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Suzan-Lori Parks and Michael Moore Speak Truth to Power

David Sheward · Wednesday, September 20th, 2017

As the last millennium ended, when Suzan-Lori Parks penned her *Red Letter Plays*, two theatrical riffs on Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel *The Scarlet Letter*, the horrifying issues of alienation, racism, misogyny, and class oppression that they raised were prevalent. Then we had a black president and for a few brief moments, it seemed we really were living in a post-racial world. Or at least, the more extreme manifestations of these nightmares appeared to be laid to rest. Now almost twenty years since these pieces were written, those same demons have crawled out of their hiding places. Their resurgence in the Age of Trump makes the Signature Theater Company's tandem revival of both works especially moving and relevant.

In the Blood (1999) and *Fucking A* (2000) create modern variations on Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, demonized and branded with a red letter "A" for adulterer by her Puritan fellows for bearing a child out of wedlock. The parallels in contemporary society of castigating female sexuality are strongly and equally developed in the two pieces. *Blood*'s Hester LeNegrita is condemned to a life of poverty for bearing five children by a quintet of fathers. *Fucking A*'s Hester Smith exists in an dystopian world where she is forced to perform abortions because of a minor crime.



The cast of *In the Blood*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Both productions sock you in the gut with their visceral and violent imagery, but I would have to give a slight edge to director Sarah Benson's imaginative interpretation of Parks' vision with *In the Blood*. The characters are symbolic and derived from Hawthorne's originals (Chili for Chillingworth, Hester's first love, and Reverend D. for Reverend Dimmesdale, the minister who betrays her), but Benson and a sensitive cast makes these allegorical figures into living, breathing people.

The physical production is also arresting. The script calls for Hester and her brood to be living under a bridge. Benson and her set designer Louisa Thompson have re-imagined the setting as a combination abandoned subway stop and garbage dump. Refuse periodically spews out of a giant tube which the family repurposes as toys and furnishings. At the back is a curved wall used as a slide by the kids, but it's also impossible to climb to the street, so Hester can literally never get the financial "leg up" she keeps saying is all she needs. Saycon Sengbloh is luminous and heartbreaking as the downtrodden Hester. In a clever casting move specified by Parks, the five children are played by the same adult actors who portray the unwed mother's faithless lovers and

friends, and Jocelyn Bioh, Michael Braun, Russell G. Jones, Ana Reeder, and Frank Wood give equal depth to their dual assignments.



Christine Lahti in *Fucking A*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Jo Bonney's staging of *Fucking A* emphasizes the allegorical aspects of Parks' script which takes on a more Brechtian tone. The characters directly address the audience, they sometimes speak in a bizarre invented language called Talk, there are harsh Weill-like musical numbers, and the actors double as musicians. Though we are always aware we are sitting in a theater and never identify with the people stage as much as we do with those from *In the Blood*, Parks' prescient insights are particularly haunting. Christine Lahti's Hester is forced to clean up the messes made by the upper class, first as a cleaning woman and then as an abortionist. Marc Kudisch plays a Trump-like duplicitous mayor. Brandon Victor Dixon is Hester's son Boy, who escapes prison and is labelled a monster ("Better a monster than a boy," he claims, echoing the rage of minorities driven into the pipeline-prison system.) The cast which also includes Joaquina Kalukango as a no-nonsense prostitute and Elizabeth Stanley as the Mayor's desperate wife, provide piercing perspective on damages wrought by misogyny and class oppression.



Michael Moore in his one-man show *The Terms of My Surrender*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

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Meanwhile on Broadway, filmmaker-provocateur Michael Moore takes a more direct approach to challenging the status quo and the results of the recent presidential election. "What the fuck happened?," he asks as soon as he steps on the stage of the Belasco Theater in his one-man show *The Terms of My Surrender*, following clips of the Trump triumph accompanied by ominous music. In the following two and half intermissionless hours, Moore preaches to the choir on the current dark political climate, taking occasional detours to relive past insurrections and play game-show parodies with the audience. The show is a combination stand-up comedy routine, rant, memoir, and cosy chat. As in his documentaries *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9-11*, and *Sicko*, Moore builds his arguments against the current administration with deceptively comforting humor and startling statistics. ("That can't be true," said one woman behind me when the star revealed that 53 percent of women voted for the Donald.) Moore is not a Broadway-caliber comic and he mocks his lack of musical skills with a refreshing self deprecation, but his delivery is sincere and his expressions and timing produce laughs. (Watch as he lovingly caresses a bag of chips.) Director Michael Mayer delivers a smooth, professional evening, with strong visual support from Andrew Lazaro's projections and video design. There are a few surprises saved for the final curtain, but this is mostly a familiar call to arms for Moore's left-leaning fans.

In the Blood: Sept. 17—Oct. 15. Signature Theater Company at the Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 7:30 pm, Wed 2PM & 7:30 pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2 pm & 8 pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: two hours with no intermission. \$30—\$40. (212) 244-7529. www.signaturetheater.org.

Fucking A: Sept. 11—Oct. 8. Signature Theater Company at the Pershing Square Signature Center,

480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 7:30 pm, Wed 2PM & 7:30 pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2 pm & 8 pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: two hours and 15 min. including no intermission. \$30—\$40. (212) 244-7529. www.signaturetheater.org.

Michael Moore on Broadway: The Terms of My Surrender: Aug. 10—Oct. 22. Belasco Theater, 111 W. 44th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri, 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. \$29—\$149. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. with no intermission. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

This review previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com.

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