Cultural Daily

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Toni Stone Hits a Homer; Plus Musical Musings on Identity

David Sheward · Wednesday, June 26th, 2019

Toni Stone is probably the most famous athlete you never heard of. From 1949 to 1954, she played baseball in the Negro Leagues and was the first woman of any race to play professionally in the sport. She was hired for the San Francisco Sea Lions as a publicity stunt and had her longest stint with the Indianapolis Clowns, the diamond equivalent of the Harlem Globetrotters who incorporated comedic antics into their very serious field work. Based on Martha Ackman's biography, *Curveball: The Remarkable Story of Toni Stone*, Lydia R. Diamond's play *Toni Stone*, now at Roundabout Theatre Company's Laura Pels space, relays this unjustly obscure story in boldly theatrical terms, inventively staged by Pam MacKinnon.

April Matthis and cast in *Toni Stone*.
Credit: Joan Marcus

Diamond documents Toni's unique story of combatting racism as well as sexism with crackling wit and insight. In tangy and vernacular language, Toni explains to the audience how holding a baseball feels right and compares her emotions about the game to those of a girlhood friend for boys. ("It was like a part of her was missing if she didn't have the boys," she explains. "It was like with me and baseball.") In addition, Diamond tellingly develops the story of Toni's unconventional love life. She remains romantically unattached, leading some of her teammates to speculate on her sexuality, until she meets an older Jamaican businessman named Alberga. Her astonished discovery of courtship and later marriage form the parallel track of this life voyage. The tracks blend when Alberga forces his new wife to quit the game she loves and Toni must face male oppression in her own home. The narrative jumps back and forth in time, creating some confusion, but MacKinnon's imaginative, dynamic direction, Camille A. Brown's intense movement, and a rock-solid cast compensate for any dramaturgic lapses.

The charismatic April Matthis wins the MVP award in a quirky, vibrant performance in the title role, perfectly balancing Toni's child-like innocence with her steely determination. She's incredibly funny to boot, delivering Toni's dead-pan wisecracks with the expert timing of a veteran stand-up comic. Matthis is surrounded by a versatile cast of eight men—making for a seamless team of nine just like in baseball. They play all the other figures, male and female of both races, in Toni's life, reinforcing the theme of fluid identity and the arbitrariness of gender and racial roles. Kenn E. Head is convincingly feminine, yet also tough and worldly-wise as Millie, a seen-it-all prostitute and Toni's chief advisor in the affairs of the heart. Harvy Blanks makes for an endearing Alberga and Ezra Knight menaces with real threat as a harassing teammate. Riccardo Hernandez's dugout set transforms into all the settings in her journey from tomboyish girlhood to

uncompromising pioneer in a man's world.

With all the athletic activity on display, it's ironic that the most moving moments are still and silent. After a vigorous demonstrating of "cooning," dancing in exaggerated, stereotypical fashion as the Clowns did during their games, the cast stops and mutely stares at the audience for an uncomfortably long time before exiting slowly and the house lights come up to mark the end of the first act. It's a shockingly intense confrontation as the "clowns" drop their cliched racist masks of merriment to reveal their real selves and *Toni Stone* transcends its flaws to become a raw statement of anger like the recent *Fairview*.

The cast of *Octet*.
Credit: Joan Marcus

Asserting identity is also a theme in two recent musical offerings, both set to close soon—Dave Malloy's a cappella piece *Octet* and composer Iain Bell and librettist Mark Campbell's world-premiere *Stonewall* presented by City Opera. Malloy's work at the Signature Center focuses on a group of technology addicts at a twelve-step meeting and Bell and Campbell's piece celebrates the 50th anniversary of the history-making uprising in Greenwich Village which marked the beginning of the modern gay rights movement. Both feature diverse and engaging scores and employ multiple, single-trait characters whose lives intersect. Though the characterizations are a bit thin in both, the respective composer-authors create fascinating and believable worlds. Malloy, who wrote music, lyrics, book and vocal arrangements, investigates and illuminates the attractions of digital dating, video games, conspiracy theory websites, and vlogging, though ravishing and hypnotic vocalizing by a spectacular cast. Though the action drags a bit and becomes repetitive after an hour, Annie Tippe's clever direction, aided by Christopher Bowser's versatile lighting and Amy Rubn and Brittany Vasta's detailed, realistic community-hall set, keeps our attention focused.

Jordan Weatherspoon Pitts (center) in *Stonewall*.
Credit: Sarah Shatz

Stonewall has its heart in the right place and does achieve a heartbreaking climax as the myriad oppressed LGBTQ protestors gather amidst the post-riot rubble and intone Bell's soaring plea for tolerance. The exuberance of gay nightlife is captured with two pop songs featuring dynamic vocals by the legendary Darlene Love. But the individuals seem like categories rather than people (butch lesbian, transgender woman, young gay hustler, closeted suburban businessman, glamorous drag queen, etc.) Leonard Foglia's production efficiently handles the difficulties of mass crowd and fight scenes and there are moving arias by Lisa Chavez, Brian James Myer, Jordan Weatherspoon Pitts, and Liz Bouk in the first operatic role written for and performed by a transgender singer.

Toni Stone: June 20—Aug. 11. Roundabout Theater Company at Laura Pels Theatre/Harold and Miriam Sternberg Center for Theatre, 111 W. 46th St., NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 7:30pm, Sun 3 pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. $79—$89. (212) 719-1300. www.roundabouttheater.org.

Octet: May 19—June 30. Signature Theatre Company at Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: one hour and 40 mins. with no intermission. (212) 244-7529.

www.signaturetheatre.org.

Stonewall: June 21—28. City Opera at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Rose Theater, Broadway at W. 60th St., NYC. Remaining performances: Thu—Fri, 7:30pm. Running time: 70 mins. with no intermission. $25—$300. (212) 721-6500. www.nycopera.com

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