

## STRANGE PASSING AT THE REP



The Island-Life Social Coordinator snagged 2fer1 Season Tix at the Berkeley Rep, unfortunately after the last Mother Courage show for which roving reporter and Java ombudsman Josh Bennett gave a thumbs up for topicality from the Brecht/Weill play about a woman struggling to get by in the middle of the Thirty-Years War.

We did wander up to the Berzerkeley, where the Mayor got caught tossing opponent's flybills in the trash during the last election. Just a fit of "I just don't know what came over me", he claimed. He is up for reelection this year.

Political shenanigans aside. Berkeley is no stranger to fine performance art and we certain got that in spades for the International Premier of Passing Strange, a monumental musical opus penned -- also in collaboration -- by the single-named Stew and Heidi Rodewald team, plus assist from Annie Dorsen, director. For a original work, season starter, no plans for Broadway kind of piece, the project certainly collected an eyebrow-raising, impressive ensemble of very accomplished actors, musicians and talented off-stage artisans. Most of the performers possess A-list stage, TV and screen credits. Several of the musicians have won international jazz competitions co-worked with the likes of Billy Preston, Dr. John, Taj Mahal, Felix Pastorious, David Byrne, John Cale, Roy Ayers, and some of the most incisive jazz musicians working today. Cannes awards, Williamstown and Sir John Gielgud fellowships, accolades, and tons of Ivy League certs clog their mantels.

You could say this ensemble aint too shabby -- and is not short of stellar.

Choreographer Karole Armitage danced with the Georges Balanchine Geneva Ballet and with the Merce Cunningham Company before serving as director of the Ballet of Florence, resident choreographer for Ballet de Lorraine (France), and has contributed works to Alvin Ailey, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Rudolf Nureyev's Paris Opera, as well as ballet groups in Berlin, Lyon, Monte Carlo, Munich, and St. Petersburg, while finding time to move Madonna, Michael Jackson and other artists outside of dance.

Scenic Designer David Korins presents solid credentials from Broadway and HBO as well as E! Entertainment that have earned him nominations for

scads of design awards and deserves special mention here for his amazingly effective luminescent 3D backdrop and the on-stage orchestra which drops into four separated pits which are also used to dispense and retrieve various props.

The list goes on quite a ways, but the plays the thing.



Although "Musical" is as close to a genre as one can tag this project, such a diminishing label really fails to convey the experience of watching a 2.5 hour work loosely modeled in structure upon medieval morality plays, if one can imagine such a play rewritten and directed by Berthold Brecht. And no American "musical" ends like this one, at a funeral with everyone singing a sarcastic and

cynical upbeat number laid on as a conscious patina over the rather bleak moral that "death sucks: it will happen to everyone you love before it finally happens to you."

The reviewer for the Oakland Trib actually lamented that the authors didn't provide more of the slaphappy ending "we are all longing for." But more on why Stew and Co. probably did it this way later.

The "book" for this little opera is fairly brief, and almost formulaic in origin and its assumed values reminded us uncomfortably of a mixture between John Cheever and Bill Cosby: The protag is named iconically "Youth" (David Breaker), and after getting a little juiced by his introduction to sex by a co-member of the Baptist Church Choir, and to reefer (and music) by the choirmaster Franklin (Colman Domingo, in the first of several scenery-chewing roles), departs his mother's less-than-honest Baptist Church to embark on a coming-of-age journey, starting with the formation of an hilariously poser all-Black punk rock band and continuing with an international odyssey in Amsterdam and Berlin, where various stylized characters play the part of Folly to our increasingly foolish Everyman Artiste.



Our Youth returns to the house where he was raised on news of his mother's illness only to arrive too late. He then delivers an eulogy in the exact place where the medieval Everyman, the Prodigal Son, and the classical Tin Pan Alley Broadway Jimmy Stewart is supposed to utter the remorseful lines of penitence so as to come back home and fix up that darned picket fence. All the members of the Church are there, listening with hope, expecting that little frisson of confirmation in something in which they would like to believe. But don't really.

Instead, our man begins by saying, "Yesterday I parked up on Arlington Hill and got high . . .". He then goes on to describe looking at the bright lights of LA spread out below and then the sun coming up with no epiphany forthcoming. "Instead, Los Angles remained infuriatingly as usual refusing to make sense."

In response, the churchgoers walk away in disgust, for the sinner remains unrepentant, refusing to put on a mask, and refusing to vindicate their own personal choices in life.

The continuation of this Morality Play is not for Everyman. Our Youth is The Artist as a Young Man, and while he has certainly engaged in Folly -- smoking his brains out with hashish, having sex with multiple partners at a time, snorting crank with a wild cross-dressing German performance artist and generally pretending to be something he is not -- he has also spent time practicing Craft, and that is something which is not a part of your "Piers Ploughman" Everyman.

