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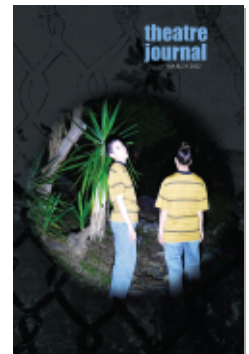
Jitney by August Wilson, and: *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare (review)

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filled the role of Mr. Michel, the property caretaker who later became the first victim.

Once the scene was set, members of the cast gestured to entrust the role of Dr. Rieux to Masson who readily accepted it. Following his example, others also eased into their stage personae. Brazilian actress Karine Teles played the journalist Rambert, an outsider trapped in the city and separated from her boyfriend. Lebanese actor Hashem Adnan took the part of Cottard, a suicidal fugitive who profited from the pandemic. Cottard's caring neighbor Grand was enacted by South African actor Simpho Mathenjwa. Chinese actress Sydney Zhao was the selfless Tarrou who died from the plague while volunteering on a health support team. American artist Henri Emond, credited as "Singer," composed and performed the original score. He also represented the incompetent public health authorities at times.

Casting six performers from different parts of the world, *The Plague* told a story that is both nowhere and everywhere. While the fictional town where the cast members work alongside one another to fight the catastrophe can only exist in intangible cyberspace, the COVID-19 pandemic proves, among many things, the impossibility of a few countries ending the spread of the virus without concerted international efforts. Cast members conversed in English, but they sometimes spoke in their native languages (the performance was subtitled in English and Chinese) to stress the pandemic's local dimensions and the profound moments. One such moment was calling the disease by its proper name, and the five actors took turns enunciating the word *plague* in Gaelic, Portuguese, Mandarin, Zulu, Arabic, and English. Another moment featured the close-ups of six pairs of hands, one playing the banjo at an increasing tempo and the others repeatedly miming handwashing to the music. The actors alternated to narrate the development of the plague in their mother tongues, and Adnan covered Camus's original reference to an Arab killed on the beach in Arabic, which resonated with the rise of racial violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The polyglot production would not have been possible without Wang fully tapping into the potential of Zoom as a performance platform. Given the limitations, the ever-changing set and screen layout steered clear from presenting tiresome talking heads and marked *The Plague* as a staging tour de force. In one scene, Dr. Rieux and Grand spoke about their wives from whom they were separated. The two players, Masson and Mathenjwa, started side by side and each took up half the screen. During the conversation, they edged toward the center of the screen until a half of their body moved out of the frame and their faces became one. Half-white

and half-black, Dr. Rieux and Grand merged into an Everyman who longed to see their loved one again, an emotion that transcends racial and national boundaries in times of crisis.

The daring experiment of staging a live performance across five time zones also came at a cost: minor technical glitches, freezes, and time lags transpired in the performance that I saw. Occasionally I found myself in the mindset of watching a circus show, getting an adrenaline rush after actors narrowly escaped a mishap. In the end, performers, simultaneously in and out of character, came out of their apartments to celebrate the lift of the lockdown. Finally eating the food that they prepared at the beginning of the performance, they revisited the moment when the everyday and the theatrical overlapped and bade goodbye to audience members who bore witness to the fight together. While food brought people together, this hard-earned meal could only be shared after characters/actors overcame the plague/perils of online theatre. Timely and optimistic, *The Plague* reminded us that the coexistence of international solidarity and precarity is indeed our reality.

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JITNEY. By August Wilson. Directed by Chuck Smith. Kennie Playhouse Theatre, Nashville. August 12, 2021.

TWELFTH NIGHT. By William Shakespeare. Directed by Jim Warren. Nashville Shakespeare Festival, Nashville. September 3, 2021.

The Nashville Shakespeare Festival (NSF) has staged an outdoor production of a work by its namesake every summer for thirty-three years. The annual production, usually a comedy, is performed at the Yard at OneCITY—a retail, hotel, and restaurant development near Nashville's centrally located Centennial Park—and is, for many who attend, a traditional event marking the end of summer and the beginning of the school year. This year, NSF offered all that has come to be expected of its summer production with a lively iteration of *Twelfth Night* directed by Jim Warren, founding director of the American Shakespeare Center. Importantly, it augmented its traditional summer offering by teaming up with Kennie Playhouse Theatre, a small Black production company in Nashville, to share its summer stage with an outdoor production of *Jitney* by August Wilson, directed by veteran Chicago direc-



Kenny Dozier (Turnbo), Clark Harris (Doub), and Pierre Johnson (Fielding) in *Jitney*.
(Photo: Michael Gomez.)

tor Chuck Smith. Taken together, not only did the paired productions celebrate a diversity of theatrical artistry, they also emphasized a civic function of theatre. Economically accessible and performed outdoors in a gathering space in the midst of the city, each production brought strangers together to share in a common experience, a kind of communal event that seems increasingly rare in our polarized and divisive historical moment. In different ways, each production considered issues of belonging and connection, thematic concerns reinforced by the festival's inclusive and public setting.

