

The past remembered : Michelle Hurst shines in KTC's 'In This Place'

By Paul Hansom

Ain Gordon's "In This Place" is based on a simple premise: "Lexington, KY has several adjoining historic districts. Four generations of historic plaques dot these precincts. Fenced inside the brass borders of each plaque are what meager facts a metal rectangle can offer. When I first visited, in 2004, there stood one house as old as all those chosen for public remembrance - unmarked. Awaiting the wrecking ball." But while this provides the mise en scene, the play folds tightly back into itself, offering a complex meditation on the (re)remembered and the forgotten. Gordon's play is both complicated and multi-mediated, but its heart throbs with such hunger that this external apparatus dwindles away. What remains is a fine, brainy production, reminding us that the past is, indeed, a foreign country.

Enter Daphney (a marvelous Michelle Hurst), a slave woman's ghost, circa 1826, who is simply trying to tell her story before it disappears from history, before she herself is lost forever. She's a compelling narrator (Hurst makes her so): curious, respectful, aware of the watching audience, their paying needs. But hers is a thankful task because she is a life worth remembering.



Who is Daphney, when was she born, what was her life like, how did she meet Sam, her future husband? These are the specific questions defining her, holding her in purposeful time and place. Hurst's telling carves out the plot, and with infinite, deliberate care she speaks, sits, listens, recreating the space of 1826, the silence of it, the weight of taken breath. Not a simpler time. No. It is as complex as you are. But Gordon's point is simple: what does this life mean? In terms of capital-H History, it means nothing, it isn't big enough, tragic enough, theoretical, political, academic enough. But on Daphney's scale it's all there is.

Hurst inhabits this scale, this limited perspective, knowing something of herself, but knowing little of her husband, Sam. A man of few words, he's a monument builder, capable of redefining lives by action: he

buys his wife and children from their owner with a simple, minute long signature, changing their worlds forever. Yet Daphney experiences the moment in anger, forced to sit in the hallway, slighted, while Sam radically changes her existence. It is this (in)significance that lies at the heart of the play.

Act Two loses some of its compelling focus because it seeks closure. Sam builds a house, they move in, are blissfully happy for a clutch of years, until Sam decides to sell. Why? He won't say. Daphney is perplexed, and this marks a shift in their relationship, introduces a puzzle into their lives until Sam passes away, lost to an unmarked grave. Daphney, lonely, lost herself, wanders the house waiting for time's final deconstruction. What can she take, what can she keep? She doesn't know, but in a beautiful gesture Daphney asks the audience for a memento of theirs - ours - that she may keep safe. A relic of present time, if you will. And she is gone.

Gordon's multi-text primarily utilizes the monologue, and Daphney does all the talking, a Janus-faced procedure that works very well. Outside of her narrative are video fragments from official historians, word slides, silent movie vignettes, popping up as Daphne hunts. It's an uncomfortable balance, the richness of the oral remembrance enjambed with grainy video, lumpy screen text, even the intrusive company of stage managers at their terminals, typing, cueing. But it seems Gordon could've achieved the same effect by having Daphney simply speak. She can. She does it well, but to mesh her, enslave her, to these other voices seems unnecessary because they don't deepen her. At times the drama wants too much, it wants to be play, movie, poem, history, documentary, and the swift snatch of fragments tend to overpower one another. Nothing is hidden. Except, perhaps, Michelle Hurst who must still be confined as an actor.

"In This Place" is a very good production, confirming that we all need a house, all need to be housed, whether in life, love, or death. We need a simple guarantee that we will live on, be remembered, and for good reasons. Because when these guarantors are removed, destroyed by the pulverizing ram of modernity, then we are not freed, we are obliterated. Daphney and Sam were freed slaves, they were liberated into human existence, into the record book. And they lived. They were actually alive. And that simple fact should never be forgotten. Every life in history was - is - just as intense and meaningful as yours, you who are reading this now.