

Exploring Life at the Margins

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what they and their teachers often experience as a war zone. Her own son, Omari (La'Tevin Alexander), isn't a student there, however, she and her ex-husband have sought to improve his prospects by enrolling him in a private prep school. At the opening of the play, Omari has been suspended for striking a teacher, throwing mother and son into a tailspin. What pressures are closing in on Omari, even inside his more privileged context? The play illuminates how the stresses and trauma that black families experience are not entirely economic, at least not in the

ways we would think of, so much as cultural and even spiritual--how one is confined by what others expect to see. The pipeline isn't only to prison; it's to an imprisoned identity.

This sensitive production is buoyed by strong performances, especially by its two leads. La'Tevin Alexander embodies Omari's sense of confinement; the options his parents have attempted to give him thrust him into a world where he is tokenized, where he is expected to receive opportunities with gratitude and subservience. In many ways, his good mind intensifies the pressure; the anger and inquisitiveness of a young black man is met not with space



PHOTO BY SHAWNTE SIMS/
COURTESY PORTLAND PLAYHOUSE

La'Tevin Alexander and Reggie Lee Wilson illuminate aspects of the school-to-prison pipeline in "Pipeline."

and understanding but with an impulse to break him.

Ramona Lisa Alexander conveys the anguish of a good woman attempting to use the tools at her disposal, as is her prosperous ex-husband Xavier (Reggie Lee Wilson). With all the best intentions, these two have attempted to do everything right, to protect their son from the pressures that are supposed to be the "problem" for black children. Yet despite their efforts, their son is still in trouble, and they are alienated from each other and, to some degree, from him. This thoughtful production of Morisseau's insightful play, beautifully directed by Damaris Webb, illuminates Audre Lorde's observation that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. What Omari needs--and what his parents need--require more than resources and education; this play opens space for love and curiosity about that something more.

Profile Theater, in partnership with Artists Repertory Theater, continues its exploration of the work of Paula Vogel with a production of "Indecent." This beautiful play, originally commissioned as part of Oregon Shakespeare Festival's American Revolutions project, also grapples with questions of identity and pressures to attain respectability at the expense of authenticity.

Vogel struck gold with an important and little-known piece of theater history, the trajectory of "The God of Vengeance," a play written in Yiddish in 1906 by Polish-Jewish writer Sholem Asch. That play about a Jewish brothel owner and a former prostitute who seek respectability for themselves and their daughter, Rifkele, feels far ahead of its time--but the story of the play's trajectory through Europe and, eventually, to an obscenity trial that hampered its 1923 Broadway production, is endlessly illuminating.

What originally made the play controversial was its focus on unsavory characters and its treatment of the Torah; in a time of virulent anti-Semitism, a story of a brothel owner with a complicated relationship to Judaism and any idea of redemption seemed dangerous. Asch sought to tell the truth rather than to focus on stories that would more obviously support his beleaguered community's quest for acceptance; compromised characters exist in every community, and their stories are important and illuminating.

But at the center of Asch's play is a love story between two women, Rifkele and Manke, one of the prostitutes in the brothel run by Rifkele's parents. As "Indecent" illuminates, love in the midst of oppression

spoke to audiences--and yet the love story became the wedge that led to the obscenity trial (driven by the efforts of a rabbi to shut down the play). The dominant culture would not have shut down "The God of Vengeance" for its treatment of the Torah and its depiction of moral compromise, but its fear and judgment of a love story between two women could be enlisted to hinder production of a play that did not portray who American Jews wanted to be in the world. Eventually Asch himself, heartbroken by oppression of Jews that culminated in the Holocaust, banned further productions of it.

"Indecent" becomes a compelling rumination on this history. In this gentle production, we experience the actors as ghosts of the many artists who found hope in the play itself; they carry the history of a piece of art that challenged even its own creator, who wrote it as an idealistic youth and then neglected to protect it from efforts to turn it from a story of love to one of judgment. The actors and stage manager, caretakers of the play, are inspired by it and also struggle against their own ambitions and desires for acceptance. Eventually, artists struggling for survival in the Polish ghetto during Nazi occupation stage regular readings of a play that has been such a source of hope for the Yiddish community.

The Portland production, beautifully directed by Profile's artistic director Josh Hecht, benefits from especially resonant design choices; we see how the play and



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN KELLY/
COURTESY PROFILE THEATER
Michael Mendelson in the heart-opening play "Indecent."

the many artists who loved it and created it lived inside shifts in culture and time. And as with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival production I saw earlier this year, choreography and three on-stage musicians hold the soul of this play, revealing essential components of Yiddish culture in movement and the sounds of accordion, clarinet and violin.

Written by visionary women, both these plays offer heart-opening journeys that are worth making time for. "Pipeline" plays at Portland Playhouse through March 15, and "Indecent" plays at Portland State University's Lincoln Hall through March 8.

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