

Hartford Stage, Hartford, CT

Trouble in Mind by Alice Childress. Directed by Christopher D. Betts.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“Chaos!”

Hollywood film director Al Manners is making his Broadway debut with a highly controversial play he has discovered about life in the less-than-contemporary south. He has cast some established Black performers he has worked with before and some talented newcomers and he ends up getting a lesson in life, tolerance and reality. Integrity is at the core of Alice Childress’s 1955 play which ran off-Broadway and then disappeared for a long while. Its themes are so “right now” that the play has slowly re-emerged and is now illuminating Hartford Stage in a excellent new production. Like Manners’ choices of cast members, Christopher D. Betts has assembled a fine company of players to take on this project; the result is exciting, revelatory theater.



The cast of *Trouble in Mind* (John Bambery, Sarah Lyddan, front); Photo: T. Charles Erickson

It may take audiences a while to get used to African-American people being referred to as Negroes, a term not often heard these days, but it is the mid-1950s on the Hartford stage. Negro blues singer Wiletta Mayer, after several minor appearances in Manners’ movies, has been hired to play the lead in the play, “Chaos in Belleville” and she has brought with her an unspoken aspiration to be known as an actress rather than as a singer. The play, and her role, mean everything to her. She makes it her goal to play every moment with honesty and reality, but she finds the script almost too limiting, its content by a White author old-fashioned and stereotypical.

Willetta and Manners find their professional relationship taking on too personal an argument that threatens to sabotage the project.



Heather Alicia Simms, Sideeq Heard;
Photo: T. Charles Erickson

Willetta is played by Heather Alicia Simms, a beautiful woman whose work exposes a beautiful soul. She delights in the admiration of Henry, the doorman at the theater, sweetly played by Richmond Hoxie, and takes equal pleasure in welcoming and advising young John Nevins, a very charming Sideeq Heard, a new actor in his first role. Simms establishes Willetta from the get-go as the person the audience will root for and she maintains that spot throughout the play.

Manners, on the other hand, is almost too unpleasant and phony a human being as Childress has written him. He is played by John Bambery with bluster as a guide and rudeness as an achievable goal. The actor makes a major impression playing the man without censure or fear. Manners is an egotist who makes it all about him, not about his players. Bravo Bambery!

Sarah Lyddan is delightful as the white girl who needs to succeed to keep from going home to her overbearing parents in Bridgeport. Chelsea Lee Williams is perfect as the more sophisticated lady in the company. Michael Rogers plays the pseudo-Shakespearean actor doubling as assistant director and plays the part with bravado. James Joseph O'Neil plays the prejudiced leading man in an off-hand, relaxed way that makes his character more than usually despicable and Adam Langdon is the young actor, Eddie, who wants everything and everyone to just be terrific. He is terrific in the role.

Childress based her play on her own experience in 1944 in the cast of the play "Anna Lucasta" staged by Hollywood director Henry Wagstaff Gribble, a play she worked in with her husband Alvin Childress, Canada Lee and Hilda Simms (no relation to the star of this production). Amazingly, this 1955 play addresses complications that still exist today in the theater and in our American society.



Chelsea Lee Williams, Sarah Lyddon,
Heather Alicia Simms;
Photo: Charles Erickson

The setting, designed by Baron E. Pugh is the basically bare stage of a Broadway theater. With its “ghostlight” and its costume racks it is a very realistic presentation of such a space. The costumes, designed by Jahise LeBouef evoke the period deliciously. Emma Deane’s subtle lighting design adds to the total effect of this play’s message. And director Betts’s work on this play is only slightly less than magnificent. He brings us to an understanding of each character’s motivations which is remarkable in this day and age considering the language and intentions of the author.



James Joseph O’Neil, Chelsea Lee Williams, Sarah Lyddan, Sideeq Heard;
Photo: T. Charles Erickson

Not a play you will often have the chance to see, Hartford Stage is making this a special opportunity to witness history and realize how little things have changed - language yes, behavior no. Take advantage of this shot at the past, present and future.

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Trouble in Mind plays at Hartford Stage, 50 Church Street, Hartford, Connecticut, through June 18. For information and tickets go to their website at www.hartfordstage.org.