

We've all been there—felt like we didn't belong, like we weren't accepted or valued. Those are universal feelings that make *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* easy to identify with.

And although this play indeed has serious themes, it has plenty of humor, too, and I needn't have worried about attending after a very short night of sleep, because it has more than enough going on to hold the interest of any theatergoer—even a sleepy one.

Set in 1950, the play centers around the coming of age of a young black girl, Ernestine Crump, whose father, Godfrey, has moved her and her younger sister, Ermina, from Florida to Brooklyn. In an effort to deal with the pain of his wife's death, Godfrey has begun following the teachings of Father Divine, the real-life religious leader of the Peace Mission Movement.

When the girls' wild aunt Lily comes to live with them, things get interesting, as they are torn between the strict religious beliefs of their father and the seeming freedom and adventure of Lily's lifestyle.

Playwright Lynn Nottage and director JoAnn Johnson do an excellent job of bringing the black experience of 1950s Brooklyn to vivid life, with references to music and culture of the times.

The entire cast has a chemistry suggesting a high level of comfort with each other. Their loving, fussing, funny and belligerent interactions reminded me several times of the lyrical take-no-prisoners banter in my own family. I almost flinched in sympathy during one scene involving hair and a hot comb.

In addition to being entertaining, the story offers insight into a period of black culture that is not often written about. "In the African Ameri-

A full meal New production brings slice of African American experience to life

BY KRONDA ADAIR



PHOTO BY OWEN CAREY

Gay actor Jesse Holmes sees parallels between his character's struggles and the difficulties faced by gays and lesbians coming out

can community, there are only a handful of stories that deal with that period," Nottage says. "In a lot of images on television and in film, the period was idealized, and I want to demystify it."

Crumbs is a drama that doesn't take itself too seriously. It has plenty of laugh-out-loud moments, most coming from the loving but gruff communication style typical of black family interactions. Then, too, the characters

sometimes lapse into flights of fancy that catch you off guard, then return you with a snap back to the "real" story.

And don't be too surprised if someone breaks into song once in a while. (It's not as jarring as it might sound.) Although the play has no gay theme, Godfrey and his second wife, Gerte, struggle for acceptance from his daughters and sister-in-law, which will ring true for gay audience members, especially entering the holiday season.

Portland gay actor Jesse Holmes shares

some thoughts about what drew him to *Crumbs*. "Once I read the play before auditioning, I really was excited about it. Godfrey is a complicated man, a very complex character, and those characters are more enjoyable and challenging to play."

Holmes also sees a universal connection for gay audiences. "Ernestine's coming of age—the depth of her love for life, wanting more—reminds me of what gay and lesbian people have

to go through when we're coming out: learning to find ourselves and to love those around us."

Despite being a veteran stage actor with 18 years of experience in New York, Holmes is too young to remember the Father Divine movement, so he had to conduct a bit of research first. "I remember his death, seeing the picture in the paper and hearing my mom speak about him dying," he says. "In 1965 it was rare to see an African American on the front page. I read a book called *God, Harlem USA* that was very informative. I tried to understand why someone like Godfrey would be drawn to the movement. I think Godfrey is looking for solace, answers to get him over the death of his wife, and he thinks Father Divine will provide him with the answers he's looking for."

Holmes' next move is to pursue his dream of working in television and film in Los Angeles, where he says the closet is alive and well. "In TV, there is still a stigma, once you're out, of being cast in only gay roles or not getting hired at all. It's not uncommon to be shunned by closeted gay actors and directors who see being associated with an out gay actor as the kiss of death."

Before he heads for the screen, be sure to catch Holmes' stellar performance in *Crumbs*. Oh, and be sure to take a nap before the show, because trust me, you don't want to miss a word. **J**

CRUMBS FROM THE TABLE OF JOY runs through Dec. 16 at Artists Repertory Theatre, 1516 S.W. Alder St. Tickets are \$15-\$28 from 503-241-1278.

KRONDA ADAIR is a book-sellin', coffee-pimpin', Buffy-watchin' entrepreneur who loves to write and sometimes gets paid for it. Write her at ephany@myexcel.com.

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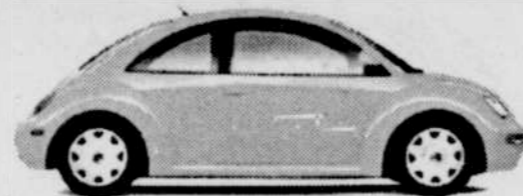
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WED. DEC. 12, 7-9PM

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