Jitney, part of Wilson's American Century Cycle exploring African American life in each decade of the twentieth century, directly explores notions of community through its depiction of a group of jitney drivers, men who use their own vehicles to provide rides to those in need of them. Set in 1977, *Jitney* takes place in an interior workplace: a station in which these independent operators take turns fielding calls for their services. The drivers form a tightly knit band rife with family-like relationships and conflicts. Each character is defined by a dominant characteristic that distinguishes him from the others and contributes to the representation of a collective composed of a variety of recognizable individuals. Becker, the older driver who runs the

station, is the play's benevolent patriarch. Turnbo, the busybody with a sharp temper argues incessantly with Youngblood, the young Vietnam veteran, who he accuses of lacking respect for his elders and for the station's customs. Fielding, the alcoholic, can never get ahead because he keeps borrowing money from the other men to buy booze. Through their shared workspace, the play's characters, with all their quarrels and connections, demonstrate both the interrelatedness and the differences that characterize their community.

The greatest strengths of Kennie Playhouse Theatre's production of *Jitney* were the detailed characterizations created by its ensemble. In Brian Anthony Wilson's Becker, I saw the dignity and generosity of a life lived in service to his fellow citizens. When Pierre Johnson's Fielding, a former tailor, examined the cheap suit jacket Becker's son Booster was issued on his exit from prison and explained how it might have been altered to better fit him, I saw the professional expertise of the man that Fielding had been once within the shambolic drunk he had become. Kenny Dozier as Turnbo clearly communicated both the desire to belong and the fear of change that triggered his fiery temper. The range of complex characters represented by the skillful acting company and their palpable familiarity with



Kyra Davis (Rena) and Gerold Oliver (Youngblood) in *Jitney*. (Photo: Michael Gomez.)



Tophre Embrey (Sir Toby Belch) and David Wilkerson (Malvolio) in *Twelfth Night*.
(Photo: Michael Gomez.)



Tom Mason (Feste) in *Twelfth Night*. (Photo: Michael Gomez.)

one another created a realistic picture of a multifaceted citizenry onstage.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the historically situated plays of Wilson's American Century Cycle is their depiction of cultural changes that their Black characters experience at different points in time. In this production of *Jitney*, one relationship marked the play's American historical context particularly effectively. Youngblood, the youngest of the drivers secretly saves money to buy a house for his girlfriend, Rena, and their toddler. In doing so, he fulfills a traditional masculine role as provider and believes that his surprise will be well-received. Instead, Rena confronts him for cutting her out of an important decision that affects her profoundly and reminds him that she too has priorities and opinions. Kyra Davis as Rena movingly portrayed a young woman trying to establish a genuine partnership rather than a relationship in which her man is responsible for decisions that impact them both. In Youngblood's response to Rena's criticism, actor Gerold Oliver effectively portrayed a young man beginning to understand the work that a successful relationship will require. In the capable hands of these actors, I saw an emerging Black feminist consciousness begin to disrupt traditional models of heterosexual partnership and to establish new kinds of connections.

While it initially seemed incongruous to see *Jitney* with its realistic interior setting in an outdoor performance venue, the sense of strangeness faded quickly as the production began. Designer Shane Lowry's serviceable unit set, replete with an old sofa, desk, and chairs, fit neatly within the large domed sculpture that defines the playing space of the Yard at OneCITY and suggested a comfortable, shared work space. Victor Wooten's funky original musical score set the production squarely in the 1970s and effectively underscored transitions between scenes, while Hazel Robinson's historically accurate costuming reinforced the period visually. In fact, performing outside a conventional theatre space made the production viable in a city in which the Delta variant precipitated a rapid rise in COVID-19 cases during its run. The outdoor setting of the production also emphasized the play's themes in an unexpected way. During the performance I watched, I saw several people walking over a bridge behind the set stop to watch the actors onstage. In that moment, the sense of community created by the characters onstage was bolstered by those citizens of Nashville who, outside the confines of the play, peered in for a minute or two. The life of the fictional city onstage was reflected by its setting within the visible city beyond its bounds.

