The Top of Bravery by Jeremy V. Morris (review)

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lies as dysfunctional. While the black family, black parenthood in particular, remains under constant critique, Morisseau refused to respond to the criticism by creating a morally upstanding and intact family. Instead, *Pipeline* asked its viewers whether a black boy can succeed in America with his soul unscathed? The production presented a divorced mother and father struggling to assist their son as he attempts to navigate a hostile world that they themselves can barely manage, despite their middle-class trappings. Pittman performed Nya as a loving and devoted, yet flawed mother who pursues every avenue to help her son succeed. Substance abuse, infidelity, and foul language all appear in the play as coping mechanisms that she adopts as a way to manage not only the stresses of single parenting, but also of teaching at an under-resourced school. Through the character, Morisseau destabilizes what black feminist scholar Michele Wallace once called the myth of the superwoman, rejecting the notion that survival requires perfection from black mothers.

Morisseau's weaving of canonical literature by Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks throughout the play allowed the production to talk back to the US educational system, while also demonstrating the power of black literature to craft tender, yet brutal depictions of black boyhood in the country. Her dizzying reimagining of Brooks's poem "We Real Cool" haunted the production. Nya's explication of the four verses for her students revealed how evocative the poem's depiction of young black boys in 1959 remains. This scene also demonstrated the power of black literature to capture the fates of those too often relegated to the pipeline that leads them nowhere and the ability of art and education to confirm that black lives matter.

Notably, it was a question posed by Omari's teacher about Wright's classic novel *Native Son* that served as the lightening rod that threatened his future. In this moment Omari worried about being perceived as a "monster" like the boys in the pool hall in Brooks's poem or like Wright's protagonist Bigger Thomas. The threat of the black boy as monster appeared repeatedly in *Pipeline*. The vibrant film projections by Hannah Wasileski presented during scene transitions provided glimpses of young black students at an urban public school. It was difficult to discern whether the students in the footage were simply being teenagers or if they were on the verge of being dangerously out of control. The projections served to remind audiences of how often fear of black male violence emerges in the American imagination, even in the minds of black boys themselves.

Powerfully, *Pipeline* invited audiences to question assumptions about what constitutes a "good school" and the idea of school choice, especially if both elite and low-performing schools fail their black students both culturally and pedagogically. New York, with its labyrinth of highly segregated schools, ranging from elusive private academies to under-resourced public schools, provided the ideal setting for the world premiere of the play. Overshadowing the show was the specter of the eventual prize of acceptance to a prestigious college or university; it loomed large in the background of the story, as does its alleged guarantee for a successful adulthood. *Pipeline* not only encouraged its audiences to consider the cost of educational achievement to the souls of many, but also to interrogate what constitutes a successful society.

Heather Velazquez (Jasmine) and Namir Smallwood (Omari) in *Pipeline*. (Photo: Jeremy Daniel.)

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THE TOP OF BRAVERY. By Jeremy V. Morris. Directed by Tawnya Pettiford-Wates. Quill Theatre, Richmond Triangle Players, Richmond, Virginia. February 3, 2017.

Blackface minstrelsy haunts American vernacular performance, from children's cartoons to sorority selfies, but in *The Top of Bravery* it took center stage. Running for three weeks at the Richmond Triangle Players, Jeremy V. Morris's new play was a collaboration between Quill Theatre and the African American Theatre of Virginia, with support from the Conciliation Project. Even if it had not debuted in the former Confederate capital and less than a month after Trump's inauguration emboldened racism across the country, Morris's choice to perform a blackface repertoire would have been provocative. But *The Top of Bravery* was, like the figure that inspired it, brave and virtuosic. The play

Jeremy V. Morris (Bert Williams), Katrinah Carol Lewis (Lottie Williams), Keydron Dunn (George Walker), and Jasmine Eileen Coles (Aida Overton Walker) in *The Top of Bravery*. (Photo: Aaron Sutten of Sutten Photo.)

grappled with the life and legacy of Bert Williams, best known as one half of the black vaudeville duo, Williams and Walker.

