



THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 08, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: "Eve's Song" Preaches On The Original Sin Of Indifference

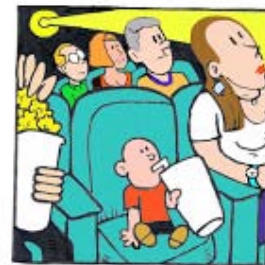
**EVE'S SONG** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

### THE PUBLIC

Just as filmgoers sometimes idly wonder "What exactly is a best boy?" theatergoers pouring over credits might ask themselves, "What does a dramaturg do?" The answer varies from production to production and -- in the case of an ongoing institution like The Public -- from company to company. In its simplest form, a dramaturg is often another pair of eyes, someone who can observe your theatrical piece without an agenda. A set designer might want a bigger set, an actor might want more lines, a producer might want to save money. But a dramaturg? They don't care if a particular song or monologue is added or cut except for one reason and one reason alone: they are always thinking about what is best for the work as a whole. And so while their opinion may have no more weight than anyone else, it is a blessedly neutral one.

I haven't a clue as to the role of the dramaturg at The Public or what role if any they played in this debut. But they are nurturing playwright Patricia Ione Lloyd and part of that nurturing should have included a neutral and trusted set of eyes that might have kept *Eve's Song* from numerous obvious missteps.

It's a piece with a lot on its mind and eager to spell that out for you. Lloyd tells the story of Deborah (De'Adre Aziza), a divorced woman overseeing her just-out daughter and isolated son Mark (Karl Green), a teen who obsessively watches news footage of police brutality against young black men. Deborah is succeeding at a difficult job where her talents as an executive are used but not wholly appreciated, while her status as a woman of color is abused with incessant sexual harassment. *Eve's Song* deals with gender and #MeToo and sexual



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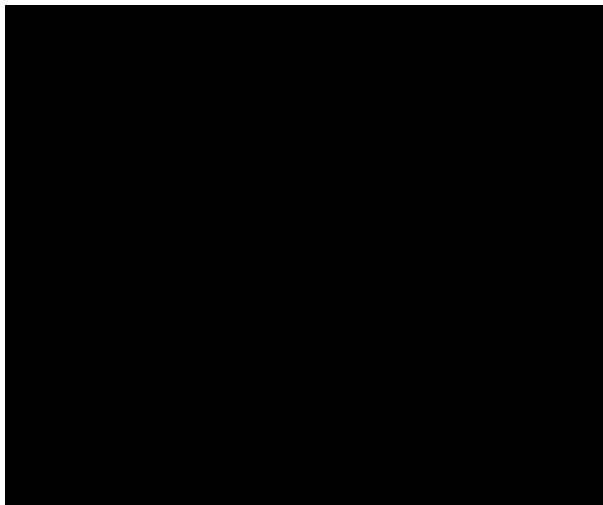
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orientation and the societal invisibility of violence against black women and ghosts and legacies and activism and inequality and presumably a few other issues I forgot about.

All admirable, if spelled out far too flatly. But *Eve's Song* also rolls the dice theatrically, playing with abrupt changes in style that veer from satire to surreal to naturalistic drama to a heavy-handed, ghostly climax. Even the stuff that doesn't work (and there's a lot) is at least bold in its attempt.

One can easily see why Lloyd caught the eye of the Public -- she has ambition and humor and some sharp, original dialogue. But part of nurturing talent is to help them shape their work. It's hard to understand why no one ever spoke up and said, "Hey, you know what's really working here? The relationship between the daughter Lauren (Kadijah Raquel) and the activist Upendo (Ashley D. Kelley)." You know, the rare scenes that actually stick to the form of a traditional play, one where people meet and bounce off each other and something real and tangible happens. Playwrights may love to fire on all cylinders and try every trick in the book the first time out, but that doesn't mean it's a good idea.



Family scenes are played in a highly theatrical manner, with the mom and kids sitting in rhythmic unison, flapping their cloth napkins and speaking with exaggerated politesse. But prowling around the stage are ghost-like people, dubbed Spirit People in the text. And a crack in the wall of the living room turns into an August Wilsonian crack in the firmament through which the desperately unfair and unacknowledged trauma black women endure comes pouring out. But every once in a while Lloyd just tells a story. Lauren spots Upendo at a bus stop and their tentative sparring is sweet and human, with both actors fleshing out these roles with chemistry and genuine emotion.

That's the play one would actually like to see. But even the play Lloyd has written should have been steered more thoughtfully by director Jo Bonney or the dramaturg or *someone*. For example, early in the play,

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the lights dim, a spotlight falls on the mom and she addresses the audience with her personal thoughts. Soon after, the same happens with the daughter. And the son? Nothing. For almost the entire play, he does not get his moment to open up and reveal something about himself. Naturally, you just assume he won't; this seems a perfectly reasonable stance since the play is focused on the silenced voices of black women. But right towards the end, suddenly the lights dim and the spotlight turns on him. You sit up straight -- since his confessional scene has been saved till the last moment and he's had the least dialogue of the three, you have every reason to assume it's going to be a doozy of some sort. Instead, it's just as unremarkable as their asides to the audience. Either he should be given a moment up front like the others (so we're not kept in suspense and expect too much) or it might have been cut entirely for the thematic reasons I just gave. The only choice that *shouldn't* be made is the one Lloyd went with.

