

DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN

A Deliverer's Dream, Realized in All Its Complexity

By Gordon Cox

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What a strange, sprawling piece of theater "Dream on Monkey Mountain" is. The 1967 play, generally considered to be Nobel laureate Derek Walcott's strongest dramatic work, tells the surreal story of an old West Indian named Makak who may or may not have had a dream that may or may not have granted him the powers of a savior who can redress the wrongs committed by the Western world against Africa. Many of the images are magical and hard to stage. Characters speak in poetry. A large cast is required. These days, only a troupe with the rare sense of adventure of the Classical Theatre of Harlem would be ambitious enough-not to say crazy enough-to undertake a play like this.

And thank goodness for that. "Dream on Monkey Mountain" may be convoluted and more than a little opaque, but it's also consistently surprising and regularly riveting. It has a raw and ferocious heart that doesn't preclude humor, and expresses itself in unforced, openly beautiful language. It looks with complicated ambivalence at the obstacles to faith, the impossibility of revenge and the seeming inevitability of hate.

The Classical Theatre of Harlem production, which opened Friday night, is a full, enveloping event, with director Alfred Preisser encouraging the action to spill off the stage and into the aisles around the audience. (The stage itself, as designed by Troy Hourie, is mostly bare, with a sheer draped curtain suggesting the titular mountain, and a moon that has a homemade, folk-art look.) Music director William "Spaceman" Patterson has provided a propulsive score, played by a live band and complemented by affecting bursts of song from the cast. There are also moments of energetic dance that serve to punctuate an athletically physical production, in which, at one point, ensemble members become set elements by simply and efficiently transforming themselves into a swaying, sighing jungle.

The cast, as is generally the case in Classical Theatre of Harlem productions, is lively and fully committed to the action. That goes, too, for the star of the show, André De Shields ("The Full Monty," "The Wiz," "Ain't Misbehavin'"), so much so that he tends toward the overwrought, even if he does lend an air of stifled dignity to Makak. Kim Sullivan, playing Makak's friend Moustique, pitches his performance a couple of notches lower, and finds both the humor and the affection in the messiah's sidekick, a pragmatist who gets many of Walcott's loveliest lines. Michael Early, as the officious Corporal Lestrade, adopts a voice and a ramrod posture to match his character's overbearing grammatical correctness, and Arthur James Solomon, holding a walking stick topped with a skull, makes a slyly dapper figure of death.

Preisser's staging sometimes favors sound over sense, and he and his actors have trouble tracing the specific emotional arcs of the play's characters. That makes Makak's quick-shifting attitudes difficult to follow, and when the thief Souris (Jerry Clicquot) has a sudden change of heart, we haven't seen enough of his inner journey to do more than just take his word for it. But even though some of the details get lost, the overall force of the play remains intact, thanks to a theater group undaunted by such a tough, thorny, worthy challenge.

THEATER REVIEW

DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN. Classical Theatre of Harlem production. By Derek Walcott, directed by Alfred Preisser. With André De Shields, Kim Sullivan, Benton Greene, Jerry Clicquot, Michael Early, Arthur James Solomon, Neil Dawson, Délé. Set by Troy Hourie, costumes by Kimberly Glennon, lights by Aaron Black, sound by Matt Kraus, choreography by Bruce Heath, music direction by William "Spaceman" Patterson. HSA Theater, 645 St. Nicholas Ave. near 141st Street. Seen Saturday night.