Cultural Daily

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Searing Pipeline at Lincoln Center

David Sheward · Wednesday, July 26th, 2017

Theatergoers may feel as if they are back in high school when they enter Lincoln Center's Mitzi Newhouse venue for *Pipeline*, Dominique Morisseau's searing close-up of the public school system and its failure to serve minority youth. Set designer Matt Saunders has transformed the back wall of the intimate space into a blank white cement canvas not unlike the drab interior of an urban hall of learning. As the play begins, Justin Ellington's jarring soundscape and Hannah Wasileski's video projections take us inside a bleak secondary institution where the main character Nya, an African-American English Language Arts teacher, is slowly unravelling as her son Omari struggles to stay afloat at a private school upstate. Though there are moments of melodrama, Morisseau delivers a piercing and powerful indictment of educational breakdown.

Omari is at a crisis point. He has assaulted a teacher and Nya battles to prevent him from being expelled or worse, incarcerated. (The title refers to the view that public schools are a conduit to prison for too many African-American males.) Pressure mounts on Nya as she clashes with the establishment, her estranged ex-husband, a potential new love, and her students. In one intense sequence, Nya's personal and professional spheres collide when she teaches Gwendolyn Brooks' grenade of a poem "We Real Cool" and she imagines her son living the razor-edged lines depicting black drop-outs who "lurk late, strike straight," and "die soon."

Namir Smallwood and Karen Pittman in *Pipeline*.
Credit: Jeremy Daniel

Morisseau creates a startlingly realistic world where societal preconceptions corner young people into back alleys of despair. The production is tightly directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz and unflinchingly acted by a spot-on ensemble, particularly Karen Pittman as the disintegrating Nya, Heather Velazquez as Jasmine, Omari's fierce Latina girlfriend, and Tasha Lawrence as Laurie, Nya's bombastic white colleague. Namir Smallwood captures Omari's rage and intelligence. Jaime Lincoln Smith brings humor and bite to Dun, the school security guard who seeks romance with Nya and Morocco Omari is solidly supportive as Xavier, her former spouse.

Heather Velazquez and Namir Smallwood in *Pipeline*.
Credit: Jeremy Daniel

But there are serious flaws here. Clocking at 90 minutes, the script has little fat, but there are areas where the story is too lean. Omari's parents often mention his current altercation is his "third

strike," but we never learn about the previous two offenses or their context. Likewise, the rift in Nya and Xavier's marriage is glossed over. More details on these vital plot points would have increased the impact. Nya herself is a bit thin, despite Pittman's best efforts to provide subtext. She is defined by her relationships with the men in the play rather than having a strong vision of herself. As a result, two supporting characters—Jasmine and Laurie, who have more clearly defined character throughlines and grittier, less cliched dialogue—emerge as more compelling. Despite these clogs, *Pipeline* explores a vital topic and should be seen.

July 11—Aug. 27. Lincoln Center Theater at the Mitzi Newhouse Theater, 150 W. 65th St., NYC. Tue 8pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission. $87. (212) 239-6210. www.telecharge.com.

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