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Kill Move Paradise

Odyssey Theatre Ensemble

Even before James Ijames received the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Fat Ham*, his phenomenal contemporary retelling of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the playwright was paying his unique brand of streetwise homage to Sartre's *No Exit*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and several similar episodes of *The Twilight Zone* with his 2017 play *Kill Move Paradise*.

Developed in 2016 under the mentorship of Chay Yew for Chicago's Victory Gardens Theatre and first presented the following year by the National Black Theatre of Harlem, *KMP* emerged with a bang five years before the huge success of *Fat Ham*.

Ijames' prophetically in-your-face earlier work cries out to us about the current horrendous epidemic of ongoing brutality perpetrated against innocent and unarmed African-American men and women—especially by members of what is ironically still called “law enforcement.”

One by one, four young Black men are dropped from a huge chute into a kind of nondescript afterlife waiting room, recent victims of violence stemming from racial injustice who arrive at this ominous destination without rhyme or reason, left on their own to figure out for themselves that they are indeed no longer among the living.

There are no clues where they have (literally) landed except an old computer printer doubling for a teletype machine on one side of the stage pumping out an endless list—a list, the waiting room's first inhabitant Isa (Ulato Sam) soon discovers, of our country's real-life victims of lethal violence over the past few years.

As Isa almost accusatorially recites each name directly to the audience, many on the list are names we all should shudder to remember, including George Floyd, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Trayvon Martin. This unfathomable pattern of death by cop inspired Ijames to write this play and its message couldn't be more urgent to be heard, even if sometimes it seems protesting such injustice is a dead-end that never seems to go away.

The promise of IJames is all over the place here, something akin to hearing hints of familiar musical strains from *West Side Story* wafting briefly in passages from Bernstein's much earlier score for *On the Town*.

Still, there's something measurably formulaic about *KMP*, a sense that we've heard these arguments and indictments about the public's apathy before, a feeling that the creators are preaching to the choir—especially when the actors often come to the edge of the stage to shout out to us, asking if we're scared of them or demanding to know why we're just sitting there staring at them instead of doing something about the situation.

Seated directly front row center, I haven't felt so embarrassingly Caucasian in a long time.

This sentiment echoes the complaints many of the lionhearted and radically upstart contemporary theatre companies proclaim about dealing with the older white audience base who in general would rather be watching something less personally accusatory—a fact all-too glaringly apparent considering the theatre community's ongoing post-pandemic struggle to keep the doors open.

This play made it clear when it first premiered the kind of urban poet IJames was about to become but *KMP* doesn't have the adroitness and seasoning to more cleverly finesse IJames' message his later masterpiece possesses. Luckily, what this production does have to camouflage its rough edges is the incredibly visionary Gregg T. Daniels in the director's chair.

Daniels keeps the play moving when the dialogue does not, delivering a dynamically kinetic 80 minutes of nonstop action, gloriously assisted by choreographer Toran Xavier Moore, as well as extraordinary lighting and sound created by Donny Jackson and David Gonzalez, respectively, and featuring a cast so obviously trusting and on the same page that the production breaks free of all predictability.

Sam is a powerhouse as Isa, easily commanding the stage at the play's beginning when for an extended period of time he is the only inhabitant of this sterile and unadorned limboland.

Jonathan P. Sims and Ahkei Togun are also heartbreaking as the next two souls to arrive in this hopefully pre-paradise holding cell, particularly as their characters give in totally to Moore's astonishingly strident tribal-influenced choreography while Sam chants his lamentable—and extensive—list of victims.

The most remarkable thing about these three performances is how they grow from wary, suspicious strangers to form a kind of familial brotherhood, something that becomes palpable when the last of the group arrives: a young

boy (in a staggering performance by Cedric Joe) carrying a futuristic child's water gun. As miserable as the others are about their own individual fates, how they instinctively band together to protect and care for Tiny is, aside from the Ijames' built-in inefaceable sense of humor, perhaps the only hopeful thing presented in the play.

As excellent—and haunting—as this production is, there's a frustrating feeling that lingers here, an enveloping perception how sad it is these things must still be said at all. There was a long period of my adulthood when I lived in a world of my own making blind to the kind of racial and social injustice at the heart of *KMP*.

Until nine or so years ago when our former rotting orange nightmare of a national leader signaled the Morlocks that they were welcome to crawl out from under their rocks and be free to admit they think and believe as he does, I honestly thought my early years of perpetual activism protesting racial inequities and social injustices in our poor country had made a difference. *Au contraire*.

"I always say I hope this play becomes obsolete one day," Ijames said in a 2018 interview. "That's like a crazy thing for a playwright to say... but I hope one day that people will say we don't need to do this play anymore because we are different. We are better. And every time I think we have reached a point where maybe this play is obsolete, it's suddenly not. And the violence with which that reality comes to me never ceases to take my breath.

"I'm also anxious because I know, by the time this play opens and someone is sitting comfortably in those fabulous seats, perhaps sipping a glass of wine, that list will have grown. I'm anxious because by the time this play closes that list will have grown. I don't say this to be cynical. I don't say this to be pessimistic. I say it because, unless we really begin to look at why this is happening—structurally, psychically—we will repeat it."

It seems insane to me that currently over 40 percent of American citizens can't see the face of pure evil trying so desperately to bring back the hatred and destructiveness we've spent the last five years trying to erase. Help put James Ijames' *Kill Move Paradise* on its way to obsolescence on November 4, won't you? That ever-expanding list of names at least deserves that.

THROUGH NOV. 3: Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, 2055 N. Sepulveda Blvd., West LA. 310.477.2055 or OdysseyTheatre.com
