

Interchange (Wanda Basir)

Friday, November 11, 2011

Pity the Proud Ones at the Robey Theatre at the Los Angeles Theatre Center Nov. 11-13, 2011



Darrell Philip (Martin O'Grady) up close and personal with Dorian Christian Baucum (James Perez)
photo:Adenrele Ojo

The first weekend in November found me dashing to Los Angeles to say goodbye to a dear friend who was transitioning from one leg of his soul journey to another, one those of us bound by gravity could not follow. Jet-lagged and fighting a cold, I made it, the farewells neatly tucked into Jamal's pocket as he bid us farewell Friday afternoon.

Saturday morning after a special broadcast of my radio show seated at a table in a noisy cafe at USC, my mother and I headed for the Pacific Ocean.

The water was calling me, and so we drove to a beach not far from LAX. Planes were so close we could almost see the passengers (just kidding). The weather was lovely and my mother took off her shoes and waded as I hung out with the shore birds who were enjoyed a late morning snack.

The tide was out and seaweed covered the relatively quiet terrain. I thought of Jamal Ali, who loved the water and always found himself near an ocean if he could at all help it.

LA for me was Mama and Jamal, California African American Museum and Robey Theatre, so while at the hospital a friend whom I'd last seen two years ago at a Robey matinee, S. Pearl Sharpe, told me she'd had tickets for Saturday and had just called and cancelled them. She didn't know the name of the play, but like me, it didn't matter, if it was at Ben's theatre it was a black story and it was good (smile). I immediately called for tickets and was so happy when I arrived early the next day to find a reservation in my name.

We detoured at Occupy LA, the only Occupation supported by a municipality in the nation. I spoke to Melissa who was giving an interview when I walked up and asked her about the site. People were lined up for dinner. It was a celebration of sorts, lots of spaghetti and baked bread and dessert. Earlier marijuana was dropped off to the dismay of the police parked nearby, but they worked it out Melissa said.

Earlier that day, after the meditation on the beach, Mama and I went over to CAAM where I checked out *Places of Validation, Art, and Progression*, part of *Los Angeles's Pacific Standard Time: ART In LA 1945-1980*. That afternoon, Dr. Samella Lewis was giving a talk! Yes, that Dr. Lewis, the woman who almost single-highhandedly took it upon herself to give black artists public access or venues to network with other black artists and places to show their work, whether that was through publications she started or galleries she opened or books she wrote. I couldn't believe my good fortune. And then I found out that her grandson, Unity, and my younger daughter, TaSin Yasmin Sabir, went to school together, The California College of Arts and Crafts. The two of them started *Black Artists and Designers* or BAAD, a student organization for Pan African undergraduates and graduate students. Visit camuseum.org

Both the director, Ben Guillory and the playwright, Kurt Dana Maxey, were present that night at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring Street, and agreed to be on my show today, closing weekend. *Pity the Proud Ones* looks at slavery's impact on a family, and the secrets and lies parents keep to themselves for many reasons.

Perhaps in this story Martin O'Grady (actor Darrell Philip) is ashamed of his past, which is why he doesn't tell his son, James Perez (actor Dorian Christian Baucum) who he is, that he was once a slave. O'Grady is looking for his son to pay a debt; Perez is looking to collect and he does, more than he bargained for, but certainly what he needed.

It is a stormy play. The chaos sets the world at kilter, the hour glasses break and time stops as the characters all claw their way up from the manacles and debris, waste and refuse they'd grown too fond of especially Ella Mae McDonald (Staci Mitchell) and O'Grady.

James Perez, O'Grady's son, refuses to feed from the bottom and this pride costs him. His is a righteousness one admires, as is Elizabeth Marie's (actress Caroline Morahan), the woman he loves, who works as a bookkeeper at a brothel, Ella Mae's brothel, Ella Mae Irish like O'Grady.

The other character is Pettigrew (actor Ben Jurand) who is a military veteran who learns early on to fight smart and live when he almost loses his life. He is a proud man who is content to use others to get back at the white men, the small white men who don't realize his power. He runs the town from behind his bar stool. He is the first person O'Grady meets when he comes to town. He is also the only character who lives above the chaos--the audience's peer. We can look into his eyes.

The relationships in *Pity* crisscross so much, it is almost incestuous. Is this indicative of small towns or small people? Hum. To travel from Barbados to Florida and speak of other places like New Orleans yet allow one's world to shrink in on itself where the air is almost gone. . . this is what we see happening on stage as the storm crashes outside and we all fear for our lives.

At *Pity's* center is the story of a father and son at odds because of lies and deceit. The dad hides his shame in drunkenness--his acts too barbaric and horrific for him to bear sober for long.

The Irish were enslaved on the island of Barbados along with Africans, eventually becoming a commodity of choice when it was cheaper or more cost effective to enslave an Irishman instead of the more expensive African. During the 1600s the British government made a bundle from this free labor as Irish joined the Africans either as kidnapped nationals who refused to surrender land to Oliver Cromwell or military prisoners. Like Africans these "barbadosed" Irish and white indentured servants to British planters were often enslaved for life.

The playwright states in program notes that the number of Barbadosed Irish is not known and varies between a "high of 60,000 to a low of 12,000. Both groups suffered harsh treatment and banned together to revolt against the British," yet in the 1880s census not a mention shows up of the Irish Barbadians. What happened to them?

Pity the Proud Ones is such a story . . . that is, the story of the *ever after*, if not *happily*. . . O'Grady's clan sets out to rewrite their history complete with a forged family crest and an anglicized version of their name. It is easier for an enslaved white person to pass as a freeman than an African, yet freedom is more than a crest or literacy. Freedom is an attitude which O'Grady lacks. The British saw no difference between the Irish and African, both were savage, both were seen as property, both had no rights as human beings.

In Barbados there were French and Spanish pirates who raided the island colony, and if that wasn't enough, the weather was not hospitable to agrarian living--"decimating crops and morale, stirring the seeds of revolt and revolution among Africans and Irish allies."

Pity the Proud Ones is set in this turmoil--the storm raging within O'Grady and his son James. The two weather systems meet at the brothel and the ensuing storm breaks windows, decapitates homes and sends buggies rushing to their makers.

Maxey leaves much unsaid and unresolved when the storm ends, O'Grady bleeding but not dead, the truth lying on the floor between he and his son, alive, but barely breathing. Seated above the set, the audience looks down or in on a sketch or sliver of a story, one of many past and many to come and like most of life, if we don't get it when it happens and perhaps never fully comprehend all of its nuances, we can hope the sip at the well will make the next chapter a bit easier to swallow.

That's all one can hope for and I guess in *Pity the Proud Ones*, so that's what we get. Visit robeytheatrecompany.com