The Nashville Shakespeare Festival's production of *Twelfth Night*, performed on a bare stage backed

by the architectural elements of the *Jitney* set, was more obviously suited to the outdoor park setting. Warren's production evoked a contemporary Nashville-like environment through its use of blues-inflected rock songs composed and performed by local musician Tom Mason, who played Feste, Orsino's fool. Accompanying himself on electric guitar backed by offstage bass and drums, Mason's songs set Shakespeare's words ("For the rain it raineth everyday," for instance) to Americana-style tunes that established an accessible and inviting tone for the production. Mason's musical Feste became the production's backbone as the single character most involved with the play's different subplots. Mason, an actor in his early sixties, effectively conveyed Feste's foolishness through the delight he exuded as he participated in various onstage antics, as well as a genuinely believable wisdom suggested by his years. In doing so, Mason's Feste connected the two poles of the play: its comic raucousness and its more poignant longing for love and union.

In general, this *Twelfth Night* favored the broadly comic subplot to destroy Malvolio over the play's more contemplative questions about love and infatuation. Maria, played by Miranda Pepin, radiated a kind of manic glee as she organized her disorderly drunken companions and enlisted them as co-conspirators. Topher Embrey gave a particularly compelling performance as Sir Toby that inspired affection by relaying just how much fun the lout was having. Richard Colley's hapless Sir Andrew and Nettie Chickering's cheeky Fabian rounded out the lively group. The comic quartet dominated the stage whenever they were present and through their shared delight in their own plotting, conveyed the sense of an "in group" or clique. They included the audience in the fun, establishing a friendly relationship with spectators through direct address and contemporary references. During the exorcism scene, for instance, Sir Toby drenched Malvolio with liquid sprayed from a large plastic container labeled "Holy Water," and Feste performed a toe-tapping number, "Devil Be Gone," backed by an enthusiastic red-robed gospel choir. For all the energy of this scene, Malvolio, ably played by David Wilkerson, inspired a degree of sympathy that was difficult to reconcile with the comic characters' remorseless playfulness.

The play's love plots were capably enacted, but less prominent in this *Twelfth Night*. I accepted the premise of Orsino's love for Olivia and Viola's love for Orsino, although these relationships were among the production's least developed. Much

more engaging was Olivia's love for Cesario, the boy that Viola pretends to be. From their first encounter to the scene in which Olivia celebrates their betrothal, actress Allison Campbell communicated Olivia's giddy infatuation with a sense of agency and urgency. Her Olivia lusted for Cesario rather than merely pined for him. After her betrothal to Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, Olivia seemed not only delighted by her union, but positively triumphant in winning the man who she believes is Cesario despite his previous hesitancy. Of all the production's characters, she most fully embodied the lovesickness and emotional excess often associated with the play and, ultimately, the true joy of being paired with the right person.

Olivia's betrothal ushers in the play's final scene, in which all the disguised characters reveal their true identities and the comic characters explain their exploits. As is the case with other Shakespearean comedies, a sense of community is established as the play's characters gather together to celebrate new unions and social order is restored. Malvolio's expulsion at the end of *Twelfth Night* is a notoriously difficult aspect of the play, as it is at odds with its festive ending. While NSF's *Twelfth Night* was a lively and enjoyable production, it did not solve the problem of Malvolio—his angry exit raised questions about belonging and inclusion even while the production's conclusion seemed to celebrate them.

Apart from the individual merits of each of these fine productions, the fact of the partnership between NSF and Kennie is in and of itself worthy of comment. While *Jitney* Playhouse Theatre and *Twelfth Night* do not cohere thematically or stylistically, through shared marketing and a common platform, Wilson's drama was presented on an equal footing with the work of Shakespeare and as half of one of Nashville's higher profile theatrical events. By extending its privileged position within the Nashville entertainment landscape to an independent and under-resourced Black company, NSF broadened the reach of both. As predominantly white theatre organizations across the country reckon with the history of racial inequities in the field, it is heartening to see such a collaboration between two producing entities. It is not only a partnership that will provide more opportunities for Black actors, directors, designers, and producers in Nashville, but also a collaboration that will bring diverse audiences together to share theatrical experiences and, perhaps, broaden our sense of the communities we call our own.

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