While Stew lectures the Youth as a sort of Greek Chorus of common sense -- think Bill Cosby's conservative humane values coupled with Stanley Crouch's tartness -- the Youth seems to realize eventually at least that at least he has something of value inside of himself -- and it was put there by his long suffering single Mother (played tenderly and well by Eisa Davis). After those leaden moments -- for Stew never lets the language wallow in that mudslick of sentiment so often and so traditionally indulged by traditional musicals -- Stew says, "well you and everyone you know is going to die. So lets take our talents, such as we have about us, collect them and sing and dance and make music and sculpture and painting for as long as we may."

Thus ends the work with a traditional ensemble sing-along in an upbeat number.



There are loads of great moments in the work, and some really deadly satire, such as the whole Berlin sequence where Youth meets up with an anarcho-leftist artist collective inhabiting an Einstandsbesitz (an apartment squat) of the type that was fairly common from the seventies well into the eighties because of the high number of permanently vacant apartment blocks in that massive city of some five million people all crammed into a walled compound. The collective, calling itself GoHaus!, is a pretty deliberate hit on the pretentious Andy Warhol-styled communes and "postmodern" aesthetics adopted by folks who were less concerned with (or even cognizant of) the origins of those movements than with the adolescent joy of breaking things and getting away with it.

And besides, its never bad form or not politically correct to hit on the Germans -- who talk funny with those accents and uberseriousness.

And when Youth gets off the airplane, stepping from black-and-white stage set of the Baptist Church and Arlington Heights to Wow! Amsterdam! the backdrop rises to reveal the multi-textured flash of David Korins' neon and LED bright backstage, the effect is pretty amazing. You could see jaws drop all down the line while our hero wanders, stunned, into a hash bar.

Some of the critics complain, besides of Stew's uncompromising ending, that the characters never really flesh out, that we don't know any more about the character Breaker plays at the end than we do at the beginning. Well, we would have to say, you are missing the point if you are looking for details like what's his favorite color and does he ever ask about his absent dad. These are cabaret icons, not real people and Stew never had any intention of writing a play or a musical in any real sense and he says so quite clearly in the program notes. "I had no interest in writing a play . . . I wanted to make something that took the electricity of a rock show and merge(d) that with the rock and roll potential that exists in theatre."

In fact, the piece is more interesting in what it evokes than what it actually says. The title and what Stew says about it refer to issues of identity and pretense performed at first by necessity and then by habit. Here are the lines in Othello referenced by Stew's title.

Othello: She'd come again, and with a greedy ear  
Devour up my discourse. . . .  
And often (I) did beguile her of her tears,  
When I did speak of some distressful stroke



That my youth suffer'd. My story being done,  
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs;  
She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;  
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful." (I.iii.149-161)

The scene concerns Othello regaling Desdemona -- and others -- with somewhat elaborated tales of his adventures and by so doing currying favor with her father while frankly impressing the ladies.



Chronicle / Deanne Fitzmaurice

The act of "passing" for White, alluded to in the play when several characters refer to Youth's grandmother managing to survive by passing with her light complexion is a touchstone of identity issues that run through the play. "What are we doing but Black men passing as Black." Livingston says in the light blue car parked up on Arlington Hill, referring to his own closet gayness, the group's reefer smoking, and all of their sexual escapades while pretending to be devout Black Baptists in Church.

The issues of identity are certainly real, and not only in the Black Community, but the play prefers to use certain touchstones along the way rather

than come to grips with what individual identity means to the personage inhabited by Youth. Perhaps the play is clearest in stating the message over and over again much as poet John High once said to us, if you pawn yourself as something other than what you are, "you will wind up chasing your own sweet self down long hallways of mirrors, only to run up against something broken at the end."

Identity is a tricky thing that changes from time to time, for at one point Youth always hearing the siren call over the telephone to "come home" from his mother cannot go home, at least in any real sense of returning to the way things once were. Even as the Go Haus artists make pilgrimages home each year, those visits are clearly painful and distressing for all parties concerned. In fact, when Youth does go "home", he finds there is no real return and is rejected, first by inanimate Los Angeles, and then by the people of his community who cannot accept that someone really can change, for such possibility suggests a certain cowardice that only Franklin will cop to, and that knowledge only comes with a certain amount of self-dislike.

Although steeped and dripping with African-American experience, there is quite a lot of material here to knock on just about anybody's door, and in making his gestures large, Stew and Company sweep in every blend of color and ethnicity. There is nothing exclusive to Black experience in the story of "Young man rebels against his upbringing and instead of going to college, travels around in bad company, makes a fool of himself, breaks his mother's heart and learns a little along a way."

