



THURSDAY, MAY 09, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: 'BLKS' IS SERIOUSLY FUNNY

BLKS ** 1/2 out of ****

THE ROBERT W. WILSON MCC THEATER SPACE

To the growing list of playwrights of color pushing the boundaries of contemporary theater, you can happily add the name of Aziza Barnes. Is it any wonder they attracted the attention of red-hot director Robert O'Hara? No, it is not. He gives *BLKS* a solid showcase that also shows off the versatility of the mainstage at the relatively new Robert W. Wilson MCC Theater Space. This was my first visit to the latest addition in NYC's collection of artistic spaces but it won't be my last. And this was my first chance to see a work by Barnes, but it surely won't be my last for that either.

In this broad but pointed comedy, Octavia is having a bad day. She (Paige Gilbert) freaks out over a mole on her clitoris. It wasn't there yesterday! When her lover/friend with benefits/whatever Ry (Coral Peña) demurs when asked to play amateur gynecologist, Octavia has had enough. She ends their brief fling/burgeoning romance (I don't know what to call it because neither does Octavia). When roommate June (Antoinette Crowe-Legacy) barges in and reveals her boyfriend has cheated on her (again) and a relative of Octavia says the potentially cancerous mole needs to be dealt with right away, they and fellow roomie Imani (Alfie Fuller) agree there's only one solution. Day drinking, rolling a blunt and generally partying, of course.

What follows is a roundelay of sexual entanglements, hilarious banter and the unwelcome but inevitable downer of reality intruding in on the fun via a violent confrontation on the streets and social media updates on the latest killing of a young black man.

Unlike other recent plays, *BLKS* is not extravagantly out there or form-breaking. It's not a series of sketches, just a well-constructed play with characters bouncing off one another in unexpected, revealing ways and with a joyous sense of sisterhood. Even when they are practically



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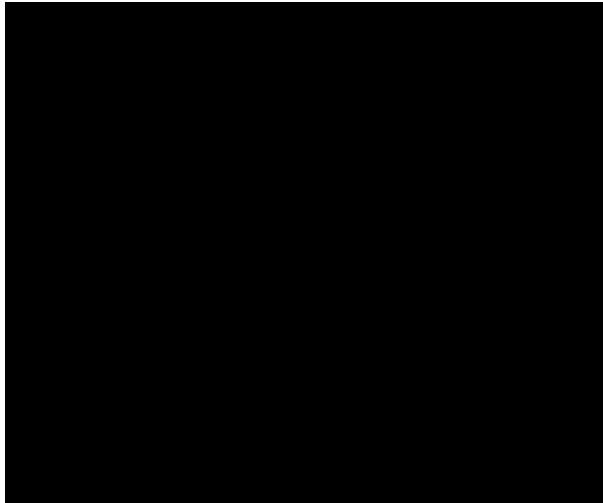
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swapping potential partners, you never doubt Octavia, June and Imani have each others backs. And while the humor is broad and cranked up, unlike Barnes we never doubt its essential seriousness either.



O'Hara oversees the show with affection but several elements hold it back. The scenic design by Clint Ramos is a trickster in its own right. The stage is wide and deep but the central space of the shared living room in their apartment is presented at a cramped, odd angle. It's puzzling until the set rotates again and again, almost going widescreen as Ramos reveals a bathroom, bedrooms, a club and even a city street with subway entrances. And yet it felt over-elaborate and attention-grabbing to me. You shouldn't be thinking about the sets as much as we do here.

Worse, two roles are poorly cast. Marié Botha as That Bitch On The Couch is merely ok as a clueless white woman bedeviled by what's appropriate for her to say. And Octavia's love interest Ry was mishandled entirely by Peña, making her Off Broadway debut and proving very uncomfortable onstage. Her body movement, her line deliveries, literally everything about her proved awkward, never more so than a key monologue at the climax she barely delivered, much less brought to life.

The three leads are much better. Fuller reveals depths to Imani. Crowe-Legacy is full-on Amazonian as she straddles the stage with her personality and take-command voice. And Gilbert anchors it all with ease as the conflicted but decent Octavia. Playing a string of male characters but mostly the nerdy, off-beat Justin (a guy who befriends June in a club), Chris Myers is scene-stealing good from start to finish. For a play centered on women, Barnes gifts him with a terrific showcase and Myers makes the most of it.

I wish Barnes had trusted their own talents as much. News alerts about the gunning down of young black men by the police both early on and at the end feel like an unnecessary attempt to prove the play has serious intent. I never doubted it, thanks to the more organic

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THEATER: 'BLKS' IS
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THEATER: CIRQUE DU
SOLEIL GETS ITS MOJO
BACK

THEATER: HANS CHRISTIAN
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► [2016 \(2\)](#)

► [2015 \(20\)](#)

► [2014 \(2\)](#)

► [2013 \(5\)](#)

► [2012 \(17\)](#)

► [2011 \(15\)](#)

► [2010 \(10\)](#)

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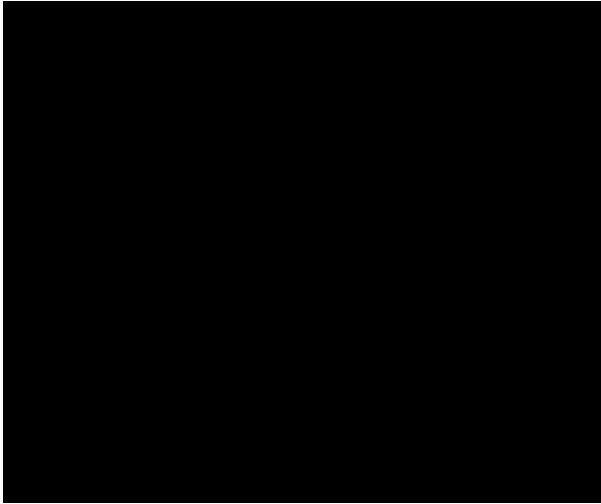
► [2006 \(2412\)](#)

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inclusion of a burst of violence on the street and the wickedly funny taunting Imani gives to a white woman she flirts with. Yet even at the end, Barnes insists on a string of monologues that come from a different world than the colorful comedy they created and make us care about.

Indeed, Barnes has a gift for character and dialogue. After delivering three women in a setting I'd be glad to return to, TV might just be in their future.

NOTE: It's not every day NYC gets a new theater space. Check out this quick peek of The Robert W Wilson MCC Theater Space.



THEATER OF 2019

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BLKS ** 1/2

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POSTED BY MICHAEL GILTZ AT 2:30 PM 

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