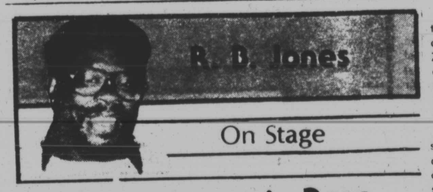

On Stage

Nevis Mountain Dew

"Nevis Mountain Dew" by Steve Carter, the current production at the Arena Players in Baltimore, is a drama dealing with the existential question of whether mere existence or a life with dignity and purpose are equivalent.

The play centers on a middle-class West Indian family in New York that has at its center an older brother who is being kept alive by an iron lung. He is totally immobilized and dependent on the care of his wife whose sexual yearnings are driving her into the arms of a co-worker, a bitter sister, Everelda, who is estranged from her husband and hostile to her brother's wife, and a younger sister, Zepora, who manages the property that the family owns.

The invalid Jared has been begging his loved ones to pull the plug on his iron lung because he cannot bear to exist in his current state of dependency when he was formerly a vital and virile man.

The entire play takes place on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday. His friend Ayton, who is also Zeporah's boyfriend, has bought a case of Nevis Mountain Dew, a powerful rum drink that eventually becomes a truth serum in the words of Jared.

Billie, the wife, buys a television set for her husband's room and it is delivered by two of her co-workers, Boise and Lud. Jared senses that his wife and Boise have a mutual attraction and during the course of the evening many revelations come out about the family relationships and about the yearning between Boise and Billie.

Essential to the success of the play which I believe was first performed at the Negro Ensemble Company is a sense that the illness and dependency of Jared is as much of a burden on him as it is on his family. Their unhappiness stems from their dogged determination to care for Jared regardless of the pain he suffers and the pain they inflict on each other.

All the characters with the possible exception of Lud who is primarily a dramatic device to move the play along with his slips of the tongue, must exhibit an inner conflict between duty and desire.

Cornell Jones, who performed the role of Jared the night I saw the play, gave an adequate performance. His accent held up well but he yelled too early too often in his characterization and this made his performance a bit flat. If he moderates the yelling, his performance will improve more rapidly. By screaming his lines so early he painted himself into a corner in terms vocal flexibility. He showed flashes however of getting a handle on the role.

Nura Saleema-Bey gave the strongest performance in the cast. Her accent was strong and in her posture and body movement she embodied the woman whose own life has been reduced to caring for her brother and making everyone in the house miserable. She epitomized sexual repression and emotional isolation. It is good that her performance was excellent because she is the closest thing to a villain the play has.

Peggy Jordan, who played Zeporah, has problems with her accent and her voice level and it seemed that they were related. Her accent was weak and it wavered during the play, however she conveyed very well a tenderness with the other characters in the play. She seemed to genuinely care for people. She demonstrated very well the inner conflict between her love for Ayton and her loyalty to her family.

Billie was played by Deborah Craig who was a last minute replacement according to the director of the play, Donald Owens. Her performance exhibited a rawness that was apparent, but she showed flashes of insight for example at the moment that she revealed her desire for Boise and their abortive first attempt lovemaking. At that moment she touched the emotional core of her character briefly.

One problem that the play had was in the area of passion between the men and women. **Zepora and Ayton and Boise and Billie speak tenderly to each other, but the kissing scenes need work. A listless stage kiss looks like acting, not two characters in a natural setting kissing.**

Calvin Garlic gave a very creditable performance as Ayton, a good hearted, free living simple man. Garlic captured the joy of life of the character, but he did not quite portray enough of the strength and forcefulness of the character.

Boise, as portrayed by Michael Kane, was also a man torn by internal contradictions. He wants Jared's wife, but he also wants to face the husband and tell him. Boise is a man who does not want Billie if she has to slink out of the door secretly. Kane has stage presence and a good voice, but he was slightly out of character. His Boise is a bit stiff. Also his vocal interpretation needs work because some of his softer phrases are garbled a bit.

Irvin Carraway as Lud captures his character very well. Lud is the least developed character in the play, but he is crucial to the initiation of certain plot developments.

Although the play suffers from awkward blocking and uneven performances, it is still a play that should be seen. The issue of suicide versus a life of incapacity is enough reason to go see the production. There are also some good plot twists and touching scenes of friendship also. "Nevis Mountain Dew" should get better as the play is performed during the run.

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HAROLD PRINCE
GRIND AS IN BUMP AND
GRIND
WEDNESDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 27
THRU SATURDAY, MARCH 16
Performance Schedule: Evenings: Monday Saturday at 8:00 p.m. Sunday March 3 & 10 at 7:30 p.m. Matinees: Wednesday & Saturday at 2:00 p.m. Thursday Feb. 28 at 2:00 p.m. Sunday March 3 & 10 at 1:00 p.m. Friday 8 p.m. Thursday Feb. 28 at 8:00 p.m. No Monday, Mar. Feb. 17
Ticket Prices: All Evening Performances: Saturday and Sunday Matinees: Orchestra & Dress Circle $30.00, Grand Tier $25.00, Balcony $22.50, Boxes $25.00. Wednesday Matinee: Orchestra & Dress Circle $25.00, Grand Tier $20.00, Balcony $17.50, Boxes $20.00. Friday Feb. 15 Orchestra & Dress Circle $25.00, Grand Tier $20.00, Balcony $17.50, Boxes $20.00.
The world premiere performance of "Grind" stars Ben Vereen, Leilani Jones, Timothy Hole, Stubby Kaye and introduces Beth Leavel (winner of the Golden Globe award for the Broadway musical "Baby") and Ron Richardson (winner of the Tony Award for the Broadway musical "Big River"). Directed by Harold Prince. Choreography by Lester Wallace. Scenic Design by Robert Kovach. Lighting Design by Jennifer Tipton. Sound Design by Otis Sallid. Musical Director/Vocal Arrangements by Lynn Freeman. Orchestrations by Michael Gibson. Dance Music Arrangements by Peter Howard. Production Stage Manager Jack Lloyd. Casting by Jerry Kissel, CSA. Press by Merle Frohman, Susan Bernard, Jeffrey Richards. General Manager Nancy Nagel. Company Manager Ruth Hendel. Associate Producer Ira Bernstein. Associate Director Ronald Lewis. Associate Choreographer Ann Reinking. Associate Scenic Designer Ed Wittstein. Associate Lighting Designer Ken Billington. Associate Sound Designer Jeff Fisher. 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