

Creativity, Innovation Strike Again At Rites And Reason

The *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, showing this week end at Rites and Reason in Churchill House, holds a unique theater-going experience in store for its viewers.

Written by Suzan-Lori Parks and directed by A. Lorraine Robinson, a second-year graduate student in the Brown Theater Department, *The Death of the Last Black Man* is a tour de force for both its writer and the actors. The play encompasses such diverse themes as the realization of mortality and the havoc wreaked by Columbus; Parks's considerable talent creates a language for her characters that is simultaneously humorous and intriguing.

The scene opens to an overture in which a chorus of characters with such names as Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork (PJ Steyer) and Queen-Then-Pharaoh-Hatshepsut (Monique Shubert) introduce themselves. The actors proceed to inform the audience, in what will provide the refrain for the show, that once the world was ROUN, until "they" added an D and things fell apart.

In one of the most lyrical lines of the play, we are told that "them thinkin' the world was flat kept in roun', and them thinkin' the sun revolved around the earth kept them satellite-like." Once the Europeans discovered the truth, however, and conquered their fear of the dragons in the sea, the fate of everyone else was sealed. We are

periodically told, often by the Peter Jennings-like Voice on Thuh Tee V (Bill D'Agostino), that the last Black man died just a moment ago, in 1317. Time and setting are ephemeral in this play. Parks is less interested by the where and when; her characters are fundamentally concerned with verifying their own existence.

The central focus and emotional impetus for the play comes from the couple Black Man With Watermelon (Bancroft Wright) and Black Woman With Fried Drumstick (Leah R. Williams), who sit on the porch of their house and try to determine whether they are dead or not.

Wright and Williams do an excellent job with the difficult material; they lend humanity to Parks's broken poetry. They talk in circles, each character with his or her particular concerns.

The Black Woman is desperately trying to get the Black Man to eat, hoping that by shoving a drumstick into his mouth she can somehow make him human again, while the man wants freedom for his hands, his neck, and his entire spirit. Williams is particularly good at portraying his character's gentle bewilderment.

He recognizes that he is dead, and yet he derives pleasure from memories of living. He lists for



the audience his preferred foods ("choice between corn and peas: choice, peas. choice between peas and greens: choice, greens) and wonders at the simple

writing veers more towards the poetic than the dramatic, but the actors do their utmost to keep this play alive and watchable.

Both Robinson and the ensemble of actors are to be admired for their efforts to present a rather difficult piece ... the actors do their utmost to keep this play alive and watchable.

The set is simple: there is the porch, quite elevated from the ground, where the couple have their dialogues, a misshapen tree with an ominous rope attached to a branch, an easel which announces the different acts, and large pieces of watermelon placed at various spots in the theater.

Parks's material is a challenge for her actors at all levels, her monologues often turning into elaborate tongue-twisters.

Lines are repeated frequently, and then slightly changed, until their evolution has altered the entire direction of the play. Parks's characters may be dead, but their language contains a vibrant, self-perpetuating life.

The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World is director A. Lorraine Robinson's first production at Brown, but she has worked on several productions with the Dallas Theater Center, including *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson. The play runs through February 25. *The Death of the Last Black Man* is a play whose meaning may not be immediately comprehensible to its viewers, but it promises creative and untraditional entertainment nonetheless. —Ashley Minihan

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