

Hartford Stage, Hartford, CT

The Hot Wing King by Katori Hall. Directed by Christopher D. Betts.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“No, not today Satan, not today no, no.”

This Pulitzer Prize winning comedy-drama by Katori Hall (*The Mountaintop*) examines the reality of family: what it means, how it works, what it takes to maintain. It is a difficult play, partly due to the heavy, Black, Alabama accents that have been coached remarkably by Cynthia Santos DeCure, and partly due to the characters and the subject matter. When the protagonists shared a lengthy kiss near the end of Act Two one audience member shouted “enough!” and that in itself was more than enough; he got a laugh which the play did not need at that point.



Israel Erron Ford, Bjorn Dupaty; Photo: T. Charles Erickson

Cordell, played by Bjorn Dupaty, is preparing to enter his fourth Hot Wing competition, an annual national contest, and he is determined to win. His partner, Dwayne - played by Calvin M. Thompson, is encouraging but not overly helpful. Their closest friends Isom (Israel Erron Ford), Big Charles (Postell Pringle), are on hand to help him out. The group are all homosexuals, their personal styles all different, from screaming queen Isom to resoundingly forceful Charles.



Calvin M. Thompson; Photo:
T. Charles Erickson

They all clearly enjoy one another. It isn't until Dwayne's nephew Everett, (EJ) played by Marcus Gladney, Jr. joins them that the play takes a turn from outrageous humor to mellow drama. Cordell doesn't want the sixteen year old around, while Dwayne does. The family conflict is compounded by the fact that Cordell doesn't see his own two sons. Later, when EJ's father TJ (played by Alphonso Walker, Jr.) joins the group the drama soars into the realm of Arthur Miller's work as re-conceived for a Black family group.

Like all of Hall's work this play is slender and pointed to a particular goal, but unlike some of her earlier work it is a concentrated look at a substrata of her contemporaries. Based on her own brother and his friends she worked from reality to theatricality and successfully created the characters and the plot. The Memphis accents made it rather difficult to hear and understand a lot of the lines in the play, but there was clearly enjoyment going on and that, curiously, worked.

Christopher D. Betts has done a fine job of staging this seemingly simple but remarkably complex work. The interplay among the actors keeps the play vibrantly alive and real. It is staged on a beautiful and realistic two level set designed by Emma Finckel with appropriately pointed costumes designed by Jahise LeBouef. The lighting has been devised by Asam Honoré and goes from realistic to theatrical and back again. Kathy Ruvuna's sound design was a bit awkward at times.

Any play by Katori Hall is worth your time and this one, with all of its peculiarities, is very much in that class. Doing what it does to qualify for a Pulitzer it is especially worthwhile for you will have the unique opportunity to experience the new family dynamic that is literally, and literarily, sweeping the country. I heartily recommend it.

+ 03/09/2024 +

The Hot Wing King plays at Hartford Stage, 50 Church Street, Hartford, Connecticut through March 24. For information and tickets go to www.hartfordstage.org or call 860-527-5151.