



THURSDAY, MARCH 21, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "White Noise" Yearns To Provoke

WHITE NOISE ** 1/2 out of ****

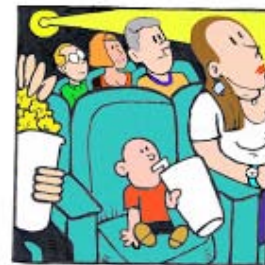
THE PUBLIC

Depicting slavery in the past is safely noble and instructive. The film "12 Years A Slave" was a Passion Play and who would ever feel anything but righteous, condescending horror over such an evil taking place more than a hundred years ago? Just like a Passion Play, the Oscar-winning film was dramatically inert. Drag slavery into the modern world, however, and it may not seem so comfortingly distant any more. Artists are embracing this fact with increasing frequency.

Author Paul Beatty showed a black man buying a slave in contemporary California to hilarious, upsetting, disorienting effect in his brilliant black comedy of a novel, "The Sellout." Rising playwright Jeremy O. Harris did a face plant with his would-be shocker "Slave Play," in which couples working through sexual or relationship issues reenacted master-slave plantation tropes. Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks falls somewhere in the middle with her intelligent, probing but not provocative enough new play "White Noise."

From her commercial breakthrough "Topdog/Underdog" to the stunning masterpiece "Father Comes Home... (Parts 1, 2, 3)," Parks has toyed with form, explored power dynamics and proven she's a talent worth following anywhere. Typically, she punctuates the action with monologues and this show begins with a stunner.

Leo (Daveed Diggs) is sitting in a chair on a fairly bare stage, addressing the audience. All his life, Leo has not been able to fall asleep. Ever since a teacher told his five year old self that the sun would eventually burn out and we'd all go with it, Leo has been plagued by insomnia. Pills, therapy, a white noise machine --



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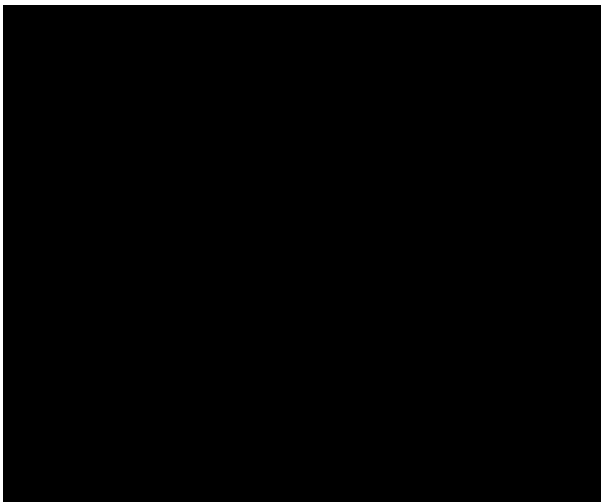
ultimately, none of it helps. So Leo goes walking late at night, around the block and one fateful evening farther afield. That's when the cops come up on Leo and brutalize him, shoving his face into the concrete. They break his last illusion that while life isn't fair and a black man is never safe in America, maybe just maybe if he played by the rules it wouldn't be quite so unsafe for him as other people of color. Uh-uh.

Leo is broken and his girlfriend Dawn (Zoë Winters) doesn't know what to do to help other than state the obvious: he needs to see a lawyer and get some justice. Unfortunately, she also doesn't know what to say when he proposes. Dawn tries to pretend he's acting rashly because of the attack but Leo planned the proposal for weeks. Leo's very bad week just got worse.

We quickly meet his circle of friends. Dawn his girlfriend is a lawyer representing some kid caught up in a crime; she's determined he won't go to jail. His best pal is Ralph (Thomas Sadowski), a professor who just got bypassed for a tenured position by a person of color. At least Ralph can take comfort in his trust fund. And Ralph's girlfriend is Misha (Sheria Irving), who "presents" as a stereotypical urban black woman for her online streaming chat show, "Ask A Black."

