



THURSDAY, MARCH 28, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "Ain't No Mo'" Takes Off With Talent and Smarts

AIN'T NO MO' *** 1/2 out of ****

THE PUBLIC THEATER

If I tell you how funny *Ain't No Mo'* is, I worry that might diminish how angry it is. If I tell you how angry it is, that might diminish how smart it is. If I tell you how smart it is, you might not realize how funny it is. So I'll just tell you how good it is. Very good, very funny, very angry, very smart and very everything else you hope for from a committed, exciting play by a new talent (Jordan E. Cooper) who also delivers a high-wire act of a performance as the airline gate attendant, Peaches. Yes, he does. Go.

The conceit of this kaleidoscope of a play is that time's up in America for black people. The U.S. government is offering a one-way ticket to your country of choice in Africa and making the *very* strong suggestion to get going while the going is good. As a bonus, the captain of the plane from African American Airlines is former President Barack Obama. ("We found him!" shouts one of the characters.) Other people of color? Well, the Hispanics and Latinos are on stand-by, but the last flight out is filling fast.

It begins with an uproarious spoof of an African American funeral. The overly enunciated preacher mopping his brow, the church ladies speaking in tongues and offering an "amen," the fiery speech -- all are present and accounted for. And who is being buried? That would be Mr. Right To Complain. Yes, once Obama became President, the idea that black people no longer had the Right To Complain became gospel. In one fell swoop, Cooper mocks our cinematic conception of a Tyler Perry-like black funeral, the idea that Obama's election changed everything and the small fragile hope that it might actually be true. Oh and he makes us laugh while giving a ridiculously talented cast the first of many chances to shine.



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And we're off. Cooper offers a string of skits, one scathing and scabrous and unforgiving but humane take-down after another of racism and the privileged and white society and how your own community can sometimes be its own worst enemy.

A reality TV show about "baby mamas" features a light-skinned woman who is touted as the world's first person to transition from one race to another. (I think Rachel Dolezal beat her, though.)

A line of women patiently wait for their chance to abort their babies before society can torture and squeeze the life out of the child on its own terms.

A rich family is bemused by the offer to leave the country (why would they leave when they're so respected and accepted?) but a tad worried about the disappearance of all their servants.

And punctuating it all, the scene at the airport gate where Peaches maintains order amidst the chaos of that final flight.

It's a raucous, sobering work that's also balanced and generous. Most every actor gets a show-stopping bit of comedy and a moment to bare their humanity. Time and anger a righteous bit of speechifying pops in right after some over-the-top humor and it works 99% of the time. Director Stevie Walker-Webb and his entire creative team (especially the costumes of Montana Levi Blanco working in concert with the hair, makeup and wig designs of Cookie Jordan) do marvelous work in supporting the text and the actors on stage to make that happen.

My one caveat is that Cooper felt the need to underline and italicize the finale when his play was already so powerful. Did he worry a la Dave Chappelle that we would be laughing a little too loud and perhaps not always at precisely the right moment or in the right way? Just to make sure we get it, his character Peaches strips down and the sound design tosses in rolling thunder (or tolling bells, I can't quite be certain) at the end. Then he drops a giant American flag so the cast can stand soberly in front of it, more a line-up than a curtain call. It's as if he didn't quite trust us enough, that we'd let him down. To be fair, if history and current events are any judge, he's probably right.

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