

Black Theatre Troupe of Upstate New York, Albany, NY
Knock Me a Kiss by Charles Smith. Directed by Barbara Howard.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Quiet as a cat that peed on cotton,”

In 1928 W.E.B. Du Bois’s daughter Yolande married Harlem poet Countee Cullen. The marriage was never consummated and two months later Yolande filed for a divorce. In Charles Smith’s play “Knock Me a Kiss” this relationship, along with all of Yolande’s relationships, is at the center of an interesting production of this play. Director Barbara Howard has taken it out of its own time and landed it in our time. The costumes, by Sheilah London-Miller, have nothing to do with 1928. The incidental music chosen by sound designer Maya Pomazal-Flanders, sets the mood of each new scene, but doesn’t reflect the sounds of the 20’s, but rather sing out from the late twentieth century including a Rodgers and Hart song not written until 1940. For this stage presentation the story is given relevance to our day and it works. It works all too well.



Jocelyn Khoury, Hayes M. Fields, II, Angelique Powell, Aileem Penn,
Hasson Harris Wilcher, Morgan Hayward; Photo: Willie David Short V

As we learn about Yolande and her suitors we discover how little difference a century has brought to us. Her best boyfriend is saxophonist and dance band leader Jimmie Lunceford who is struggling to make his band a mainstream organization, fighting the prejudices of race and reputation. Du Bois is a successful author and authority on race, history and political positioning but has not as yet discovered how his own beliefs marry with the growth of communism. Cullen has developed as a poet but not as a philosopher, a goal he hasn’t quite reached. Yolande, herself, is still trying to reconcile her physical goals with her intellectual ideals. Her mother has yet to reconcile her differences with her adult child and Yolande’s friend Lenora is the perpetual outsider in this family group that only accepts her for Yolande’s sake, not trusting her and

ultimately proven right in their assessment.

Cullen's relationship with his best man, Harold Jackman, "the handsomest man in Harlem," becomes a major issue between him and his wife, and their departure for Paris, leaving Yolande behind becomes a major issue for her. Yolande is played here by Angelique Powell, a beautiful actress, who has the dramatic chops to make everything as real, genuine and honest as can be. She brings a sensuality that is missing in every other character; this makes her performance a stand-out. Her friend Lenora, ambitiously played by Morgan Heyward is sexier than Yolande, but Heyward gives her a distancing personality, distant when close which is an interesting quality to portray.



Angelique Powell;
Photo: Willie David Short V



Hayes M. Fields II, Jocelyn Khoury;
Photo: Willie David Short V

Yolande's parents, W.E.B. Du Bois and his wife, Nina, are played by Hayes M. Fields II and Jocelyn Khoury. He is gruff, gutsy and full of bluster, living up to the photo-images of the man himself which show him to be a stern, intense figure in history. Khoury has the more difficult task of playing a woman who doesn't have complete control of her mind. Nina is only half-mad and that half takes control every now and then, giving the actress the task of bringing believability to the character of a woman who believes in truths that only she can perceive. Khoury makes her character utterly believable.



Penn, Heyward, Powell, Wilcher, Fields, Khoury;
Photo: Willie David Short V

Yolande is surrounded by people who drive her to despair. The boyfriend her father will never approve of makes her focus difficult and the man Du Bois wants her to marry drives her to take action that cannot deliver satisfaction. As Lunceford, whose career success is already on his horizon, Hasson Harris Wilcher dives into this lustful man with a vengeance. His man is the absolute opposite of Penn's Cullen, a

quiet and subtle character who slowly reveals himself to Yolande making him both endearing and hard to like. Wilcher is great at the pushiness that Lunceford requires and Penn is excellent at bringing his character's reluctance to be up-front to the point of lying into an honesty that is touching. In his introduction to the show, producer Jean-Remy Monnay encouraged the audience to react, and all of these characters give the audience lots of reasons to honor that request.

Howard and her team have visually and aurally brought these people forward a hundred years and the relevance to today is remarkable. As a play of today's moral questions "Knock Me a Kiss" on this Albany stage is a very honest, contemporary play in spite of its historical accuracy. I recommend it highly.

+ 10/30/2022 +

Knock Me a Kiss only plays through November 6 in the Laura and Harold Iselin Studio, theRep, 251 North Pearl Street, Albany, New York. Tickets can be booked on line at www.Proctors.org.