hour of the week when they're permitted to interact, use fantasy and story-telling and a whirling dance with furniture (real or imagined) to escape the dread and anguish of limitless detention.

Meanwhile, *Br'er Cotton* at the Zephyr Theatre is the ambitious product of Tarrance Arvelle Chisholm, a young writer with a strong sense of injury and dialogue, who has a lot to say, but has not fully mastered taking the teeming raw product that crowds his mind to make it cogent. *Br'er Cotton* is a study of what happens when systematic racism goes unchecked. The resulting poverty, struggle and frustration of others lead to nothing wholesome.



l-r, Omete Anassi and Christopher Carrington in *Br'er Cotton*, Zephyr Theatre. Photo Ed Krieger.

The kernel of an incendiary play is there, but uncontrolled at the moment by a playwright whose many words emerge unformed and unrestrained. Many of the connections he wishes to make — a crumbling house, the cotton fields, Br'er Rabbit — are not fully realized. Some forceful acting is in evidence from everyone, especially Christopher Carrington and Omete Anassi, but even the production's fine director, Gregg T. Daniel (*Honky*, *Les Blancs*), cannot tame the overextended thoughts and actions, while David Mauer's ambitious set, with several locales (some more decorative than needed) is too cramped for the small Zephyr stage, making the muddled action seem even more so. Since this production will be playing other theatres as part of the Rolling World Premiere model, Chisholm will have opportunities to rein in the overabundance of everything and perhaps even make the play's eventual resolution more credible.

Finally comes Ensemble Studio Theatre/LA's *WET*, deliberately left for last because, of these three productions, it is the most memorable and the most accomplished. Economically staged by Kevin Comartin and requiring nothing more than a bare stage, Alex Alpharaoh's autobiographical "DACamented journey," written and performed by him, is peopled with unforgettable characters, good and bad, conveyed with careful delineation, unfailing humor, affection, fear, anguish and above all, veracity.



Alex Alpharaoh in *WET: A Dacamented Journey*, Atwater Village Theatre. Photo: Youthana Yuos.

Alpharaoh is a highly skilled physical and vocal mimic who could bring a stone to life and may discover one day that standup could be his gig. While the airwaves daily fill up with the indignities and tribulations suffered by the Dreamer population, nothing makes their plight and their appalling dilemmas as vivid or as eloquent as their telling by this exceptional artist. This is a case in which the particular is infinitely more compelling than the universal. Let's hope they get to film this and show it everywhere in the land, although nothing will be as heartbreaking or as heartwarming as seeing the man himself perform it in the flesh.



Alex Alpharaoh. Photo by Youthana Yuos.

Top image: l-r, Omete Anassi, Christopher Carrington & Yvonne Huff Lee in Br'er Cotton. Photo Ed Krieger.

WET: A DACamented Journey plays the Atwater Village Theatre, 8269 Casitas, Los Angeles, CA 90039, Saturdays at 2 and Mondays at 8, through Oct. 30. Tickets: \$15-\$20, available at dacamentedjourney.com. More info: 818.839.1197.

Br'er Cotton plays the Zephyr Theatre, 7456 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90046, 8pm Saturdays & Mondays, 3pm Sundays. Ends October 29. Tickets: \$15-\$45, available at www.lower-depth.com/on-stage or 323.960.7787.

La Razón Blindada continues at 24th Street Theatre, 1117 West 24th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90007, Saturday at 3 & 7:30pm, Sunday at 3pm. Ends Sunday. Tickets: adults, \$24; seniors, students, teachers, \$15; kids 14-18, \$10. Available at 213.745.6516 or www.24thstreet.org.

NOTE: *WET* and *La Razón Blindada* will be participating in the **Encuentro de Las Americas** festival scheduled at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514, S. Spring Street in downtown Los Angeles, November 2-19. Tickets at 866.811.4111 or info@thelatc.org.

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