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The Wrong Man

'Knock Me a Kiss' looks at the pressures of love and class among well-to-do Harlemites in the Jazz Age'

By Terry Teachout
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Knock Me a Kiss

Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe
1646 10th Way, Sarasota, Fla.
941-366-1505, closes Feb. 8

It is an untruth universally acknowledged that America has no class system. In fact, we have *lots* of class systems, none of which is more complex—or less openly discussed—than that of the black community. Such untold tales make for exciting theater, but I haven't seen a play that dared to put America's black upper class onstage since Lydia R. Diamond's "Stick Fly" came to Broadway in 2011. So it was a real pleasure for me to make the belated acquaintance of "Knock Me a Kiss," a history play currently being performed by Florida's Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe, in which Charles Smith uses the failed marriage of Yolande Du Bois as the occasion for a satirical yet sympathetic study of life among the well-to-do blacks of Harlem in the Jazz Age.

Since W.E.B. Du Bois, Yolande's father and one of the play's central characters, is no longer as widely known as he deserves to be, it's worth saying a few preliminary words about him. Born in 1868, the author of "The Souls of Black Folk" was a sociologist turned civil-rights activist who believed that the salvation of his race would be secured by the rise of a classically educated elite that he dubbed the "Talented Tenth." Naturally, Du Bois counted himself among the upper crust, so he was horrified when his daughter fell for Jimmie Lunceford, who would soon become a world-famous bandleader but in 1928 was still an obscure musician whose family came from nowhere in particular. Accordingly, Du Bois muscled in on their romance, insisting that she instead marry Countee Cullen, the Harlem Renaissance poet. That's a full-bore plot right there—and what makes it even more interesting is that Cullen, though neither Du Bois nor Yolande seems to have known it prior to the marriage, was almost certainly gay.

Mr. Smith has spun this twisty tale of doubly thwarted love into what he describes as “a fictional account inspired by [the] factual events.” The fictionalized Lunceford (played by Joel Patrick King) becomes a jive-talking hipster who contemptuously dismisses Yolande’s father (E. Mani Cadet) as “one of the most sadditiest Negroes I’ve ever seen in my life....that man’s nose so high up in the air, if it rained, he’d drown.” That’s Du Bois to the life, a light-skinned super-snob who is determined to marry off Yolande (Emerald Rose Sullivan) to Cullen (Ethan Henry) in order to enhance his young protégé’s social respectability: “Here you are, in your late twenties, a highly visible vanguard of the struggle [for racial equality] and you are, as of yet, unmarried. No matter how you turn it, it doesn’t look good.” By playing this culture clash for raucous laughter, Mr. Smith sets the audience up for Yolande’s heartbreaking second-act discovery that her elegant, talented spouse is not the marrying kind, and that her famous father is so wrapped up in “the struggle” that he is blind to his own child’s pain.

First performed in Chicago in 2000, “Knock Me a Kiss” has since made the regional rounds, and even had a brief off-Broadway run five years ago, with André De Shields playing Du Bois. I didn’t catch that well-reviewed production, but I can’t imagine that it was more impressive than this one, directed by Chuck Smith (no relation to the playwright), who previously staged the Chicago and New York premieres of “Knock Me a Kiss.” The six-person cast is tightly knit, with Ms. Sullivan giving a fiery, smartly paced performance as Yolande. Mr. Henry, a Florida-based actor whom I’ve lavishly praised in this space for his appearances in GableStage’s 2012 production of “The Motherf**ker With the Hat” and Palm Beach Dramaworks’ 2013 revival of “A Raisin in the Sun,” is no less interesting as Countee Cullen, playing him without a trace of stereotypically “gay” behavior. The only hint that he isn’t what he seems to be is the puzzling diffidence with which he treats the gorgeous Yolande (unlike Mr. King, who can’t keep his hands off her).

I wish that Mr. Smith had stripped some of the laugh-catching comic business out of the second act, which would flow better if it were played with perfect seriousness throughout. Otherwise, his staging is completely convincing, as is the set, designed by Steve Patmagrian. Most of “Knock Me a Kiss” takes place in the Sugar Hill apartment of the Du Bois family, and Mr. Patmagrian has made it look just like the overstuffed museum-piece home of a status-conscious intellectual who spends way too much time worrying about what other, richer people will think.

Founded in 1999, the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe performs five black-themed plays and musicals each season for a mostly white audience (Sarasota is only 4% black), operating out of an old warehouse that has been turned into a black-box performance space. If this production of “Knock Me a Kiss” is any indication, then WBTT is worthy of much wider regional recognition.

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