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Spunk: A Powerful Cal Shakes' Production

By Lou Fancher



Aldo Billingslea as Sweet Back, Omoze Idehenre as Girl, and Tyea Tilghman as Jelly in Cal Shakes' SPUNK, directed by Patricia McGregor Photo by Kevin Berne

decades of white versus black, and black versus candy shopkeeper "white man" - in "The Gilded Six Bits."

The sum of Spunk's parts is a powerful 90-minute production. Top caliber set design by Michael Locker features mossy green, fog-filled backdrops interrupted by stage-to-sky chalkboards scored with "Ratonville," "1937" and "Jump at the Sun." Ingenious props, eye-directing costumes by designer Callie Floor and Anthony Michael Peterson's (Guitar Man) platform, firmly anchored upstage right, ground the work in what Cal Shakes does best: everything technical, pushed to its expressive limit.

But even this degree of technical mastery could not satisfy with mere bells and whistles, or serve as an artistic springboard, if there weren't talented actors-the bones and gristle of live theater-at hand.

Aldo Billingslea (Sweet Black, Joe) is imposing, yet draws both sympathetic tears and belly-rumbling laughter. L.Peter Callender (Sykes, Slang Talk Man) is so irretrievably wicked in the first story that only his wizard-worthy transformational skills and stunning, redder-than-red suit allow audiences to forgive him in story number two. Tyea Tilghman (Jelly, Slemmons), on the other hand, is likable from the start. Announcing his character's name-"Jelly, 'cause jam don't shake,"-he jiggles up a storm; spots an attractive woman and lunges like a nimble fencing champion. Even his final outing as the ice cream man who put a freeze on an otherwise beautiful marriage, Tilghman finds the humanity and the innocence in a man's lust.

The women, classically, even stereotypically, are the center of the play's universe, and equally impressive.

Margo Hall (Delia) is capable of taking on any role, from a queen to a prison guard, and here carries her worn wife/ensemble roles with dignity, grace and sly humor. Omoz•Idehenre (Missie May) is saucy, nuanced, and more than any man can handle. Although it's not a featured narrative, the "marriage" between Dawn L. Troupe (Blues Speak Woman) and Peterson, who opened the show with an audience warm-up including grunts and egg-shaking (You'll have to go to find out!), is stand-alone fantastic. With a mighty singing voice every woman would like to have and a physicality to match, Troupe's greatest surprise is her ability to embed herself deeply, then burst to the front lines and command our complete attention. All along, Peterson-the-man falls silent, but his instruments speak louder than words.

Spunk, with Hurston's lovely lines - "A harrowing wind rushed across his heart" - is a gift, delivered by the work-worn, world-wise hands of a remarkable theater company.

Spunk, presented by California Shakespeare Theater, runs through July 29 at the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (off Highway 24), Orinda. For information, call (510) 548-9666 or visit www.calshakes.org.

With Spunk, an adaptation by George C. Wolfe of three tales by writer Zora Neale Hurston, Cal Shakes proves its mettle.

The 16th century term, derived from "metal" and suggesting a steely determination characterized by fearlessness and substantial grit, explains why most of the seats were filled at a recent 7:30 p.m. weeknight performance and why eight of the finest actors working in live theater today formed the cast. Season after season, Artistic Director Jonathan Moscone's company raises the bar of local, professional theater.

The outdoor setting of Orinda's Bruns Amphitheater, refreshingly comfortable on a day with soaring temperatures approaching the century mark, wasn't the sole cause for celebration. Director Patricia McGregor has assembled a terrific ensemble: actors whose stellar individual performances are only eclipsed by their ability to surrender their lead for the good of the whole.

The stories, cloaked in Hurston's savory dialogue and sharpened with the writer's uncanny, opaque transitions, are spicy. Jubilant clapping in one moment becomes harsh, abusive slapping in the next. There's a disregard, or a deliberate embrace, of politically incorrect characterizations: the downtrodden wife in "Sweat," the philandering males in "Story in Harlem Slang," and the racists-black versus black,



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