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“I’m a person, because of networking and relationships, who has become a deal maker, someone who a person can come to and get things done. We stay with a client and consult on many aspects of their business to carry it through to fruition.”

Legitimate Versus Popular Theatre: Two Plays Bring Toledo the Best of Each

By Geneva J. Chapman,
Sojourner's Truth Reporter

Glaciy Theatre Collective may be Toledo's connection to the latest in theatrical fare. The company's recent production of Laura Wade's "Breathing Corpses" in The Truth's new gallery space, January 31-February 3, 2008, puts it on the cutting edge with groups like New Works Writer's Series founded by Imelda Hunt, Ph.D., who has an amazing talent for finding really good, albeit not well known, scripts by African-American authors.

Usually, you find such edgy theatrical presentations on college and university campuses, like UT's recent production of "Top Dog/Underdog" by Suzan Lori Parks, an African-American author first introduced to Toledo by Hunt who staged her play "In the Blood." UT's production of Park's Pulitzer-Prize winning drama was directed by Equity actor/director Sylvia Carter, recently returned to her native Toledo after performing throughout the Midwest for many years.

One often finds unusual plays at The Village Players and really great productions of

musicals (my personal favorite) in the many community theatres in the area, but except for Hunt, few folks venture out as far as Glaciy did with its most recent production.

A British import, "Breathing Corpses" might be considered rather morbid, since it deals with death and not the 'natural' kind. No, the deaths in this play are intentional, sometimes brutal and always disturbing.

I recently heard "The Circle of Life" from "The Lion King" performed at a wedding and thought it so appropriate to associate marriage with the cycle of birth. Likewise, Wade associates death with the cycle of life in a rather twisted, 'suspended reality' kind of time loop that allows interconnected plots to bring unlikely characters together in the most intimate of moments: their deaths.

Not an easy script to cast, but director Cornel Gabara showed remarkable brilliance in his casting of each character with the absolutely perfect actor to play the part, a rare thing in the world of theatre. Amy, played with just the right

amount of hopeless naiveté by Risa Beth Cohen discovers Jim, played by Dave DeChristopher after he commits suicide late in January, in the hotel where she works as a maid. Her reaction and dialog with the dead man is at once comical and pathetic.

That pathos is an underlying theme in "Breathing Corpses," as Jim's desperate life unfolds in the next scene in mid-December, when his irritating wife Elaine, played like fingernails scratching a chalkboard by Holly Monsos, pays him a visit at his storage business where his slightly less irritating employee Ray, played by Brad Arner, keeps reminding him of the smell of decomposition coming from storage unit B16.

Next we meet Kate, played by Irene Alby, who makes even the word 'shrew' sound tame with her violent and abusive personality that has left her husband Ben, played by Richard Furlong, covered with bruises and scratches, and his poor little dog with a gash in its side where she kicked it in the

first few moments of Scene 3 in late December, the day after she discovered the corpse of a hotel maid in some bushes while out walking the same dog.

Although they only appear in one tense and emotionally draining scene, it is Kate and Ben's relationship that seems to be at the heart of this drama, named for a quote by Sophocles. "When a man has lost all happiness, he's not alive. Call him a breathing corpse." Not that they are any unhappier than Jim and Elaine or Amy; it's just that their unhappiness is expressed in unrestrained rage, well, at least in Kate's case.

Jim does find out what was in B16 and it has left him muddled and mumbling in mid-January as he fusses with assorted tools in his garage, refusing to leave the house or go to work. All of this explains his suicide. Finding a woman stuffed in a box strangled by a dog leash proved too much for him.

But it's the last scene that sends "Breathing Corpses" into the realm of the surreal. Amy becomes enchanted with a guest, Charlie, played by Ben Pryor, who woos her, then takes out a dangerous knife while she cleans his bathroom and later makes a date with her for early the next day, a Saturday morning in late September. The play ended with the SRO crowd that attended the second to last performance knowing what happened but unable to sequence the events in any kind of timeline outside of "The Twilight Zone."

Like another British import, the film "Sliding Doors," "Breathing Corpses" operates outside of time and space, bending the laws of physics to examine the human condition in a new and novel way.

Kudos to Gabara and his marvelous cast. Alby, Monsos, and Pryor are faculty members at the University of Toledo; Arner and Cohen are UT theatre majors, and DeChristopher and Furlong are professional actors. I expect more great things from Glaciy Theatre Collective.

