

ZELMA

By Gordon Parks

“A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots” Marcus Garvey

If one doesn't know his / her history, then one is destined to repeat the same mistakes. Because the truth about black history is so complexed and interwoven with other things, no one can tell our story better than ourselves. The history of Black Americans for the most part, has been documented through the lens of White Europeans, an interpretation that has not always been an accurate portrayal of the true black experience. “Zelma” is an attempt by Percy W. Thomas to portray African American history from a different vantage point and to present a more accurate account from a black perspective. This play is the playwright's third in a series of plays written to express the African American slave experience and the atrocities they endured while trying to survive during this horrific period of history. Percy has become a passionate storyteller whose purpose is to reveal the hidden truths of the people who lived their lives during this era. The character's journey allows one to understand the beliefs, values, attitudes of the slaves, and slave masters, as well as the personal relationships they developed.

I saw a Sunday matinee and was immediately impressed with how a church fellowship hall was converted into a theatrical setting. The set design was well constructed and set the mood of the play. When the lights came on and the opening scene began, the audience became captivated with the cast, who held their attention for the remainder of the production. The play evolved around the main character, Zelma, the Master's black daughter, who had inherited the plantation after his death. Her conflict arises when the towns people attempt to take her land before president Lincoln signs the 13th Amendment and her determination to keep that from happening. Even-though the characters are fictional, it nevertheless depicted a historical account of that period of time.

I give Kudos to the Production Team. They created a very imaginative set, lighting, and sound design for the space. They included Percy W. Thomas, Prince No-/RA, and Alice Thomas. The Cast was wonderful and need to be applauded for doing a great job of making the characters come alive on the stage. I noted that there were a few actors making their stage debut. They included Daniel Warshaw (Bratley), who did some fine work, Carolyn Chissell, who I thought was quite impressive as Annie, and Senetra Butler who I felt was outstanding in the role of Zelma. The veteran actors, who shared their extraordinary gifts and talents are also deserving of mention for some excellent acting. They included Charles Daye (Moses), Paul Jerry (Hercules), Arnold Aubrey (Monroe), Nicholas Friend (Apollo), Eunice Seagraves (Eliza), and David McPayten (Toby). They all helped to create a very exciting performance.

Percy Thomas has every right to feel proud of his final play in a three part series on the historical experience of the African American slave. I felt that it had a powerful message. The play was staged quite admirably and had a good flow. It was easy to follow and understand. I was impressed with the overall writing of the play. The dialogue was compelling and helped the actors to tell the storyline clearly. It was a very enjoyable theatrical experience. After the curtail call, I felt a greater sense of pride that the true African American story was starting to be told and hopeful that it will continue to be told in the future.