

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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BETWEEN RIVERSIDE AND CRAZY



Photo by Jenny Graham

Fountain Theatre

In an interview featured in the program accompanying the Fountain Theatre's Los Angeles premiere of Stephen Adly Guirgis' 2015 Pulitzer Prize winner *Between Riverside and Crazy*, the dramatist is asked to name a playwright who influenced him.

"Tennessee Williams is the man!!!" Guirgis answers, the three exclamation points part of his handwritten response.

The interesting thing is how much Guirgis and Williams have in common, both notable for one major similarity: the ability to take a socially marginalized bluecollar character and elevate him or her into a genuine heroic figure. Tenn had his Stanley and Leona and Chance Wayne, Guirgis has his Angel

and Lucius in *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*, Chickie and Shank in *In Arabia We'd All Be Kings*, Jackie and Ralph D. in *The Motherfucker with the Hat*, and all the dysfunctional denizens gathered at Ortiz' Funeral Parlor in *Our Lady of 121st Street*.

Guirgis' most saintly underdog of all might be *Between Riverside and Crazy's* Walter "Pops" Washington, an aging world-weary African-American former New York beat cop fighting for monetary compensation from the NYPD after being disabled from six bullets pumped into him—at closing time at a strip club considered off-limits to cops—by a rookie new to the force who may or may not have called Walter the "n-word" as he fired.

The makeshift family Walter (Montae Russell) has gathered around him in his incongruously oversized rent-controlled Riverside Drive apartment, all "hoppin' around here like it's Section 8 housing," include his recently paroled son Junior (the always-impressive Fountain regular Matthew Hancock) and his kid's possibly pregnant, possibly former "pro" girlfriend Lulu (Marisol Miranda), as well as providing a generous roof to huddle under for a shaky recovering junkie named Oswald (Victor Anthony), a guy who, Pops observes, "got emotionalisms."

Ignoring his landlord's eviction notices as his back rent mounts and commandeering his recently deceased wife's wheelchair to wander around the house as he grieves for her, Walter stays stubbornly unwilling to do anything to benefit his recovery, including rejecting all efforts to get him to take care of himself and especially to eat better, instead demanding high-extra-strength-sodium Ritz Crackers over any healthier alternative.

Walter is something of a tragic modern-day Lear, surrounded by people who, no matter how much they insist they're only there to help, might not have his back after all. These include his former partner and protégée Audrey (Lesley Fera), now promoted to detective, and her blustery fiancé Dave (Joshua Bitton), drooling for a promotion as he's assigned by his precinct bosses to try to get Walter to sign a non-disclosure settlement agreement and end his outstanding dragged-out lawsuit against the department.

Even the uninvited visiting Santeria-obsessed lady from the local fundamentalist church (Liza Fernandez) trying to get him to take communion has a secret agenda and the continuously barking offstage "little bad intent motherfucker" dog his housemates brought home to keep him company, leave Walter even less anxious to rejoin the world outside his apartment—something in his case that quickly becomes understandable.

Director Guillermo Cienfuegos does a slick job of making the sometimes limiting Fountain stage approximate Walter's sprawling classic upper-westside apartment (inspired by the playwright's own similarly-sized Riverside Drive residence he moved into to care for his dad after his mother's death), a space which designer David Mauer has created in compartmentalized sections to evoke different areas of Walter's once-grand home now clearly transformed into a self-imposed prison.

Although challenging here, this does not mean the Fountain is the wrong destination for this long-awaited LA debut—in fact, it is the quintessential space for it. Any of those larger venues one might have expected this play to land in its first LA mounting would never afford such easy access to the

Cienfuegos hosts one of our city's best ensemble casts in an outstanding season chockful of an abundance of talented ensemble casts invigorating our reclaimed desert climes, a factor that leaves the outcome of my annual TicketHolder Awards an impossible task for me to contemplate this year. Pass the eggnog.

Although it takes some time to "get" the mellow and at first seemingly dispassionate performance of Russell, the true dynamism of his work as he leads the charge for the other actors to bounce off of and spring from is something to behold. And by the time Walter proves to have more wisdom and tricks up his sleeve than anyone could ever expect, in a town where standing ovations are as common as rush hour traffic jams on the 405, this is one actor who really and sincerely deserves one.

Hancock is an excellent foil to Russell's patriarch as the well-meaning but characteristically messed-up Junior and Anthony excels as Oswald who, despite his efforts to stay sober, eat healthy, and make things right with his own father, is a scary catalyst for what makes Walter's world turn upside-down once again.

Miranda is a refreshing comedic treat as Lulu, who may not be the sharpest tool in the shed—Walter notes her lips even move when she's reading the horoscope—but then she has an "understanding" with her higher power when it comes to things such as getting sober or dressing as though she's still walking the streets. "I know how I look," she tells Walter, who begs her to put on a robe over her fetching short-shorts and halter top when she comes down for breakfast, "but that don't mean I *am* how I look."

Fera is wonderful as Audrey, torn by love for her former partner and her fiancé's questionable agenda, while Bitton delivers the Ken McMillan-esque roughhewn New York cop routine to near-perfection—albeit a bit predictably, which does tend to show his character's hand when the final twist in the career cop's true intentions should be more of a surprise.

As the pious church lady reminiscent of every uninvited Jehovah's Witness who's ever darkened your door, Fernandez makes her limited stage time one of the most impressive things about this production. While initially looking a little like Freda Khalo reincarnated as a demure and introverted scripture-spewing missionary, Fernandez successfully assays a character who, in true Guirgis-style, drops a jaw-dropping bombshell she plays with utmost authenticity.

Unlike his hero Tennessee Williams, Guirgis is a master at writing hilariously outrageous and delightfully off-kilter dialogue to lessen the pain of his characters' challenging, life-crushing existence and here, he is at his best. Yes, there's surely a lot of Williams-spawned inspiration in *Between Riverside and Crazy*, but there's also a little O'Neill, a little Odets, a little McDonough, and even a dollop of early Mamet—you know, reminiscent of that time when he could still write a good play.

In Stephen Adly Guirgis, we have found one of the most important and most insightful, sharp-witted, and observant new voices to energize modern theatrical literature. The point of awarding the Pulitzer Prize for Drama is to recognize work that examines the nature of our existence, particularly our existence in our complex and badly wounded country. This time out, the Pulitzer committee could not have been more on the money in their choice of a play to honor and make part of our history.