'Les Blancs': Anatomy of a good intention

By Alan Wayde Stancil

Firstly, the season: BLACK HISTORY MONTH. An appointed time (for all who are eager, interested or troubled) to celebrate the numerous and various contributions of "Afrikan," Americans to the bellowing tapestry that is American society.

Secondly, the place: Arena Stage in Southwest Washington, D.C., renowned for its' often clever presentations of American theatre.

Thirdly, the bright idea: let's celebrate Black History Month!

Then, the wise: a play by an Afrikan American playwright, a "major" Afrikan American playwright. Yes! Lorraine Hansberry. Yes! Lorraine Hansberry. But she's dead and everyone who's anyone has already seen a production of "A Raisin in the Sun" or "Raisin," the bastardized musical version of her powerful dramatic work.

Well, let's do another one of her plays. What? Why not "Les Blancs," the explosive tale of three brothers coming to terms with the political upheavals threatening their unnamed Afrikan country? Yeah, why not, "Les Blancs?"

It's sufficiently ambiguous. Ms. Hansbery wrote it or, more precisely, she started to write it (unfortunately, she died of cancer at the age of 34 before it could be completed).

But her husband, Robert Neimiroff, has "finalized" the text and Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. during what is nationally recognized as BLACK HISTORY MONTH, could be the first nationally acclaimed artistic theatre organization to produce a version of this "new" play by a "major" Afrikan American playwright. Why not "Les Blancs?"

Then, the play. Ahhhhhh, the play. "Les Blancs." The incomplete, potentially lethal warrings of Lorraine Hansberry: a woman who, perhaps at the time of her death, was on the road to eloquently illuminating the inequities and blasphemes of Western civilization as it relates and interacts to the philosophies of all those "colored," all those "non-white" inhabitants of this planet. The play! The play perhaps destined for greatness. Perhaps? The play!

Lorraine Hansberry

Then, the setting: Arena Stage. The stage itself, as the name implies, is situated in the center of the seating arrangement. It is theatre in the round, in the purest sense, and, for a play such as that devised by Mr. Nerimoff (and perhaps with Ms. Hansberry's assistance), the setting is totally unsuited for the wide range of characters and predicaments which the "finalized" text presents.

On one side of the auditorium, the music is too loud; on the other side, the dancer has her back to the audience. On another side of the auditorium, the dialogue is funneled to a selected few; on the other side, patrons wish to execute the many exotic birds which absurdly chirp at the more inappropriate times, inhibiting even the most elementary comprehension of the script.

Seventh, the script; there are moments when the brilliance of what one can imagine or access to be Ms. Hansberry's, shines through, almost like a glimmer of hope. Incredible moments when the events in question appear as immediate as the situation we all know to be apartheid or Boston. But these moments are few — after all, the play WAS NOT FINISHED.

Then, the performance: Tony Todd, as Tshembe Matoseh (the brother who ventures West), is all the "finalized" script demands he should be: entertaining, enigmatic, confused, and enticing. His voice, heavy with accent, often gets lost in the corner of Arena but this, alas, is due either to place or direction. Todd, however, remains convincingly powerful despite these shortcomings.

He is well complimented by an earnest performance by Richard Beymer, who portrays a "non-colored," "non-black" American writer exploring Afrika for the first time and with the purpose of documenting his discoveries. Their exchanges are a few of the play's most anxious and potentially grand moments: the rhetoric is duly voiced and the quests and passions for justice more than adequately expressed. The dancing of Evelyn Thomas is provocative, even if it's "meaning" is lost within the overall intent of the "finalized" script. She is so energetic that one wishes she could save the production.

Then, the fact: BLACK HISTORY MONTH.

Then, the problem: noble intention.

Finally, the thought: BLACK HISTORY MONTH should make everyone somewhat nervous. Too many people wish to pay tribute to or make amends for far too many things. It's all very nearly hysterical, much too frantic.

If the creative works by Afrikan American artists of all genres cannot be displayed and celebrated within the everyday fabric of the cultural setting which is American society, why bother to overstate the issue for a mere 28 or 29 days? The effort is forced and the product unsatisfying.

—Ruth Brown

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features Sonny Bono, Debbie Harry from the rock group "Blondie" and Divine, who has starred in several of Waters' films as a transvestite.

Two black choreographers, Ed Love and Kiki Shephard, of "Showtime At The Apollo," choreographed all the dancing, including "The Dog," "The Madison," and "The Bug," for "Hairspray," Drown said.

Before Brown landed the role, she was acting and singing in nightclubs and hotels. In her heyday she was as fierce as Etta James and Dinah Washington.

She played the Apollo Theater in Harlem, New York, The Royal Theater in Baltimore and other popular black night spots in the 50's and 60's across the nation.

Cab Calloway's sister, Blanche discovered Brown while she was performing with the Lucky Millinder Band at age 16.

