

ANGRY BLACK WHITE BOY

Intersection for the Arts

February 26, 2009

The Island-Life Coordinator secured tickets to the venerable Intersection for the Arts in Babylon midweek for the premier of Dan Wolf's adaptation of Adam Mansbach's Angry Black White Boy, which has gotten rave reviews, including from the stodgy Chronicle.



The Intersection has dozens of projects going on simultaneously at any time of the year and has remained vital for the past 44 years down in the once notoriously dangerous area of Valencia and 16th Streets.

It was interesting reentering the space which has remained essentially unchanged since at least 1982, with a steep bank of cafeteria chairs arranged in tiers above a basic "black box" space.

We could swear that the usher wearing a newsboy cap and the emcee with long stringy hair were the same folks that performed the exact same functions well over twenty years ago.

As for the production, the official notes state "Angry Black White Boy features Dan Wolf as the title character along with actor/soundscape musician Tommy Shepherd, and actors and choreographers Keith Pinto and Duncan Cooper. This is a collaboration that wrestles head on with the messy issues of identity and race with all the fight and flavor of a Hip Hop battle."



Liz Hafalia, / The Chronicle

The heavily multimedia production is difficult to summarize, but basically is an abstraction of the story detailed in Mansbach's bestseller that describes a young Jewish boy from affluent family attending Columbia University -- not exactly an institution that welcomes blue collar or anything less than genteel -- but turning to robbery during his shifts driving a taxicab in an effort to somehow address if not redress injustices done by Whites on Black. The resulting media mayhem creates a situation too difficult for the boy to handle, leaving the resolution of America's racial mess to the audience to resolve.

In a bizarre twist, the customers who the boy robs fail to see his race accurately, reporting to the police that "an angry Black man ranting epithets" committed the crime.

Intending to create a situation in which Whites are forced to confront the realities of their own racism, the situation quickly gets out of control -- much as grandiose attempts often have done in the past -- and the resulting violence spirals well beyond his ability to direct the consequences of his actions after a national "Day of Apology" is announced in which Whites must perforce apologize to Black People for their attitudes.

Mansbach is fairly right on and wolf not far behind in that these sorts of public dramas usually result in the violent suppression of all voice and the hard consequences usually fall on those who deserve punishment the least.

Should it be forgotten, the people who got the nail-end of the lash during the Rodney King riots happened to be a helpless white truck driver and untold

numbers of African American mothers and their children caught up in the burning rage and what should be expected Official Response.

In the end, Justice was left, still blindfolded and bearing the weight of scales, but scourged and bloody and wounded.

The play fails, for those who are already experienced and committed, in revealing just how off our "angry black white boy" happens to be. The Offspring already did that some years ago with "Pretty Fly (for a White Boy)" song. And for those who have never stepped into the hot zone where public catharsis meets public acknowledgment, the play really hits a problem. What about the single mother trying to get through the day and the old man trying to take the bus home through a city on fire? These are the ones who always are the ones to suffer whenever the media demands a sacrifice.

There is also an issue of the difficult to nail point of personal connection in all of this. In our experience, the essential resolution of racial issues has always been a personal and individual one when motivated by an individual, and we feel that the background for the character is way too thin for his commitment. The character fails because he is really paper thin, but then, that leaves the rest of us.

Where the play works, despite the conscious failure of its principle character to accept responsibility, is in its leaving the audience with the sense that this racism thing is something to be gripped head-on and resolved and that it can be done, one person at a time. That idea of one person at a time is fairly critical.

That said, in terms of the ideas of the play, what also works is the blend of hip hop voice with stage tableaux that are essentially borrowed from Grutowsky without conscious appropriation. Which is good, because where Grutowsky would have paused all the action, Wolf and company flow through with a combination of music, dance and gesture that really works effectively as a seamless and cohesive whole. It works by virtue of its propulsive energy and in the area of race relations, that is one thing which is sadly lacking.

This is polemical theatre of which certainly Brecht and Company would approve. It is theatre that says, don't just sit in your seats and watch what is going on like a TV. See what happens and go out to make some change of your own.

In that vein, we heartily agree and so issue a solid thumbs-up to "Angry Black White Boy".

Intersection for the Arts & The Hybrid Project in association with Resident Company Campo Santo present the World Premiere of Angry Black White Boy.

Written and adapted by Dan Wolf from the book by Adam Mansbach

Directed by Sean San Jose

Featuring: Myers Clark, Keith Pinto, Tommy Shepherd & Dan Wolf

Collaborative Team: Sharif Abu-Hamdeh, Mia Baxter, Josh Begley, Duncan Cooper, Robert Hampton, Chinaka Hodge, Joshua McDermott, & Christopher Studley

Extended Run

January 29 - March 8, 2008 at 8pm

Thursdays - Sundays, \$15-\$25/sliding scale