Blending documentary traces of Williams's career with imagined scenes from his life, *The Top of Bravery* explored the ways in which Williams fought for racial justice even, perhaps especially, within the devastating limits of blackface minstrelsy. Morris set the play in Richmond in 1916 at the now-defunct Academy Theatre. As the lights rose, Williams, played by Morris, was preparing for a performance; the stage was strewn with costume pieces and furniture; Williams had not yet applied the burnt cork that became his public face. Establishing a convention of direct address, Williams greeted his audience; we must, he acknowledged, be confused to see him without makeup. In these first few moments it was clear that *The Top of Bravery*'s spectators had an uncomfortable part to play: we were cast as Williams's 1916 audience, ardent consumers of blackface.

Frustrating the presumed desires of his Jim Crow audience, Williams did not apply makeup until the play's final scenes. Instead, preparing for his official performance, he grappled with the path that led him to a Richmond stage. Notably, he did not work alone—three spirits haunted the Academy Theatre. They whirled onstage and off to play a range of onlookers, disparagers, and confidants: most notably, Williams's wife Lottie, his partner George Walker, and collaborator Aida Overton Walker. The range and energy of these actors (Katrinah Carol Lewis, Keydron Dunn, and Jasmine Eileen Coles) were formidable. Their visible transitions from ghosts to a wide array of characters reformulated a central question: What makes people recognizable to others, especially when systematic racism renders them invisible?

Williams and his ghosts told the story of his career, centering the possibilities of comedy. As a schoolboy in Florida he had clowned for classmates. Comedy, he discovered, allowed him to act up without getting into trouble. But as Williams grew up, his comedic

gifts were curtailed by the expectations of white audiences. Criticizing the indignities of blackface, his collaborator, Walker, and Lottie both urged him to perform without makeup; yet, Williams maintained that it was only by blacking up that he could present otherwise provocative material. And indeed, by animating Williams's repertoire in a narrative about his life onstage and off, *The Top of Bravery* proposed that many of his numbers were more transgressive than they might appear in the archive. His performance of "Evah Dahkey Is a King," adapted from Cook and Dunbar's libretto to *'Jes Lak White Fo'ks* (1900), was fraught with racist conventions: a blackface dialect; a proud Zip Coon; an imagined repatriation to Africa. Yet, *The Top of Bravery* invited spectators to look against the grain. In an imagined conversation that introduced the number, Williams and Walker envisioned Africa as a site of liberation and alternative to racist America. Director Tawnya Pettiford-Wates orchestrated scenographic contradictions to echo dramatic ones; for example, when Williams and Walker returned to the United States from a triumphant tour in Britain, it was a tattered American flag, projected behind them, that welcomed them home.

By the play's final scenes, when Williams's life story had finally arrived in the present moment, the laughs were few and far between. His collaborators had died; the ghosts of Lottie and Walker had angrily left him alone to apply his humiliating "mask." Williams would say little about his train ride to Richmond, but in a photo projected behind him the body of a black man hung from a tree. The contradictions that threaded his performance culminated in the announcement that Williams's Richmond show would be cancelled because he was barred from performing in the same theatre as white actors.

In true vaudeville style, music played throughout *The Top of Bravery*, most memorably in a short refrain. The company repeatedly belted two words: "That's America." The refrain rose in a harmonious crescendo, at first evoking triumphant pride; it resolved, however, in a dissonant coda, punctuated by a musical question mark. Are we stuck, the company challenged us, with *this* America? Is another America possible? *The Top of Bravery* ended ostensibly in 1916, but it reached into the present. Its white spectators were complicit in the repertoire it performed, its spectators of color still navigating its legacies. Throughout the performance the audience had been entangled in the predicaments of spectatorship. Who could laugh and when? Was applause appropriate after a minstrel performance? Were spectators applauding a character, or an actor playing a character, or the human being who chose to act? In which performance exactly were we complicit? In staging these questions, often more explicit in scholarly writing than in performance, *The Top of Bravery* cast a spotlight on both theatre history and contemporary spectatorship.

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