

‘The Man Who Dug Fish’ and ‘The Purple Flower’ at Factory Theatre

By Terry Byrne | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 03, 2014



PHOTOS BY JAMES CORREIA

Above: Keith Mascoll in Ed Bullins’s “The Man Who Dug Fish.” Below: shadow puppets in Keli Garrett’s adaptation of Marita Bonner’s “The Purple Flower.”

At its best, theater creates a sense of connection. Sometimes the connection is confined to the stories of characters portrayed onstage, and sometimes, as in Sleeping Weazel’s “African American History and Its Expressions,” it reaches beyond the borders of the Factory Theatre to an awareness and appreciation of a larger community.

“African American History and Its Expressions” is an evening of four distinct theatrical experiences, each of which delivers a uniquely dramatic tale. The evening includes two world premieres of short plays, bookended by stories of identity told through dolls and poetry. Local playwright Ed Bullins’s “The Man Who Dug Fish” has, according to artistic director Charlotte Meehan, never been performed before and stands in stark contrast to some of Bullins’s more overtly incendiary works. In this drama, a well-dressed black man (Keith Mascoll) visits three different white-owned businesses, a fish market, a hardware store, and a bank. At each stop, he requests ordinary items that will fit into his briefcase — a fish, a shovel, and a safe deposit box — and his needs are met by salespeople (all played by Jeff Gill) who may be confused by his requests, but are happy to make the sales.

Ultimately, while the bank manager steps away to make sure it's OK to accept a cash payment for a safe deposit box rental, The Man places his briefcase into the safe deposit box and locks it. We are left with the knowledge that The Man has used the tools of white capitalist society to exact a powerful — and smelly — revenge.

“The Purple Flower” was written in 1927 by Marita Bonner, and this allegorical play, adapted by playwright Keli Garrett, is brought to life with Annie K. Rollins’s evocative shadow puppets. Bonner, whose work focused on racism and sexism directed toward black women, pulls no punches here and director Dominic Taylor balances the ethereal beauty of the puppets with Bonner’s revolutionary message. The two sides of the conflict are clearly outlined, with the White Devils (who come complete with horns and tails) positioned at the top of a hill while the Us’s (beautifully detailed individuals) are confined to the valley below.

The bookends to these plays are storyteller Debra Britt and performer and playwright Robbie McCauley. The evening opens with Britt who, with her five sisters, has collected 6,245 dolls, many of which are included in the National Black Doll Museum of History and Culture based in Mansfield. A deft storyteller, Britt offers a glimpse of the power of dolls as role models, inspiring not only young girls but also black nationalist Marcus Garvey, who ran a doll factory that emphasized the beauty of black features.

McCauley, professor Emerita at Emerson College, is a gifted performer who presents three poems from before, during, and after the Harlem Renaissance. Her choices, from Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Amiri Baraka, all reflect a sense of longing, striving, and a sense of determination to forge an identity beyond the mask of expectations.

Sleeping Weazel’s festival pulls together neglected works and unheralded pieces of culture for a revelatory evening of theater.

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