As for the more specific story of how an artist needs to learn to know his own "geography of pain" before presenting his work with authenticity -- and authenticity over artifice is an assumed value here -- that, too, is more global than culturally specific. Unless Mr. Stanley Crouch does come up with another answer, James Joyce wrote pretty much the same story in *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*.

Here is where Mr. Cosby and John Cheever come in. Please bear with us; you may not have thought of the two in the same minute before this.

Bill Cosby, a fairly successful and urbane comedian entertainer has had unfair brickbats thrown at him for making some critical statements that summatively are simple calls for common sense and absence of Folly, with specific reference to Black Culture. John Cheever, a darling of the middle class, is a successful fictionalist whose work often appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*, which are not exactly known for punk aesthetic, or wild experimentalism. For some people, Cosby is an example of someone who has yielded up something of himself to become successful and push his family forward in *White Society*. "If you have to change, it aint love." To impose thoughts on someone else, Cosby would probably reply that he does what makes sense for himself and for his family and all this gangsta rap and complaining about oppression in this day and age is avoiding responsibility; "it aint love if you don't change."

Well, skipping away from the issue of a paleface dictating what is authentically Black and what isn't, we come to Cheever, who presents the ideal

as being calm normalcy, overriding all other ideals and this calmness is a sign of perfection.

Of course, from that point of view, if your views remain limited to your origins, its easy to cap on funny-talking Germans, employ the uptight stereotype, satirize alternative lifestyles, lampoon Andy Warhol, poo-poo Jackson Pollock, and eventually trash most of modern jazz music, punk rock, Iggy Pop. Twyla Tharp, and David Bowie. In fact anything that is not bound by limits of specified "taste", questionable ideas about "natural talent", or conservative ideas of the known and familiar becomes dangerous. Which is exactly the sort of thinking that produces people in reaction against it like Iggy Pop, David Bowie, David Lynch, David Cronenberg, and Jackson Pollock. And Gnarl's Barkley or BB King, for that matter.

Every play has to possess certain implicit values, even ones written by David Mamet. None of the artists encountered by Youth is practicing anything of value, with the possible exception of the German girlfriend (Rebecca Naomi Jones) who wants to wants to found a Revolution on Love. The Amsterdam collective is just a spiraling collection of hop heads and Berlin is filled with unengaged politics with more evasion of real artistic discipline in the name of "postmodernism." Well, since Postmodernism had exhausted itself by 1958, anyone claiming that title in 1972, or 1984 for that matter, was just using a title to mask the excuse for being an asshole.

Still, limiting the "geography of pain" to the already known is not only frustrating, its counterproductive and self-defeating, and that is probably the only

serious criticism we might have of the latent values here. That and the troubling concept of "Home" as a fiction.

The concept of Home is a little tweaky plug-in for expected responses when it comes to performers, so don't trust what is said when it comes to received sentiment.

Take BB King, come to think of it. "I left home at fifteen with this guitar strapped around my waist. I am going to play this thing until the day I die." In the man's own words. And at 325 touring days a year, year after year for twenty, thirty, forty years, if you think this man has a conventional house with white picket fence, longtime loyal wife, and two dogs in the back you are crazy. There is no question the man is hugely successful, quite happy (at last), and finally slowing down at eighty-five.

In fact there is nothing about even an average performer's life which suggests stability as represented by a "home" concept other than a generic longing for something not possible under the circumstances. As Chris Smither summarizes it "Been sleeping in a no-name town / Thanksgiving dinner in the Top Hat Lounge / Xmas eve in the Black and Tan / Lord have mercy on the Crocodile Man."

You know, like it or not, somebody who wants to get up on a platform so as to captivate hundreds, maybe thousands of strangers, by using their breath, their body and their fingers in a certain way has got to be a little, well, outside the norm. There might be a couple, but there really are not many John Cheevers in the performing arts. "We're all freaks here. Right."

Or maybe its everyone else except those on the stage who are playing with masks. Time to go rent *Blue Velvet* again.

Judging from the SRO crowd on opening night, the buzz is on for Passing Strange, and like it or not, this ensemble is not likely to be flying to their respective homes for the holidays any time soon while the word gets out. It's amazing how fast 2.5 hours can go by.



book and lyrics by stew  
music by stew / heidi rodewald  
created in collaboration with and directed by annie dorsen  
choreography by karole armitage  
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Kevin Berne

Daniel Breaker as Youth  
Stew as himself  
Colman Domingo, Rebecca Naomi Jones, Chad Goodridge, de'Adre Aziza  
Eisa Davis as Mother

**Stew** is *Entertainment Weekly's* two-time artist of the year. The *Village Voice* says his unique sound, dubbed Afro-Baroque cabaret, is "smart and tart, fussy and funny," while the *LA Times* describes his lyrics as "gorgeous, deeply-felt, wildly sophisticated and at times hilarious."