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Blue Door

by Meg Currell
Contributor
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If the point of art is to make the viewer examine herself, then "**Blue Door**" succeeds powerfully. "Blue Door" is an unflinching examination of the heart and mind of a black man who is a successful mathematician and professor. The play takes a painful journey into the professor's family-and his own-past, bringing his insomniac meanderings into the light where all of us, together, can look at how everything fits together. And the final image, while beautiful in its rawness and depth, isn't pretty.

The dreamlike staging of Tanya Barfield's Pulitzer Prize-nominated play is an opportunity to spend some time in another person's subconscious, to witness the waking dreams that lead him to his truth. The audience enters the room while the professor, Lewis, is onstage, trying and failing to sleep.

When the lights go down, Lewis' dreams come to life, three-dimensional people who recall for him the forgotten and neglected past that shaped who he is. Lewis' conversations with his past, with the dead ancestors whose painful lives Lewis would prefer to forget, frame the painful journey of Lewis' awakening.

The audience is a part of Lewis' imagination, and part of the text of the play; a group of white people assembled to watch Lewis work through his understanding of his place in the world. The audience, real and figurative, features in Lewis' dawning comprehension; always aware of how he appears, particularly to white people, he has chosen his path carefully in an attempt to avoid the fatal missteps of his forbears. His examination of his history eventually reveals that no amount of caution will offset the dangers faced by a black man in this culture.

Lewis' nighttime visitors include his brother, grandfather, great-grandparents, his father, and ancillary characters in their lives. Lewis is played by Victor Mack, a seasoned actor who compellingly conveys stillness and gravity in the midst of his character's uncertainty and fear.

All other characters are played by Seth Rue, who brilliantly embodies children, adults, multiple regional accents, and shares each different personality as if that's the only thing he's got going on. Rue switches between characters and ages in a flash, utterly convincingly. His performance is astounding. I will be looking for chances to see both of these fine actors again.

In a city like Portland, with its dueling characteristics of "very white city" and "very progressive political city," this play is particularly important. It's decidedly uncomfortable to sit with the weight of history that Lewis grapples with, disquieting to be surrounded by the pervasiveness of pain and mistrust and fear, but that is, I suspect, rather the point: this is the fraught existence of being black.

The moment at the party that Lewis reenacts for us, when the white woman at the university tea party can't stop staring at his hands, when Lewis realizes his unavoidable blackness is the trigger for uncontrollable fear, is sickening and shaming. In that moment, I saw how pervasive and stifling it must be to carry the weight of not only your own individual successes and failures, but also the expectations and accusations and misapprehensions of an entire culture -- and to have to carry that everywhere you go. The gravity of that realization was crushing; there is no way for me to contemplate the weight of the experience itself.

Barfield has crafted a play so honed and refined that every word is set perfectly in place and leads to the next grouping logically, like long-form poetry or a symphony. "Blue Door" is a difficult play to see, if you have any awareness of the social-political climate of our country, but so necessary for our understanding of that world. What an opportunity for Portlanders to understand what life is like for someone without the privilege of white skin. Take this chance to see "Blue Door."

"Blue Door" runs through April 24 at Profile Theatre, 1515 SW Morrison St. Portland, OR 97205. For tickets and information, call 503-242-0080 or visit <http://profiletheatre.org/tickets/>

Meg Currell is a freelance author based in Portland, where she moved for the coffee and mountain views. With a background in literature and music, she explores dance, concerts and DIY with equal enthusiasm. She is currently at work on a collection of short stories.