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Dealing with the Truth

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car crash and more like looking into our own souls, if we are willing; “Appropriate” holds up a mirror to the impacts of American chattel slavery and anti-Black racism on its “beneficiaries.” And if we are honest, the beneficiaries include more than the descendants of former slaveholders like this family.

Profile Theater’s production, playing through May 22 at the Imago Theater in Portland, is essential viewing. Its uniformly stellar cast, benefitting from courageous direction by Jerry Ruiz, goes all the way in to the play’s most difficult elements, sparing neither us nor themselves. I expect it is a heavy lift; the play’s action assembles a remarkably comprehensive menu of moves people make to avoid seeing what is right in front of them. Embodying that takes a relentless commitment to the truth.

The reunion of three siblings, Toni, Bo, and Franz (rebranding himself from his given name of Frank), and their families occurs six months after the death of their father, at the debt-burdened family “plantation” in Arkansas, where none of them live any longer. Through casual references, we learn that the grounds include two cemeteries (one for the slaves), and we can see that the house is laden with junk that they need to sort through for an estate sale. (Franz describes their dad as a “hoarder,” though I can think of additional explanations.) Sorting through the mess, Bo’s children haplessly unearth a series of signs that their Harvard-educated lawyer grandpa was a member of the Klan and an unrepentant racist, beginning with an album of postcards of lynchings. (I’ll leave you to discover the rest of their finds.)

Naturally, no one manages to directly deal with or even name the significance of these discoveries. Perpetually furious Toni (Linda Hayden), who is recently divorced and ousted from a job as a school administrator due to the misdeeds of her teenage son Rhys (Colin Kane, desperate for respite), cared for their father in the end and administers the estate. She carries that role to extremes, quashing any suggestion that their father was even slightly prejudiced—and tellingly, Toni’s defense against attempts by Bo’s wife Rachel (Sara Fay Goldman) to describe her own experiences of anti-Semitism from their father quickly devolves into epithets. For her part, Rachel’s obsessive focus on sheltering her children evidently has left them without skills to process reality. Bo (Gavin Hoffman, tightly wound), seemingly the most successful sibling, appears to have begun

avoiding the family legacy as far back as his own childhood visits to the plantation, and has honed an inability to imagine that he is seeing really everything that is materializing before his eyes. And bringing further chaos into what the others have likely experienced as equilibrium is Franz (Tyler Caffall, more sorry for himself than sorry), estranged from the family for 10 years after a series of misdeeds including a conviction for child sex abuse. He has arrived with the self-styled River, his much-younger fiancée (Elizabeth “Lizzie” Rees, embodying River’s confidence that does not appear to be hard-won). Franz and River, trained in Reiki and New Age platitudes, exercise a reflex to turn every unfolding discovery into an occasion for redemption, though they both appear to lack much practice at self-application of the wisdom that River beatifically employs.

In a multitude of ways, each of the family members, including Bo’s children making the discoveries (Tiffany Groben, not nearly as helpless as her mother assumes and not understanding as much as she thinks she does, and Nico Spaulding, innocent, ignorant, and yet perhaps the most clear member of the family) is ill-equipped to understand what is crumbling around them or how they are carrying forward the rot. Bo and his well-schooled daughter separately suspect, and then confirm, that the photos might be “worth” money—and then they and each of the family members mishandle that information along with everything else. Each family member unwittingly contributes to the further disintegration of themselves and their “legacy.”

The New York Times review of an earlier production of this award-winning play described Jacobs-Jenkins as a “thief” of other playwrights (like Letts) while purporting to praise the play. That strikes me as an ironic and tone-deaf way of describing what this African-American playwright constructed before he even turned 30: an endlessly insightful assemblage of how generations of stolen lives and wealth have dehumanized the “beneficiaries” of that theft. What’s true is true, and this excellent production of the work of this gifted playwright offers us some help in seeing and maybe even understanding more of what is hidden in plain sight before it further destroys us.

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