



***Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death***  
By Melvin Van Peebles. Dir. Alfred Preisser. With ensemble cast. HSA Theatre.

Full disclosure: The last time I visited the Classical Theatre of Harlem (for Genet's *The Blacks*, done as an audience-interactive circus), I was lured onstage and publicly humiliated for my ignorance of African-American history and my default racism. Compared with that traumatizing experience, the in-your-face revival of Melvin Van Peebles's *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* is downright tame. Alfred Preisser's production of the 1971 urban singspiel rolls out a Hogarthian rabblement of pimps, prostitutes, beggars, junkies and predatory cops to paint a mural of life and death in the ghetto. While the performers' bell-bottoms and the jazz-funk score over which they recite their singsong monologues are pure '70s, the work as a whole remains startlingly fresh.

What's more, CTH reconfirms itself as one of the gutsiest and physically fearless groups around—second only to the hard-landing Streb dancers. When a pimp (Ty Jones) brutally thrashes a prostitute (Althea Alexis Vyfhuis), you want to jump up and defend her. Later, Jones endears himself to the ladies even less when he plays a vile cop who coerces oral sex from a young hooker (Simone Moore).

In recent interviews, Van Peebles has argued that social conditions haven't changed in 30 years, that his bleak vision still stands. He may as well add that the daring and deeply personal *Ain't Supposed to Die*—which originally played on Broadway—suggests that the musical has also not progressed much, stagnating in its own artistic ghetto.—*David Cote*