

Brisk and Funny 'Mean Girls' Tackles Skin Color

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its rumored promise of a potential date with Bobby Brown! -- until a new girl, Ericka (a lovely Morgan Walker) arrives from the U.S. She is kind, eager to make friends, and well-endowed with American beauty products, knowledge of American culture, and light skin that is naturally hers and not just a sign of better whitening products. ("Wow! You really are blessed!" one of the girls exclaims, to Paulina's evident horror.)

Even the two adults in the picture--the school's beleaguered headmistress, Frances (Kisha Jarrett), and her own former rival, the visiting pageant representative Eloise (Sara Williams), who finds a way to mention in nearly every sentence that she was Miss Ghana 1966--embody the essential conflict that these women carry in their bodies. Although Frances urges all the girls to audition for the pageant, to Frances, Paulina is the only real contender; she is driven, deserving, and embodies a truly Ghanaian standard of beauty. As Paulina gloats to the girls, "Headmistress likes to make everyone feel like they have a fair chance, but we all know I'm the best." But once the ambitious and practical Eloise lays eyes on Eric-



PHOTO BY RUSSELL J. YOUNG/PORTLAND CENTER STAGE AT THE ARMORY
Tonea Lolin, Kayla Kelly and Andrea Vernae perform as teenage girls who fight over who is prettiest, most worldly and who has the best shot as a contestant in the Miss Ghana pageant in 'School Girls' or, The African Mean Girls Play.'

ka, she sees the promise of a real shot; Ericka, with her pale skin and more European features, is what the judges like to see: "girls who have a more universal and

commercial look."

In this brisk and funny play, it's a small but powerful point: even in Ghana, one's proximity to whiteness is what determines

one's value. And even though the play isn't subtle and packages its truth in buoyant humor, the point, which too few audience members will have even begun to inter-

rogate, is well made. Colorism operates relentlessly no matter where you are.

This production benefits from a uniformly solid cast that lives the jokes and nervous energy and hints of underlying sorrow in their bodies. These women know the power of this material and carry it in every muscle and pore. Each is funny and beautiful in her own way, and each (including Taylor) fails to measure up to the impossible standard of whiteness. And the show is buoyed by Wanda Walden's spot-on costumes, which comically express the inherent humor in African girls aspiring to 1980s American pop culture, which is itself somehow inherently and comically aspirational.

Bioh's play feels too short; I wish she had carried her very good idea a bit deeper. But spending a brisk 80 minutes with these splendid women is too precious an opportunity to miss. The production runs through Feb. 16.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie and theater review column *Opinionated Judge* appears regularly in *The Portland Observer*. Find her review blog at opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com.



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'Life is Fare,' an Eritean/American film, dives into both the struggles and joys of being part of an immigrant community in the United States. The film will conclude the five-week Cascade Festival of African Films on Saturday, Feb. 29 at the Hollywood Theatre. The director Sephora Woldu will be in attendance at the screening.

From the African Perspective

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a Civil War." This autobiographical performance by Ifrah Mansour explores Somalia's civil war through poetry, puppetry, videos, and interviews, confronting a vio-

lent history with humor. The performances are 1 p.m., Saturday, Feb. 8 and 5 p.m., Sunday, Feb. 9 at the Moriarty Auditorium.

Other highlights include matinee shows for the whole family, a focus on women filmmakers and

a special series showcasing fully re-mastered classic films from seminal African filmmakers.

For the complete calendar of film screenings and director appearances, visit africanfilmfestival.org.