

Moving Tragedy Takes the Stage in 'The Ballad of Emmett Till'

Bayeza's star-crossed play, "The Ballad of Emmett Till", will make you laugh, cry, suffer, burn and rejoice, separately and all at the same time. Fraught with the horror of naked and fearful racial discrimination in the Deep South in 1955, it tells the awful tale of the violent destruction of 15-year-old Emmett Till, who was celebrating his 15th birthday by leaving his family in Chicago to visit his cousins in Mississippi for a working vacation. A sheltered boy who had been raised by his Mother and Grandmother (Karen Malina White and Adrenele Ojo). Following a bout of debilitating polio as a small child, he's a spoiled and utterly charming child on the verge of his first big adventure when we meet him, so full of beans that he's bursting to get out, see it all, do it all, and all at once. Lorenz Arnell, with a background in singing, acting, dancing, piano, and music produc-

Mad About Theater



by Madeleine Shaner

tion, is deliciously winning as the outgoing, outrageous Emmett on the cusp of manhood. Bayeza's script has a lovely, jazzy, hip-hoppy, extravagantly poetic, light-hearted, fun-loving Afro romp to it, so we're connected to the story immediately. The happy-go-lucky Emmett, with a rubber-faced smile and a hugely attractive presence, has the world, and his family, on a string, and the string wrapped around his little finger. Actors Arnell, Bernard Addison, Rico E. Anderson, Ojo and White

play all the parts, black and white, young and old, which can be a bit confusing at first, and does maybe dilute, or accentuate the black/white drama, but the quality of the performances makes for a philosophical argument which one cannot resist following up. Is the resulting drama essentially a black/white situation, happening at a particular moment in history, or does blame fall on these relationships in particular? The drama takes on an additional layer with the death of the original director, Ben Bradley, a Co-Artistic Director of the Fountain Theatre and an African American, who was killed in his home in Hollywood early in the production period. The

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Photo by Ed Krieger

Lorenz Arnell shines in the title role.



Photo by Ed Krieger

From left, Rico E. Anderson, Adrenele Ojo, Bernard Addison, Lorenz Arnell and Karen Malina White star in "The Ballad of Emmett Till".

horrible incident put a colossal pall on the production, but Shirley Jo Finney, a talented African American Director from Chicago, who has worked at the Fountain before, was able to step in and pick up the reins. She is a fine, proven director and has done a remarkable and noteworthy job here. The dichotomy that kills the boy, besides now being part of history, is the difference between life in Chicago for "free" men, and the institutional anger and hatred of African Americans in the deep South, which finally sparked the nascent Civil Rights movement in

the '50s. Whether picking cotton, which Emmett unhappily finds himself doing with his Southern cousins, fishing in the Delta, which he dislikes intensely, chasing and killing his own chicken dinner, or living the restricted life of an African American in the South, these are not the pastimes Emmett sought out when he hit the road. This is a terrifying play (the most violent action takes place behind screens), and an excellent play, very hard to take, but gripping and, not surprisingly, depressing. Superbly played - the ensemble is excellent, backed by a fine set design by Scott Siedman and lighting by Kathi O'Donahue, costumes by Naila Aladdin-Sanders, sound by David B. Marling and lovely choreography by Ameenah Kaplan. The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave. Thursdays to Saturdays 8:00pm, Sundays 2:00pm, through April 25. Call (323)663-1525 or visit www.FountainTheatre.com.