

Classical Theatre of Harlem revives the acid groove of Van Peebles's '70s musical
Ghetto Blasting by **David Finkle** October 6 - 12, 2004



Playing the street life: Lizan Mitchell

It's always surprising but also satisfying to recognize that a startling work of sulfurous social criticism eventually becomes part of a recognizable continuum. This is unquestionably true of Melvin Van Peebles's still-vital *Ain't Suppose to Die a Natural Death*, which seemed to spring from nowhere in 1971 to shake Broadway rafters. Today, Van Peebles's series of linked monologues bellowed in a ghetto street is traceable to the likes of Langston Hughes, Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, and Lanford Wilson's *Rimers of Eldritch*. More revealingly, it's a precursor of hip-hop; without it, Russell Simmons would never have gotten to Def Poetry Jam, which itself is practically an *Ain't Supposed* revival.

Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death

By Melvin Van Peebles
HAS Theatre
645 St. Nicholas Avenue
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Called a musical and featuring songs Van Peebles penned for it, *Ain't Supposed* isn't your typical tuner. It includes only a few conventional numbers, although William "Spaceman" Patterson fronts a percussive band that won't let up on the tense, pre-hip-hop underscoring. Instead, Van Peebles makes music from the dialogue.

The spoken outcries slyly draw inspiration from pop music. To wit, he appropriates that most coveted Top 40 ingredient: the commercial hook.

Each of the generally unnamed ranting characters repeats one or two signature phrases, implying everybody in the world has a mantra. One implores a listener, "Come on, baby, rap to me." Little did he know how soon Sensurround rapping was headed his way. A woman standing under what could have been the now razed Women's House of Detention at Sixth Avenue and Eighth Street shouts to a jailed girlfriend, "Baby, is you ever gonna come back and dance with me?" (Van Peebles specifies no NYC locale.) Perhaps the most disturbing outburst is the death-row inmate recalling that the prettiest sight he ever saw was "Lilli doing the Zampoughi." Van Peebles's final monologue is also a verbal acid spray—a woman insisting, "I put a curse on you." In his typical African American underclass community, Van Peebles makes Act One a day in the life and Act Two a day in the death. Looting and several brutal killings occur. He includes a blind beggar, a drag queen, a Malcolm X lieutenant, you name it. (Incidentally, they're overseen by a cartoon white man with paper money for eyes and a chain for a mouth.) The ensemble that Alfred Preisser has explosively directed vivifies the unforgiving language. In an outstanding group, standouts are J. Kyle Manzay, Tracy Jack, Lizan Mitchell, and Carmen Barika (doing that Zampoughi). If "renaissance" means "rebirth," then the *Ain't Supposed* revival represents a slice of present-day Harlem Renaissance.