Similarly, much is made of a creaky floorboard. The house is "haunted" perhaps and coming apart at the seams as their middle class existence is smashed apart by a racist and misogynist society. The son trips over the floorboard. It's commented upon. Eventually the mother and son take the time to check it out...and the floorboard is accidentally ripped up! Do they find something buried underneath? Do spirits escape it? Does it play any role whatsoever after that? No, they just move a table to cover the unsightly bulge in the floor.

Those Spirit Women? Like the son, they are not given a moment to speak out -- until they do, three quarters of the way through the play. Again, they spent so much of the play NOT speaking that we accepted their mute presence. Having them first speak up so late in the play felt like a violation of the rules the play had set. If what they said proved remarkable, of course all would be forgiven. There are no "rules," much as I am quoting convention. Yet what they ultimately offer are blunt recitations of the abusive violence black women suffer, telling their stories of woe. It feels far, far removed from the story at hand, like a blunt intrusion from another, more didactic play.

Even here, the play is confused. The mom suddenly blurts out that her son is "weird," though it certainly wasn't obvious to us. We know he's deeply disturbed by police brutality against young black men and views examples of it online over and over again. Yet, the play condemns the world for not paying equal attention to the brutality meted out against black women. Is the son being somehow condemned for his fixation? His fears do seem unhealthy, though of course he lives in a world where unthinkingly running down the block or an abrupt comment to a cop will put his life in danger.

But is he bad or wrong? If he's indifferent to the plight of black women, we don't see it. Certainly the women in his life have no idea what he's worried about and don't try to educate him. Worse, the play begins with the mom and son watching the local news. It begins with a story about a pet trapped down a well and the mom eats it up, even

smiling when the cat is rescued. But when the next story is about a black man brutalized by the police, the son sits up alertly...and the mom turns off the tv. That's a weird way to begin and what could it possibly mean, given what comes later? However much one needs violence against black women to be treated seriously, surely turning off the TV when the violence against black men is finally covered after decades or centuries of indifference is not the answer.

While a major climatic plot twist was surely essential to the play Lloyd had in mind (though deeply misguided and unconvincing), there is no excuse for the blunder at the very end. The drama reaches the end, the lights slowly dim, characters are backlit against the image of a painting melting into nothing and if there's a moment of "ok, they built to a moment," well this is it. And then inexplicably there is another very minor scene of such unimportance that you are shocked that no one said, "Hey, I think the play already ended. That last little bit? Does it add anything? Maybe it should be cut?" However delicately one would word this in the real world, it's absurd that conversation never took place.

Raquel and Kelley actually have characters rather than archetypes to play and they bring a spark to their scenes. True, their relationship flies by in record time, going from meet-cute to passionate romance to woke activism to Lauren suddenly deciding Upendo's activism isn't woke *enough* and she's ready to move on! As with the son being weird (he is?), the accusation that Upendo is a flighty activist obsessed with likes on social media comes out of nowhere, as does Upendo's rejoinder that privileged Lauren couldn't really appreciate the struggle. If Lloyd wanted to show economic inequality affecting their relationship or even just coloring it, she should have done so. But like so much else here, she usually tells rather than shows. It's a credit to the two that we buy their romance as much as we do.

The set by Riccardo Hernandez lacks either the imagination or -- far more likely -- the money to bring to life the disintegrating home of the family that the play calls for. Still, this production essentially shows the Public presenting a play -- flaws and all -- at a level most writers can only dream about. Lloyd will surely learn from the experience and grow, though she might have grown more with better guidance all around.

## THEATER OF 2018

Homelife/The Zoo Story (at Signature) \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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Broadway By The Year: 1947 and 1966 \*\*\*

Lobby Hero \*\*\*

Frozen \*\*

Rocktopia \*

Angels in America \*\* 1/2

Mean Girls \*\* 1/2  
The Sting \*\*  
Mlima's Tale \*\* 1/2  
Children Of A Lesser God \*\* 1/2  
Sancho: An Act Of Remembrance \*\* 1/2  
The Metromaniacs \*\*\*  
Summer: The Donna Summer Musical \*  
The Seafarer \*\*  
Henry V (Public Mobile Unit w Zenzi Williams) \* 1/2  
Saint Joan \*\*  
Travesties \*\*\* 1/2  
Summer and Smoke \*\* 1/2  
My Fair Lady \*\* 1/2  
Broadway By The Year: 1956 and 1975 \*\* 1/2  
Bernhard/Hamlet \* 1/2  
On Beckett \*\*\*  
What The Constitution Means To Me \*\*  
The Winning Side \*  
Oklahoma \*\*  
Mother Of The Maid \*  
Love's Labour's Lost \*\* 1/2  
[The Lifespan of a Fact](#) \*\*  
[India Pale Ale](#) \*  
[Thunderbodies](#) \*\*\*  
[The Ferryman](#) \*\*\* 1/2  
Eve's Song \*

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POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 12:33 AM 

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