

Epic Journey: Trinity's Black Odyssey Is a Powerhouse



Trinity Rep opens the new year with a play that is epic indeed: Marcus Gardley's *Black Odyssey*, which transposes Homer's story of Ulysses' decades-long journey to come home from the Trojan War onto an African American Second Gulf War veteran, swept off a transport ship on his way back from a tour of duty. Co-directed by company members Joe Wilson Jr. and Jude Sandy, the play sends the veteran (played by Wilson) not on a journey through geography (Mediterranean or otherwise), but rather "floating in history" through the moments of crisis that, over the centuries, would shape present-day man. Ulysses becomes a chess piece contested between the sea god Great Grand Paw Sidin (Omar Robinson) and the sky god Great Grand Daddy Deus (Sandy) — whose exchange of insults over their game displays both Gardley's brilliant language and the stand-out power of Robinson and Sandy — after he kills Paw Sidin's son, a one-eyed civilian in Afghanistan. Wilson's Ulysses is a complicated man — funny, desperate, haunted by guilt — whose very body, so fraught in his own life and affected by all the events he passes through, becomes his guide home, as he follows his blood and his palm lines to find his heart ("You can't get out of here without a past," says Circe).

The cast are all fantastically talented singers, and under Michael Évora's musical direction, they start off the play with a journey through time in miniature — a beat and a chant give way to the spiritual "Deep River" (pouring out liquor in both ancient Greek and African-diaspora tradition) and then to the Motown-ish "Still Water," complete with audience participation. Music and dance (with choreography by yonTande) serve as touchstones as Ulysses drifts through time, from Afro-Cuban Orisha dance to Mardi Gras to work songs to some surprising Sirens ("Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" makes an obvious but welcome appearance). In Gardley's spin on the myth, Ulysses' great quest — for home and family — is also his greatest danger, as longing and temptation almost entrap him over and over again in familiar music, or the ability to be part of movements in black history, or the pampering of a great-great-grandmother, or banquets of soul food. Cloteal L. Horne, as Circe, delivers one of the bravura speeches with which the play is well-stocked, praising the dishes of her table in an ecstasy that leans toward sexual. Zeus' offspring and their terrible personalities, and the sage advice of the blind seer Superfly Tiresias (Sandy) to well-known black Americans, are other showpiece speeches.

Juxtaposed with Ulysses' story is that of Nella P. (Kalyne Coleman), the wife he left behind, and Malachi (Kai Tshikosi), the son he never met. Encouraged to remain steadfast by Great Aunt Tina (Julia Lema), Ulysses' patron goddess taking on human form and all its infirmities, Nella raises Malachi in a world that's out to get him and she is subsequently tempted by a suitor — Paw Sidin in disguise — not out of lust or infidelity, but for the promise of stability and a male role model for her son. Another awesome choice by Gardley is to swap out the funeral shroud that Homer's Penelope weaves for her husband for a quilt of Malachi's life, sewn into the flag the Navy sent her with his death certificate. Malachi's perils

are very real and physical, as he is threatened by police for the crime of walking home while black.

One of the play's strongest scenes is the one in which Ulysses washes up on the roof of the Sabine family in New Orleans. The year is 1968, and the floodwaters submerging the Sabine house are both the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the rising waters of Hurricane Katrina. Horne, here playing Mrs. Sabine, points out to Ulysses the other people in the neighborhood, waiting for the rescue of being able to tell their stories: the Scottsboro Boys sleeping on another roof, wrongfully convicted by an all-white jury; the four little girls killed in the Birmingham 16th Street Church bombing; Emmett Till lynched at the age of 14, hanging on a tree and whistling. As the waters rise with no rescue in sight, Ulysses offers to take Benevolence Nausicaa, the daughter, on his raft to safety — another child separated from her parents. Jackie Davis, as Benevolence, somehow portrays a completely convincing 10-year-old girl while also having the presence and the power for some stunning moments late in the show.

Kara Harmon creates a wide range of costumes for the different eras and moods of the play, including some wonderfully colorful patterns and cuts that only appear on the actors out of character as company members. Peter Sasha Hurowitz and Edward E. Haynes Jr, on projection design and set design, respectively, likewise create a multitude of different worlds, some under the ocean itself, through projection on and behind a giant curtain made of chains.

Black Odyssey is a story that needs to be told, told as only theater can tell it, with a powerhouse cast and creative team. Not to be missed!

Trinity Rep presents Black Odyssey by Marcus Gardley, directed by Jude Sandy and Joe Wilson, Jr. through Feb 3. Run time: 2 hours and 50 minutes. Presented in the Dowling Theater. For tickets and more information visit trinityrep.com/buy-tickets/ or call 401-351-4242.