

Black Theatre Troupe of Upstate New York, Albany, NY
Hoodoo Love by Katori Hall. Directed by Jean-Remy Monnay.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“Gotta catch me that train.”

In Katori Hall’s first play, “Hoodoo Love” set in Memphis, Tennessee in the early 1930s, blues-singing Ace of Spades is always leaving for another city, catching a train whose whistles can be heard calling him away. He is leaving the young runaway he lives with, Toulou, who longs to be a blues singer and to hold Ace’s love. Work is scarce, money scarcer for these two people and the cluster of shacks near Beale Street is the best they can manage. When her brother, Jib, shows up looking for a place to stay, Toulou is compelled to house him. He is a born-again Christian missionary planning on building a church in the neighborhood but his drinking takes him down a peg or two. Toulou’s next door neighbor is a woman of no specific age, Candy-Lady, who has had five children, the last one still-born in slavery in 1865. She is a Hoodoo witch who casts spells of all sorts, but prefers them to be about love. These are the four characters who can be seen, currently, on the Lauren and Harold Iselin Studio Theater stage at theRep in Albany, New York in the Black Theatre Troupe of Upstate New York production.



Q’ubilah Sales, Josy Smith; Photo: Willie David Short V

Hall’s play (be warned) includes incest and rape, sexual intercourse and the chanting of Hoodoo spells. It is a compelling play impossible to not watch from beginning to end and the cast of the BTTUNY production make it even more compelling. Toulou, played by Q’ubilah Sales in her stage debut, is beautiful, charming, alarmingly sensual and seriously fascinating. She has a lovely voice and sings Hall’s melodies (we think they’re by Hall) with a mixture of true tone and rough sounds. She is a welcome addition to our local stage.



Q'ubilah Sales, Alexander Heck;
Photo: Willie David Short V

As her lover, Ace of Spades, she has the good luck to play opposite actor Alexander Heck who gives Ace both the emotional grace of a Romeo and the vile temper of a Macbeth. Her need for him is obvious to the eye and the ear, and his ultimate vilification of her is as painful an experience as one can imagine.

Her need of help from the local Hoodoo Madame, Candy Lady, is clear. A spell, a long-working spell, is necessary if Toulou is to achieve any sort of lasting romance. Happiness may not be in the cards for this couple, but

other outcomes come about in spite of their shortcomings.

Jib is a hard-to-take character who starts out as an interloper in his sister's life and who ends up as a monster without any serious conscience. Preston Edmunds has the task of bringing him to life on this stage and what he achieves is quite something. We continue wanting to like him, to understand him really, but Edmunds holds us at arm's length and retains his weird persona.



Josy Smith, Preston Edmunds; Photo: Willie David Short V

Josy Smith plays the Hoodoo Madame and does it with her remarkable ease and grace. She is a true beauty who uses everything in her power to make Candy Lady a scene stealing, attention capturing creature. Her Hoodoo chants are authentic, I have been told, and her own personal history plays into her role on stage. You can literally not take your eyes off her when she is on stage.

Director Jean-Remy Monnay has done wonderful things with this play, even keeping the incest and rape palatable, a not easy task, assisted by Yvonne Perry who has been the Intimacy Choreographer for the play. Monnay has molded his cast of seasoned performers and novices into a single, perfect unit that deliver Katori Hall's play with all of its truth and honesty intact.

Monnay's set works very well, theatrically and visually. Costumes, hair and makeup by Sheilah London-Miller were perfect. Lighting Designer Kate Kern uses the play's eternal night to good advantage. Chad Reid's sound design work is excellent.

All in all, "Hoodoo Love" is well worth your time and money. Put simply, this is a fine production of a fascinating play.

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Hoodoo Love plays on the Lauren and Harold Iselin Studio Theater stage at theRep in Albany, New York at 251 N. Pearl Street, in the Black Theatre Troupe of Upstate New York production. For information and tickets call 518-346-6204.