They meet for a weekly night of bowling (the two guys were serious competitors on their college team) and things soon turn edgy. Each one of them makes a poisonous comment about their partners and friends. Everyone is hiding something. A passing reference to the fact that Misha used to date Leo and Dawn used to date Ralph raises an eyebrow. And then Leo asks Ralph to buy him, to make him a slave.

Leo has a contract whipped up by a lawyer at Dawn's firm. (The woman handles a lot of pre-nups, apparently and this wasn't so different.) And the contract is just for forty days. Why would he do this? Leo wants to feel "safe." He wants to know what it means to be a slave, to give up all control, perhaps because he's never really had control over his body, his safety in the first place and this just makes it official. It's offensive. It's absurd. Ralph angrily says no way. And of course in about two minutes the contract is signed.



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I wish "White Noise" were more outrageous or more believable or more upsetting...more *something*. I don't want to watch a play with a man enslaved by "choice" and feel so indifferent. It happens so fast and yet one can spot every twist from miles away. The play flirts with satire and an out-there sensibility (especially with Misha's online persona) and yet it never catches fire. Even a secret white supremacist group for neo-liberals doesn't seem nutty so much as inevitable in this screwed up world.

Right after the contract begins, Leo is encaged in a brutal form of slave shackling, an antique device that the wealthy and privileged Ralph borrows from a museum. You might expect the play to ratchet up to such an extreme moment; it feels too immense of a spectacle so early in his enslavement. On the other hand you never doubt for a moment Ralph will get a gleam in his eye so what are we waiting for? Indeed, as with so much else here, that nasty streak pops up all too soon, robbing us of any suspense.

Other problems abound. The opening monologue by Diggs is terrific and delivered well by this charismatic actor. Yet his charm and charisma keep us from seeing the desperation that should haunt him even before the cops deliver a beating. Leo hasn't enjoyed a night's sleep his entire life and he's deeply unhappy. But you don't see a shell of a man on edge and about to unravel; you see a sexy, appealing man who looks like he can handle anything. And everyone is so nasty to each other in their first scene together it's hard to see them as lifelong friends. Who can mourn the inevitable fights and break-ups? They each seem better off alone.

Maybe this absurd act of self-immolation, this desire to be "sold" should have been a public act of art, rather than the private affair they first imagine. Maybe the desire to push the "performance" as far as it could go would add the tension so desperately missing. We might wonder more about Ralph's intentions and Leo's willingness to humiliate himself if they at least imagined for a while they shared the same goal and were doing it for a project they both believed in.

The set by Clint Ramos is serviceable with the one delightful twist of a bowling alley complete with real bowling balls and a clever way for the actors to toss them down a lane and out of sight. It's a treat. Diggs and Sadoski have by far the better roles and do better by them, though again Diggs is too centered and appealing here by half to seem as desperate as Leo should be. Irving has fun with her "Ask A Black" show and the inevitable turning of the tables when she questions our laughter over the persona she creates and why.

That's a signature of Parks, who is always asking questions, always probing and always turning a subject this way and that to discover a new angle. She did wonders shaping "Father Comes Home..." from a

workshop to the finished play. Perhaps she will realize more work is needed here. The outrageous premise of a black man selling himself into slavery simply does not bring out the outrageous in her. It's too sober, too pre-ordained, too safe really. We aren't surprised in the least, not even when a gun introduced in act one doesn't go off in act two.

Does Leo feel initially comforted and ultimately brutalized by being enslaved? Will Ralph break down in shame over what he's done? Sigh. Yes, the White Man fears the Black Man, appropriates his art and sees him as less than human, while the Black Man is filled with a murderous rage. A better play would make that belief seem fresh rather than obvious. And the power dynamics between the two men can't hold a candle to the similar forces at work in "Topdog/Underdog." For all its boldness, "White Noise" jumps quickly into grotesque bondage and the threat of death (that gun) but lacks the littler, nastier humiliations and the sexual objectification or assault the very structure of the play calls for. We don't even hear Ralph say the ugly slur that hovers over the play, the word these one-time bandmates have heard a thousand times in a thousand songs. Some buttons can't be pushed, apparently.

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