Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Thanksgiving Celebration of Another Sort

Sylvie · Wednesday, November 27th, 2019

On this Thanksgiving Day, when most theatres are dark in honor of this favorite holiday, it seems fitting to honor a play and production that deserve our thanks for something other than the usual reasons.

The Double V, a rental CEK guest production at The Matrix Theatre that closed four days ago, was, dramatically speaking, flawed, but its subject and inspiration were and are important to remember.

The subject is a little known political triumph that mainstream American history has all but ignored. It dramatizes the struggle faced by African Americans who wanted to join the U.S. army in 1942, at the onset of the American participation in World War II. The U.S. military at that point was racially segregated. But a newspaper campaign, sparked by a letter to the editor of the small *Pittsburgh Courier,* helped make a difference.

The letter was written by one James Thompson, an African American who worked in the kitchen at the Cessna factory, after he tried to enlist and was rejected because of the color of his skin. It got the attention of the editor at the *Courier* and ignited the *Courier's* subsequent campaign dubbed as the "Double V" — for victory abroad against a foreign enemy and victory at home against racial discrimination. It succeeded largely thanks to the persistence of the *Courier's* editor. Anyone who'd like to know more can find it at this link: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED205956.pdf.

People of color had served in the U.S. military since the Revolutionary War, but the policy on every level was one of separate and unequal opportunity. That changed on July 26, 1948, when President Harry Truman, aroused by the *Courier's* dogged determination with its Double V campaign, signed the sweeping Executive Order 9981 that put an official end to racial and religious discrimination within the U.S. armed forces.

Order 9981 stated that "there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services *without regard to race, color, religion or national origin…*" Only the italics are mine.

You don't have to be a historian to recognize the order's significance or the injustice that had preceded it, even if other forms of inequality lingered. The play at The Matrix, crafted by Carole Eglash-Kosoff (she of CEK) and produced by Leigh Fortier, took some acceptable liberties to dramatize the situation, but they did not tamper with the central facts or the triumph of the Double V campaign.

What the playwriting needed was a punchier, more organic level of dramatic savvy to rise to the level of a stirring play. Despite director Michael Arabian's efforts to achieve that vividness, the production of *The Double V* was more well-intentioned than dramatically viable, offering few opportunities for the members of its dedicated cast to shine. That they gave it everything they had is beyond question.

The real-life Double V campaign is considered in some quarters to have planted the seed for the more rigorous and widespread Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 70s. True no doubt, since the political climate at the time was emboldened and open to anything that challenged the status quo.

Significantly, the Double V campaign was an idea whose time had not only come, but come after an unwarranted delay of roughly 200 years — unless you count slavery's global presence that dates back to circa 1500 or another couple of centuries prior, because the worst ideas have a dreadful propensity for being really hard to kill.

Enjoy the day and all the other freedoms we should be thankful for.

Top image: The cast of Carole Eglash-Kosoff's The Double V *at The Matrix Theatre.*

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