Like so many other blues singers and black artists, Brown had to leave the United States and go to Europe, to find an audience. Racism was prevalent then in America.

In 1949, she helped to put Atlantic Records on the map. She had hit after hit.

She has also starred on television series such as the "Jeffersons" and its 1981 spin-off "Checking In," which Marla Gibbs starred in.

"There's something wonderful about entertainment," she said. "When the cameras are rolling and the microphones are on, that's adrenalin."

She said she will continue to act and perhaps release a new album in the near future.

Brown, like Motormouth Maybell, hosts a radio program. She hosts "Harlem Hit Parade" for PBS Broadcasting System.

She lives in New York and has two sons, Earl Swanson and Ronald Jackson, both who aspire to be actors.

Blues singers' exhibit at UMBC

"Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s," an exhibit that celebrates the women and the times when black blues vocalists dominated American music continues through March 6 in the Albin O. Kuhn Library and Gallery of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. This collection includes dozens of photographs, news clippings, costumes, sheet music and other memorabilia from the early years of the century when these black women vocalists made some of the most exciting music to evolve in the 1920s.

"Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s" reflects the research of UMBC Professor Daphne Harrison, whose book, bearing the same title, is being published this month by the Rutgers University Press. These were the cabaret or tent show singers who moved on to hit the big time in Baltimore, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Houston, Dallas, Chattanooga, Atlanta and Birmingham.

The blues women knew the blues lurked in the shadows, coming out to grab you, messing with you just when you thought things were going right. When they sang, they exorcised the blues feelings in a communal ritual with other black folk.

The blues queen stood on steps in glittering sequins and satins, sang the blues and captivated her audience in a love ritual that mesmerized her worshippers. The popularity of Ida Cox, Edith Wilson, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Sippie Wallace, Victoria Spivey and dozens more is a phenomenon which has not been matched in terms of numbers of black women who dominated the American music scene in a given decade.

The gallery is open Monday-Thursday, 8 a.m. to 11 p.m.; Friday 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Saturday noon to 6 p.m. and Sunday 1 to 9 p.m. Call (301) 455-2232.

Dr. Daphne Harrison

Ethel Waters, circa 1930.

'Jimbo' airs on Channel 2

For the sixth year, WMAR-TV 2 and the Arena PLayers will be presenting this year's winner of Channel 2's annual Drama Competition in honor of Black History Month.

This year's winner, 'Jimbo' Written by Brenda Warfield-Williams, will air tomorrow (27th) at 7:00 p.m. on Channel 2. It stars Darrell Kaye Carter as Jimbo; Vanessa Stewart as Lila; Sam Wilson as Uncle Creddy; and Calvin Garlic as Monk. All are members of the Arena Players.

'Jimbo' is the story of a young man's quest for freedom from slavery and his persistent convictions to make other slaves realize this same goal, by changing their brainwashed ideas about the 'Massah'.

Except for one scene, the action takes place, primarily, in a one room cabin, which helps to concentrate the interaction between the actors and the rising conflict between old and new ideas.

All in all, 'Jimbo' is a good play and deserving of it's commendations.

Congradulations are also in order for Meikil Berry nad her play, 'Better Late Than Never', and Barbara Molettee and her play, 'Perfect Fifth'. They won second and third place, respectively.

—Remy Man

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Kazin shoes, Seif's and Rodman's.

After being named the Remy Man, Farrakhan thanked the Baltimore community "for being very supportive" and pledged to donate "a considerable amount of his gifts and prizes to the homeless.

Backstage, he reiterated this commitment, "I intend to give several thousand dollars' worth of gloves and scarfs to the homeless as well as to Associated Black Charities and Childrens' Hospital. I want to be as effective as I can be in the community.

Mr. Farrakhan, who is employed by Farm Credit Banks, hopes to one day pursue a movie career and has already been accepted into the famed Lee Strasburg School of Acting. He said that he is "excited and overjoyed" at being chosen and he realizes the "challenging responsibility" that comes with the title.

Donyelle Dorsey, Miss Black Maryland, participated in the festivities and said, "Hakim is a true man of God. He presented himself well and deserves the award."

Everyone associated with the 'Remy Man of the Night' contest felt that the promotion was a huge success. Roy Sampson, program director at WXYV-FM agreed, "it was a very good contest in terms of bringing out a positive image in today's black male. We are happy with the way the people responded and we look forward to doing this again next year."

He added that V-103 would "continue to bring this type of product to Baltimore," and that "the Budweiser Showdown is coming to town next and will provide much needed exposure for local bands."

Jean Ross also said that it was a good contest. "I'm sorry that it's over. I never knew Baltimore had so many handsome and eligible bachelors. I hope we see many more contests in the future to highlight the beauty of Baltimore men."

There was even a proclamation signed by Mayor Kurt Schmoke declaring February 19, 1988, as V-103 and 'Remy Man of the Night' day in Baltimore.

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