Now, from the sublime to the bawdy - I could have said ridiculous, but that would have implied inferior and my second play is anything but that. I have news for all of Madeah's fans. Tyler Perry's got company and, no, it's not another Madeah rip-off. Well, there is a man dressed like a woman, but she's no Madeah.

No, "Miss Mary" is a totally original character with very little resemblance to the gun-toting Madeah. "Miss Mary" is

one of five characters J. D. Lawrence plays in his play, "Rumors," which was shown at the Stranahan Tuesday, February 5, 2008.

Everyone knows I always speak disparagingly of the plays that cycle through the Stranahan in what we call the "chitlun circuit," meaning they are attended by mostly African-American audiences, and have little if anything to do with legitimate theatre, although they are very popular and extremely lucrative for the producers of such fare. Lawrence's play is no exception.

It is bawdy, comical and never quite rises above sit-com level, although I enjoyed it immensely. Hey, Lawrence writes great one-liners, what can I say? And he's funny - really funny!

There was a theatrical moment or two in the production, which I'll explain momentarily. The plot hinges around a completely vilified 'white girl' played by Lisa D'Amato from "America's Next Top Model," who latches on to a black doctor as her meal ticket, but gets pregnant by another man, showing what a sleaze she really is - you get the idea - a variation on Spike Lee's "Jungle Fever."

The doctor is played by Darius McCrary from "Family Matters." Of course, there is a beautiful African-American woman, played by Destiny's Child original member LeToya Luckett, that our young doctor really loves, but she left to go away and get her degree at Spellman (can you spell 'set up'?) only to return home to find the doctor, who she also loves, engaged to the sleaze.

Well, the plot thickens (they always do, don't they?) and the doctor's tuggish brother played by comedian George Willborn gets out of jail, creating more problems for our young hero (no, not protagonist - these plays are all 'black and white', no shades of gray here!), his loving mother played by sitcom veteran Telma Hopkins and grandfather played by Lawrence.

Other characters include the doctor's best friend played by the only white comic to ever host BET's "Comic View," Gary Owen, and best friend of the villain (no, not antagonist - I told you there are no shades of gray in this kind of play!) played by Puff Johnson. Regardless of the lack of complexity of the characters and the simplistic nature of the overly-complicated plot, the play is funny and there are some great musical numbers by Lawrence, Luckett, and Johnson.

Actually, my favorite musical numbers were the ones performed by McCrary because he performed them completely in character and as if he was speaking dialog. That's talent! Speaking of talent, Tyler Perry, Eddie Murphy and Martin Lawrence have nothing on J.D. Lawrence when it comes to portraying numerous characters.

In one show-stopping moment, the playwright, director, actor and singer plays a flamboyant waiter and starts singing "I'm Telling You I'm Not Going" to a man in the audience, walks off the stage and sits on the man's lap. More supper club than theatre, I know, but it was funny!

The actors frequently broke the fourth wall and spoke to the audience - Lawrence even talked to the lighting technician when the lights kept flashing during the first scene of the play, coming out on stage in character and threatening to kick his a-- and file a lawsuit because "These people paid too much money for these tickets!"

Another time, as "Miss Mary," he returned to the stage threatening to kick someone's a-- said something insulting about his character. The audience ate it up - oh, speaking of the audience, I was very proud of Toledo's audience for "Rumors." You know we have a reputation of not reacting when shows come here. Well, that's all changed now! The audience yelled, screamed, laughed and generally became part of the show - maybe it was the cocktails they kept going out to the lobby to buy - no, I really think it was because the play was so funny! Sure a lot of the humor was very broad and burlesque-like. But there were also theatrical moments.

One was a scene when three conversations were taking place in each of the locations depicted in the exceptionally good set. The conversations overlapped with all ending with the same line spoken by all the characters, "She's having a baby!" Great theatrical technique.

Another little bit of business was the doctor's brother catching him every time he got down on his knees in front of a woman and chiding him for it. "Rumors" has and will make Lawrence a lot of money and, hopefully, some day he will be as successful as Tyler Perry. But neither of these playwrights will be remembered a hundred years from now. Laura Wade will. That's the difference in legitimate and popular theatre.

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