

WAM Theatre, Lenox, MA
Cadillac Crew by Tori Sampson. Directed by taneisha duggan.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“I’m not spoiled. . . , just accustomed.”

Audiences, nowadays - and thanks to early “Pippin” commercials on TV, leap to their feet at every curtain call to accord a standing ovation, even to the most mediocre performances. They just love to get in the act, those audiences. This new play, “Cadillac Crew” by Tori Sampson, produced by WAM Theatre, is the first play I’ve seen in a long time that truly deserves a standing ovation. It is tight, terse, full of meaning and certain history, defined by a talented director, designed by those with a sure eye for character and relevant eras, and acted with consistent brilliance. You rise for this show and show your deep appreciation for such a work of art: a work of life.



Cate Alston as Abby, Kyra Davis as Rachel; Photo: David Dashiell

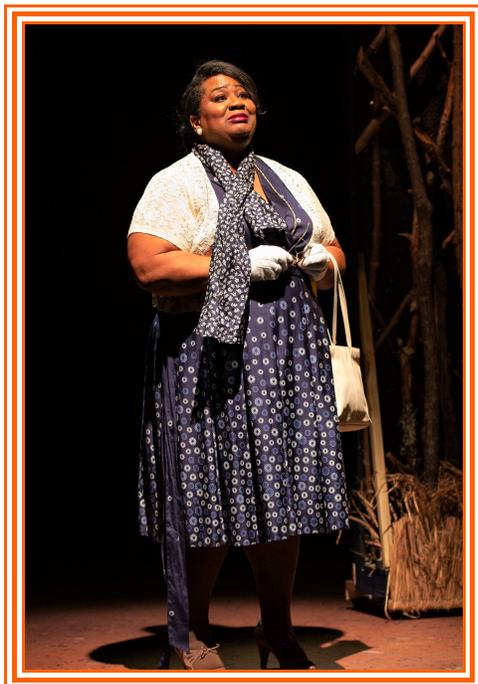
In a Virginia Civil Rights office in 1963 four women attempt to make it through another day. There are mobs just outside their building, angry people with a growing agenda bordering on violence as the four women, three black and one white, attempt to make themselves useful to the cause of civil rights. One woman is very young, quite impulsive and amazingly self-centered. Coming from a well-to-do family, Abby, played by Cate Alston with a pretty sneer and an attitude to exemplify that, has a personal rather than a political agenda. Rachel has arranged for Rosa Parks to address an audience that same evening, but a committee vote in her absence has altered the plans and Rachel is rightfully furious. When word comes that a “Cadillac Crew,” an integrated car full of women bent on defending desegregation and women’s rights has been destroyed, the female occupants shot and set on fire, the VCR women decide to take their place and they set out on the road to racial acceptance. It’s a long, difficult road.



Alicia M.P. Nelson as Sarah, Cate Alston as Abby, MaConnia Chesser as Dee; Photo: David Dashiell

Sarah, played by Alicia M.P. Nelson is devoted to the cause and we learn how broad her involvement is late in the play, one of those swell revelations the author is devoted to. The fourth member of the group is Dee, a wife and mother who is anchored in the women's priorities that so kept women under control in those unenlightened days. Dee is played by MaConnia Chesser. Though Rachel is a natural leader she is also volatile, often out of control and yet often very controlling when things are no longer under her

personal control. This play documents Rachel's choices, her associates' responses and, finally, how women in the 21st century deal with the same problems all over again fifty years later. Cooler heads prevail but, it seems, little has changed for women in spite of the growth of a nation devoted to growth and change.



MaConnia Chesser;
Photo: David Dashiell

More than the others Chesser brings a reality, a naturalness to her portrayal that leaves one feeling that this is a witnessing of reality rather than the mere watching of a play. It is a unique skill that adds a true sadness to even the most comic of moments. Though Tori Sampson's play is a comedy, there is that ineffable tension of tragedy in it that makes it a vitally honest and real adventure.

Though the final sequences of the play drag the souls of these four characters into future versions of themselves we discover how little so much travail has achieved. The struggles continue, the fight goes forward and the valiant foursome live through their adventures again in other forms. The goals broaden in our modern world and the desires for recognition of the effort remains in the forefront of four women's lived-on courage.

Director taneisha duggan pulls the characters into dangerous territory with a surety that defies understanding.

She makes miraculous use of the wide stage defined to perfection by set designer Juliana von Haubrich whose designs include the concrete sense of an office, a rural road and a highway rest stop as well as a television studio with Zoom control and an undefined wilderness. The amazing costumes have been designed by Calypso Michelet and show has been lighted by Samuel J. Biondolllo. Hair and make-up, so much a part of defining the eras in which the play is set is the excellent work of Ericka N. Hanger. But as integrated as all of the elements are in this play, the story belongs to one woman and one woman alone. Sampson leaves the best moment for the last moment. On their Cadillac road trip, Rachel has convinced the women to document their travels and their adventures, which they ultimately do. When one of her letters is discovered fifty years later it cannot be understood and her identity means nothing to the 21st century woman. How little we know of our own past histories, the playwright screams at us in a quiet, disturbed voice. We can almost feel the impact on Kyra Davis's Rachel, buried where - in some hell of a marriage, a lesbian relationship, a hillside grave, who knows - but her feelings survive and could possibly inspire others in the wake. Standing ovation.

+ 10/17/2022 +



Kyra Davis; Photo: David Dashiell

Cadillac Crew plays on the Tina Packer

Playhouse stage at Shakespeare & Company, 70 Walker Street, Lenox, MA through October 29.

For information and tickets email: boxstaff@shakespeare.org.