

Trouble in Mind, a Blockbuster



Roderick Jean-Charles, in the role of Henry and Earnestine Phillips as Willetta.
Photo by Ian Flanders

BY CLAIRE FORDHAM

The problem with giving rave reviews to *Animal Farm* and *Other Desert Cities*, the non-Shakespeare plays in the 2017 summer repertory from Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum, is that this reviewer may have run out of superlatives to describe *Trouble in Mind*. Do go and see it. Here's why: Earnestine Phillips, for a start.

A multiple NAACP award-winner, Phillips is extraordinary and outstanding as Willetta, a black actress who stands up to Al Manners (Mark Lewis), the director of a play set in the 1950s. She argues, forcibly and rightly, that her character is portrayed as yet another pre-civil rights caricature, in this case, a mother who advises her son to give himself up when a lynch mob comes after him because he voted in an election. Something, Willetta argues, a mother would never do.

Anyone shaking their head thinking racism and lynching, no thank you? Please bear with me or you will miss a chance to witness something spectacular. Yes, the dialogue will make you feel uncomfortable sometimes, but good writing should. And there are many laughs to be had here, especially when the actors' timing is so sharp.

Ellen Geer directs Alice Childress's groundbreaking 1955 satire, which follows an integrated theater company in rehearsal for a "progressive" anti-lynching drama. The play-within-a-play, *Chaos in Belleville*, is the first opportunity for gifted African-American actress Willetta Mayer to play a leading lady on Broadway. But what compromises must she make?

The play they are rehearsing is supposedly about black life. But it's written by a white playwright, and produced and directed by two white guys. So, we have a situation, where white liberals think they know the truth of black life. The black actors need jobs, so they have to decide if they should keep their heads down and continue to work, or speak out to let the

writer and director know their "enlightened" play is misguided and racist.

Speak out Willetta does, thereby risking the entire production, and her and her fellow actors' rare chance of acting work.

Playwright Childress was forced to confront nearly the same choice with *Trouble in Mind* that she dramatized in the play. Following the success *Trouble* enjoyed off-Broadway, a commercial run was announced—but only if Childress would write a happier, less ambivalent ending. Like Willetta, Childress had to decide: soften her message, follow the formula and sell out for success, or maintain her integrity and risk everything?

By standing her ground and not making the requested changes, Childress sacrificed the opportunity to become the first African-American female playwright produced on Broadway. *A Raisin in the Sun* would later take that distinction for Lorraine Hansberry in 1959.

Occasionally, if an audience is really lucky, it gets to witness an opening night that is so perfect, the performances so electric, it feels like we might burst with joy to know we were there. And burst this audience did—on its feet at the end, shouting and applauding.

The actors knew they were part of Theatricum history. High on adrenaline from their riveting performances as they came back for their second curtain call, the actors stayed to have their hands shaken and their backs slapped by the audience as we filed past this supreme cast.

Gerald C. Rivers is fabulous as Sheldon, the African-American actor who has seen it all before and expects no change. Mark Lewis is compelling and hits all the right notes as director Al Manners, who explodes and exposes his own racism. Roderick Jean-Charles is wonderfully witty and poignant as Henry, the stage doorman.

Constance Jewell Lopez is Millie, grateful to have an acting job at all. Christopher W. Jones is Bill O'Wray, a white leading man oblivious to his own racism. Judy Durkin is Judy, a privileged ingenue jarred into a new and harsh reality. Max Lawrence is John, a young and ambitious actor. And Frank Weidner is Eddie, the cowed assistant to the director. All these performances are strong and utterly convincing.

Costume design is by Robert Merkel; lighting design is by Zach Moore; sound design is by Ian Flanders; and props are by Sydney Russell. The production stage manager is Kim Cameron.

Two minor notes: the powerful last scene between Willetta and Henry could be even more so if it wasn't set so far stage right. And someone needs to take up Sheldon's pants six inches.

That said, the *Trouble in Mind* production of 2017 is one that anyone who witnesses this play and these performances will be talking about for years to come.

Trouble in Mind continues through September 30, running in repertory with *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Animal Farm* and *Other Desert Cities* as part of Theatricum's 2017 "Rising Up" summer season. Tickets range from \$15 to \$38.50.

The outdoor amphitheater at Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum is terraced into the hillside of the rustic canyon. Audiences are advised to dress casually (warmly for evenings) and bring cushions for bench seating. Patrons are welcome to arrive early and picnic before a performance.

Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum is located at 1419 North Topanga Canyon Blvd. in Topanga, midway between Malibu and the San Fernando Valley. For a complete schedule of performances and to purchase tickets: call 310-455-3723; www.theatricum.com; www.facebook.com/theatricum; twitter: @theatricum.

Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum



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