

ZELMA

Comedy and Tragedy

By Stage

July 21, 2017

Recently, I had the pleasure of seeing *Zelma*, the last in a series of plays written by Percy W. Thomas. The play was capably performed at the Resurrection Baptist Church in Silver Spring, Maryland, by the Heralds of Hope Theater Company. The performance space was in the Church's Fellowship Hall, however, once past the black velvet curtain hanging at the entrance, the space is immediately transformed into an intimate seventy-seven seat theater.

Zelma is a historical and fictional play set in 1865. The play is set in the Livingroom of the Big House, owned by a slave named Zelma. The simplistic and striking set, designed by Prince Nora, was created completely out of recycled materials but has a distinct sense of deteriorating 1865 elegance. The Big House is adorned with minimal draperies, and period furnishing, as well as chairs built by slaves.

Zelma was given the plantation by her father, a Quaker and her Massa, upon his death in 1861, at the start of the Civil War. Given, that it was unlawful for slaves to own land, Zelma has endured multiple attempts by neighboring slave owners and confederate sympathizers to take the land from her.

Onstage, a marvelous ensemble of actors bring the playwrights words to life. At the play's start, Zelma (Senetra Butler) is told by an angry Patroller that she must give up her Plantation or be killed. Because of this ultimatum, Zelma's love interest, a Quaker, Bratley (Daniel Warsaw), tells her she must leave and let them take her land. Annie (Carolyn Chissell), the matriarch of the plantation, who practices Voodoo and Christianity, is set on using roots, potions, bones and the Bible to send all that try to harm Zelma to hell. Moses (Charles Daye) and Hercules (Paul Jerry) are slaves that insist that Zelma not listen to Bratley, and that they must take a stand against the white townspeople, who would take the land and kill them all. Nicholas Friend, (Apollo) risk his life to return to alert Zelma of a diabolical plot to kill her. Monroe, (Arnold Aubrey) who is Zelma's brother returns to the plantation and finds it and its inhabitants under siege. Eunice Seagraves, (ELiza) and her son Toby (David McPayten) represent the hardships slaves face and the difficulty a mother has in protecting her man-child.

Each actors' performance is stellar and worth noting, but standouts include Senetra, who makes her debut in the play. She, mesmerizes the audience with her voice when she sings "Precious Lord." Charles Daye, is riveting in his final words, where he reveals a secret he has held for thirty years. Carolyn Chissell, as Annie, is believable as a Voodoo Priestess, she is funny in offering comic relief and displaying a stubborn disposition. Nicholas Friend, was outstanding in his portrayal of Apollo, notable was his consistent Hattian accent and maintaining a busted leg

throughout the performance. In this community theater production, all actors display significant chops for the stage.

Director Percy W. Thomas has put together an amazing show with smooth scene changes, a clear focus, and a cohesiveness that is both impressive and unmatched. No actor pulls focus when they shouldn't, and even the smallest of roles stay in their role and keeps the focus on the play. In addition, the lighting design of Prince Nora and the costume design of Elouise Griffin enhance the show in their own ways. I can only describe the lighting as magical, with the beams of impeccably placed spotlights playing their own distinct parts in the show. The sound effects created by Connor Flynn, were excellent and brought a sense of reality to the play. I encourage you to go see this production, when it is performed in the future.

Zelma, will be performed in Cambridge, Maryland at LIV AGAIN, ARTS BAR, 317 High Street, Cambridge, MD, Saturday, July 29, at 3 pm. For tickets call (301) 503-3403 or go to:

www.brownpapertickets.com/event/2952043