



Pieces of Paradise

CAST

Justin Adams, Pepper Binkley, Doug Dewitt, Lydia Owen Edmunds, Kevin Gall, Michael Halliday, Renata Hinrichs, Christopher B. Kerson, Frederic Kimball, Timothy Lee, Sonja O'Hara, Omen Sade

AUTHOR

Tennessee Williams

DIRECTOR

Stephan Morrow

COSTUMES

Brenda Gonzalez

SOUND

Larry Wilbur

MUSIC

Casey Spindler

STAGE MANAGER

Charles Casano

nytheatre.com review

Martin Denton · October 23, 2006

Pieces of Paradise is being presented as a benefit for 13th Street Repertory's Legal Fund; the company is in jeopardy of losing its long-time home, so folks who care about indie theatre in New York may want to show their support of this group by spending the 12 or 15 dollars for a ticket to this show.

But here's the excellent news: benefit or not, this is a splendid production of four heretofore "lost" plays by Tennessee Williams, all cannily directed by Stephan Morrow. These NYC premieres of short pieces by America's master poet/dramatist, all from the early part of his career (before *The Glass Menagerie*), are sure to be of interest to any Williams fan or any fan of American drama in general. Plus, they're entertaining and fascinating in their own right. So you can turn out for 13th Street Rep and enjoy a fine program of theatre in the bargain. Doing good isn't usually this easy.

Let me tell you about these plays. The first item on the agenda, *The Municipal Abattoir*, is a semi-apocalyptic, Kafkaesque piece that feels shockingly contemporary. A man asks a stranger on a city street for directions to the municipal abattoir, which turns out to be a place where people are sent to be hacked to pieces and then packaged as dog food. The stranger, an activist of some kind, tries to help the man understand that he needn't feel resigned to his fate. This is an extraordinarily prescient play that is unlike anything else that Williams ever wrote, as far as I know. Justin Adams delivers the evening's most memorable performance as the politically-inclined stranger, with Michael Halliday excellent as the abattoir-bound man.

The next piece is an intriguing curiosity called *The Palooka*. Real-life boxer Doug Dewitt plays the title character, an over-the-hill fighter who gives a newcomer ("The Kid") some advice about the world of boxing and celebrity. Williams is a bit out of his element here, I think, but the writing is still gorgeous and the ending surprised me, even though I probably should have seen it coming. Kevin Gall plays the younger fighter in this brief, interesting piece.

The second half of the evening offers a more recognizable Williams. *These Are the Stairs You Gotta Watch* is a deliciously atmospheric one-act set in a decaying movie theatre that was once an opera house; the eponymous stairs are the ones that lead to the upper balconies, where all manner of never-quite-specified but obviously very nasty business is conducted by disreputable patrons. The setting felt familiar to me, and after the show I checked out Williams's *Collected Stories*, where I discovered it in a late-30s tale called "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio." Christopher Kerson is terrific as an usher who has become disenchanted with his job after ten years in this hell-hole, while Renata Hinrichs, as the assistant to the theatre's slimy manager, and Sonja O'Hara, as a flirtatious customer, also deliver outstanding performances.

Mister Paradise is the final item of the bill, a surprisingly wise tale told by the still-young Williams about a washed-up poet (the *Mister Paradise* of the title) who is "discovered" by a smart young Bryn Mawr student who has come to fetch him and return him to public life. Anthony Paradise, whose slim volume of poems was discovered by this young lady holding up a leg of an old table in a French Quarter antiques emporium, wants no part of the scheme. Frederic Kimball and Pepper Binkley offer fine performances here.

It's a treat to come upon new works from the great Tennessee all these years after his demise; sure, these aren't classics, but they're more than mere curios. *Pieces of Paradise* is a very entertaining evening of theatre (I should add that blues guitarist Casey Spindler performs some of his own melancholy compositions in between the plays, to grand effect). This is the kind of thing that indie theatres like 13th Street Rep were made to do, and it's fitting that by taking in this wonderful evening of undiscovered Williams you can help keep the flame of American playwriting alive in this theatre dedicated to exploring and presenting the work of our emerging artists.

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