

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Still Learning to Let Go

Sylvie · Wednesday, October 7th, 2015

There's a lot to be said about *Appropriate*, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins ambitious play at the Mark Taper Forum, most of it not encouraging. It's a piece that has received a good deal of attention in the past couple of years, at Louisville's Humana new play festival where it surfaced first, followed by full productions at Washington's Woolly Mammoth, Chicago's Victory Gardens and New York's Signature Theatre, garnering some awards. And yet the production now at The Mark Taper is very much that of a play in progress.

Do not groan, but this is yet another play about the dysfunctional American family (sigh), inspired, the author tells us — and it shows — by *August: Osage County*, with added twists. Too many of them.

A father dies and his wrangling grown children, one of whom has been estranged for years, gather at his decaying mansion in southeastern Arkansas, a place that at one time had slaves and now harbors a few too many family rancors, secrets and provocative keepsakes. Aside from the tiresome familiarity of this type of plot, this one is woefully overwritten, clocking in at nearly three hours.

First come the endless — and endlessly loud cicadas — a conceit of the author's, its intentions unknown. To set a mood? Or are we to read into the fact that cicadas surface out of the ground every 13 years or so, on roughly the same calendar as these brothers and sisters come together as a family? Never mind. The cicadas are too loud, too obvious and too frequent, so that the symbolism, if that's what it is, becomes an irritant instead of an asset. It also holds up the action, again and again. What were they all thinking?

I neither wish to speculate nor bore you with too many blow-by-blows. But each of the three siblings, in his or her way, is (surprise) damaged goods. They have at one another from the get-go, with the eldest, sister Toni (Melora Hardin), the executor of Dad's will and therefor the one who holds all the power, taking the prize for nonstop diatribes that drive everyone crazy, inflicting collateral damage on her teenage son Rhys (Will Tranfo), and assorted grandchildren, lovers and wives.



Robert Beitzel and Zarah Mahler in *Appropriate*?

Toni's younger brothers are the estranged, fragile Franz (Robert Beitzel) who shows up unannounced and uninvited with his New Age girl-friend River (Zarah Mahler) — and Bo (David

Bishins), a businessman, there with his Jewish wife, the pragmatic Rachel (Missy Yager), and their children Cassie (a nice Grace Kaufman) and Ainsley (played by Alexander James Rodriguez, at the performance I attended). They are central to this piece.

Aside from the inevitable re-opening of old wounds and the concocting of new ones, the play is a series of attacks and counterattacks (one of which gets wildly physical), with the interpolation of a hitherto unsuspected aspect of their late Dad's life that puts into question whether he might, in fact, have been a racist bigot.



Grace Kaufman and Will Tranfo in *?Appropriate.?*

Toward the end of the play brother Bo asks a dangerous question: "Is there a point to all this?" The temptation is to answer "No!" But the truth is that within the rambling, messy and self-indulgent current version of this *Appropriate* (both meanings of the word apply), there is a shorter and punchier one that deserves to get out — assuming the playwright has the will to find and pursue it.

The point, the *real* point of all this, would seem to be how unredeemed evil actions will haunt their perpetrators through time — from the degradations inflicted by slavery that still scar the nation, to the ones inflicted on children that leave scars on every child they touch. It does speak, *sotto voce*, to the call for reparations that has been getting louder in the nation of late. And racial themes have been at the center of Jacobs-Jenkins other plays, such as *The Octoroon* and *Neighbors* (seen at L.A.'s Matrix Theatre not too long ago).

As it stands now, this plot is a seriously overblown and strangely careless affair. Its unnecessary twists and turns do more to confuse the audience and make it lose its way than find it in the overheated verbal and psychological carnage.



Robert Beitzel and Melora Hardin in *?Appropriate.?*

Too much of the action takes place in the dark, by candle or flash light or in a dim penumbra, causing that audience additional strain. This is the playwright's choice; lighting designer Christopher Kuhl does a fine job with the rest. The design of the dying ancient house by Mimi Lieu (awarded a MacArthur grant just days ago) is evocative, except for one detail: when the front door of the mansion opens to the outside, there is no outside. It opens onto a blank wall and an undefined interior. Odd, to say the least.

But the production is riddled with several minor inconsistencies and some unnecessaries: For instance, a worried Bo mentions that he's in danger of losing his job and wonders what he'd do if he lost it. Yet the subject never comes up again. So why bring it up in the first place?

When a key valuable keepsake goes missing, and all eyes are on Franz for having had something to do with its vanishing, he launches into a barely coherent, semi-hysterical rant that goes on wa-a-a-y too long, especially since it broadcasts Franz's role in the disappearance from the outset. Why not spare us the dither and cut to the chase...?

The answer would seem to be that Jacobs-Jenkins has trouble parting with any of his words. He hoards them, much as the deceased Dad hoarded "things."

This *Appropriate* would benefit greatly from losing one intermission and about a third of its heft, by focusing on what matters and jettisoning the rest. This is not a philosophical dissertation or an academic paper on psychiatric distortions. It's a *play*. And pruning useless ballast would give the *play* room to breathe, marshal the action (which it sorely needs) and sharpen the humor that is already there.

A final series of protracted farewell/*mea culpa* scenes (with more speechifying among the characters than needed), are followed, as if tacked on at the last minute, by a series of disembodied catastrophic events that happen to the abandoned mansion — a symbolic destruction separated by blackouts.

The implication is clear. It is as if the ghosts of both the owners and their slaves buried at opposite sides of the yard had decided to rise up and destroy the place and its evil — but it's a rather ham-fisted attempt at a poetic coda that doesn't quite fit in. The play already has too many endings and this conceit, while impressively executed and visually arresting, feels strange and only lengthens an already overextended finale.

A judicious *less* here — and elsewhere — would accomplish so much more than all of this *more*.

Top image: The cast of Appropriate at The Mark Taper Forum.

Photos by Craig Schwartz.

WHAT: *Appropriate*

WHERE: Mark Taper Forum at The Music Center, 135 North Grand Avenue, Los Angeles CA 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8 pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30 pm. Dark Mondays. Ends November 1.

HOW: Tickets \$25-\$85, subject to change. Available at www.CenterTheatreGroup.org or 213.628.2772, or

at the Center Theatre Group box office at the Music Center.

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