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THEATER

'Blue Door': truth & consequences

Profile's taut production of Tanya Barfield's drama of a black man in conflict with his soul brings back the ghosts of pain and opportunity

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In the dark, the sounds of African drumming and a loud, exultant chant ring out. Lights up, and the dialogue begins. "Divorce!" the actor Victor Mack declares, rolling and spitting the word in bafflement, savage humor, and contempt. What follows in *Blue Door*, which opened Saturday night at Profile Theatre, is close to two hours of dramatic exploration of what divorce means – not only or even mostly the divorce of Mack's character, Lewis, from his wife, but of Lewis's attempted divorce from his own black identity and cultural history.



Seth Rue in "Blue Door." Photo: David Kinder

Blue Door, the second full production in Profile's season of plays by Portland native Tanya Barfield, takes a big leap forward by trimming its sails. Its issues are larger and deeper than those in the season's appealing but sprawling first production, *The Call*, but the focus is much tighter: Just Mack and fellow actor Seth Rue, who plays a variety of characters in Lewis's long family story, are onstage.

Lewis's story is, in a sense, the story of black people in America, from slavery through Reconstruction and the supposed post-racial society of today, which of course is anything but. Written in 2006, it takes place sometime after the Million Man March of October 16, 1995, when black men from across the nation gathered on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., to assert the strength and importance of the black male. Lewis's wife, who is white, urges him to go to the march: It's important for you to do this, she tells him. He refuses. What's it going to prove? That's he's black? Anyone can see that.

Blue Door focuses on the moment of attempted assimilation into mainstream America, and what it means. It's different for an immigrant Irishman or Scot or German, who can become a part of the anonymous mass. But what of a black man or black woman, or an Asian American? In a culture whose broad assumptions still include a color code that persists more pervasively than its legal code, you are black twenty-four hours a day. You can't not be black. As Lewis notes, you can't take a vacation from it. What does that mean, on an individual basis? How do you simply relax and live your life?

For Lewis, it's difficult. He's fought to achieve a position of significance, as a professor of mathematics at a university. He's been better than his white competitors, because a black person, or a woman, has to be better to get anywhere at all. He's controlled himself, rigidly, and buried his emotions deep beneath a cool, detached exterior. Anytime that things get too messy, he falls back on the impartiality and reassuring predictability of numbers, whose truth can't be denied. *Mathematica est veritas*.

So why the insomnia? Why the self-questioning and self-doubt? Why these visions of ancestors, these arguments with the past? A mind game is going on in front of us, a split in Lewis's personality, a divorce from the deeper wells of his people and himself: to find his place in his contemporary life, he must revisit the currents of his past, those ancestors and aspects of himself who are played and sometimes sung so adeptly by Rue. The argument goes on, beyond the play's end, veering one way, then another, maybe never answerable to anyone's complete satisfaction, but a necessary conversation to have. Because Lewis is right: why should he not be what he wants to be, a master of his intellectual craft, a success on impartial terms? And he is wrong: how can he be completely himself if he shuts out the people and places from which he's come?



Victor Mack in "Blue Door." Photo: David Kinder

Under Bobby Bermea's taut direction, Mack and Rue create intense and vital drama from this argumentative cultural construct. Mack creates a conflicted character through a slow seethe, embracing the nuances of self-repression and its varieties of expression, from sardonic humor to clipped cadence to occasional revelations of genuine anguish. Rue is his agile alter ego, his memory-bank, his rawer and more honest emotional self, the stirring in the blood that Lewis can't extinguish. He is a ghost, and in a sense the realest part of Lewis: his foundation and his anchor. He's the one who paints the doors blue, as an affirmation of worth and a protection from evil. He is also a spinner of tales, stepping into the stories of a slave who learns to read and write; of a man imprisoned for trespassing in a white church and lynched for trying to vote; of a man – Lewis's father – who belittles Lewis's success and sinks into alcoholism; and of Lewis's brother, Rex, who has died of a drug overdose, and who, in this apparition-visitation, tells Lewis he has turned his back on "everything that make you black." The accusation hangs in the air, never fully answered.

This fine tension is played out on a spare and sweepingly curved set, complete with moon, by Megan Wilkerson; the excellent lighting is by Ruth Nardecchia, historically suggestive costumes by Sarah Gahagan; and subtle, highly effective sound and music by Rodolfo Ortega.

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Profile Theatre's *Blue Door* continues through April 24 at Artists Rep. [Ticket and schedule information here.](#)