

Brisk and Funny ‘Mean Girls’ Tackles Skin Color

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY
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What makes teenagers so exasperating to live with, and such fascinating story subjects, is that they reflect back to us what we least like to see in ourselves. For teenagers--perhaps particularly teenage girls--the stakes of each interaction feel heightened, and they haven't yet learned how (and see no reason) to hide or dress up or tone down their worst impulses.

In “School Girls: or, The African Mean Girls Play,” now on stage at the Armory in a co-production of Portland Center Stage and Artists Repertory Theater, teenage girls at a boarding school in Ghana fight to the death over who is prettiest and most worldly and who has the best shot as a contestant in the Miss Ghana pageant. The stakes are high--and white supremacy makes them more surmountable, even for a group of African girls.

Playwright Jocelyn Bioh plays this context for broad laughs, and teenage girls the world over are indeed funny; for these African teenagers in 1986, “The Baby-Sitters Club” can be “really powerful

stuff” and one can dream of visiting an American White Castle (“a castle with food!”). In other hands, this material would feel exploitive, but it helps that Bioh’s own parents immigrated to the U.S. from Ghana in 1968, and that she is motivated in part by a clear intention around presenting African stories that move us beyond the crude poverty porn that characterizes most of our collective image of the African continent. The laughs here are affectionate, and reflect some important insider understanding about what it is like to live female inside of dark skin.

The story revolves around a pack of girls who jockey for in-group status at a Ghanaian boarding school. The leader of the pack is, unmistakably, Paulina (Andrea Vernae, taut with furious energy), who relentlessly asserts her dominance with endless corrections of the girls who vie for her approval. There is no question in anyone’s mind that she has the only real shot at winning the pageant -- with

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PHOTO BY RUSSELL J. YOUNG/PORTLAND CENTER STAGE AT THE ARMORY

Paulina’s (Andrea Vernae, right) dreams of winning a teenage beauty pageant in Ghana is threatened by the arrival of Ericka (Morgan Walker) a new student with undeniable talent, beauty... and lighter skin in ‘School Girls’ or, The African Mean Girls Play,’ now playing through Feb. 16 at Portland Center Stage at the Armory.

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