

THE BLUE DOOR

BERKELEY REP

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The Arts Coordinator here at Island Life slipped us into the Berkeley Rep for Tanya Barfield's *Blue Door*, directed by Delroy Lindo and featuring Teagle F. Bougere with David Fonteno. Mr. Fonteno, like Mr. Bougere, was culled from the Berkeley Rep pool of actors who have done time in NBC's *Law and Order*. The director possesses quite a long and distinguished list of stage, television and film appearances with a shelf of accolades and awards.

The play concerns the spectral visitations over a single evening to a man whose wife has divorced him for his failure to attend the Million Man March in Washington DC. The African-American man, named Lewis, ruminates over his marriage, his career as a mathematics professor, and is visited by the

generations of his past, beginning and ending with his brother -- who has died from a disillusioned and cynical drug overdose -- encompassing several hundred years of ancestors, including a great grandfather who was castrated and burned alive while chained to a fence for daring to appear at a polling place during a critical election in the American South.



This is Heavy Stuff and not for the faint of heart who would endure the 90 minute performance with no intermission. Barfield does not let anyone depart the room with any false pieties comforted, and for this the young playwright deserves accolades. Like many novice writers, she has her characters declaim to the corners of the stage in long Shakespearean monologues, but unlike novices, she does prepare the way for such delivery, by setting up Lewis' insomnia and typically academic trait of lecture delivery. To solidify this presentation, she has the ghost of his brother bust down the "fourth wall" of the stage by persisting with

his question, "Who is your audience here?" At which point, Rex (Teagle Bougere) steps into the bleachers and raises his arms, declaiming, "Who is your audience? Here they are!" Meaning that Lewis must address not only the demons in his head but Franz Fanon's demons of the White World as well.

Its a pretty daring move for a budding playwright but it works well, handling any number of additional issues economically and far better than anything Spike Lee has done recently in this dimension, and that is quite a compliment. This play continues a Berkeley Rep general concern thematically with identity and so follows in line with intellectual issues bound with emotional ties. It is a play about heritage and social inheritance with aspects that apply across the color spectrum. That said, the play written by Barfield has problems that stem from novice writing that simply cannot be ignored. Yes, the production earned a justifiable standing ovation on the merits of its attempts and the strength of the actors involved. Nevertheless, a review of the production history indicates a history of structural problems partially resolved over time. Early productions earned erratic reviews that complained about the declamatory speechifying, the lack of interpersonal relation between the actors, direction problems, and overly spartan stage sets, most of which issues appear to have been addressed and resolved by the time of the Berkeley Rep production. Oakland native Delroy Lindo, an highly acclaimed actor with many stage, screen and TV credits, has successfully welded this project together, providing enough "face" time to deflect previous criticism.



That Barfield had managed to dramatize critical aspects of the Black American Experience is to be commended. That she managed to bridge Black identity concerns into terms of Universals is to be applauded. That the manner of presentation is limited by novice techniques is a problem resolved by time. The issues presented by the play are timely and important, but the realization is less than actual. When Lewis decides to paint his front door blue, the result is less than satisfying against all of history and his need for resolution. It winds up being a theatrical moment with not nearly enough resonance., leaving the audience not entirely convinced that the man has fully accepted his past.

Still, the play does manage to defeat the public media presentation of all Black men as drug-pushing, pimpin' ghetto thugs dripping with bling and 'tude. The reality is that a large part of African-American culture is straight-forward Middle-class possessed of standard Middle-class values, and David Fontano

manages to rise well above criticism levied against previous productions in fleshing out the character of Lewis with desperate humanity. He and Mr. Bougere earned well their standing ovations at the close of the evening.

We would say that the Berkeley Rep's production of *The Blue Door* is courageous for its presentation of engaged stagecraft in a world that seems increasingly disengaged. This sort of attention to theatre is what brings us back again to the Rep.

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Photographer: Kevin Berne

By Tanya Barfield
Director: Delroy Lindo

Kate Edmunds, Scenic Design
Emilio Sosa, Costume Design
Kathy A. Perkins, Lighting Design
Andre Pluess, Sound Design
Lynne Morrow, Vocal Coach
Michael Suenkel, Production Stage Manager
Janet Foster, Casting
Amy Potozkin, Casting

CAST
David Fonteno and Teagle F. Bougere