

Review: ‘Br’er Cotton’ at The Catholic University’s Department of Drama

By **Sam Hall** - February 14, 2016

It is exciting when new works of theater appear by young and promising playwrights. Tarrance Arvelle Chisholm, whose *Br’er Cotton* premiered last night at The Catholic University of America’s Hartke Theatre, is just such a playwright, one who has been named a “Rising Star” by Variety Magazine and was a finalist for the American Playwriting Foundation’s Inaugural Relentless Award. Directing *Br’er Cotton* is Thembi Duncan, who worked with Mr. Chisholm on his previous plays *A’nat Dittni* and *Bhavi the Avenger*.



Playwright Tarrance Arvelle Chisholm. Photo courtesy of Theatrethirsty.com.

Set in Lynchburg, VA, *Br’er Cotton* follows the lives — or rather, a segment in the lives — of Ruffrino (Tendo Nesubuga), at fourteen years of age an angry young man who means to be a militant prophet of rebuke and revolution, and Nadine (Ime Essien), his hardy but tired, gentle, caring mother. Nadine’s father, Matthew (Addison Switzer), lives in the household with his daughter and grandson, and he is a kind of rogue, a source of comic relief accompanied by the counsels of age, the resignations of age, and the cynicism — or is it realism? — of a life at once co-opted by the system, and at odds with it.

Nadine has also been co-opted by the system, and is at odds with it. She is not hungry for revolution, but for happiness, security, respect — for herself and for her son. Can she achieve these things through hard work and goodness of heart? Or is Ruffrino right, is the deck too stacked against their kind for hope to matter, on account of deep-rooted systemic bigotry and the accidents of birth?

As foils, interlocutors, and sympathetic ears to Ruffrino and Nadine are Danielle Scott, who plays CagedBird99, Ruffrino’s physically disabled online video game friend, and Kevin Boudreau, a nameless white policeman whose house Nadine cleans. Also making appearances are Kevin Berry and Regina Childs as Ruffrino’s and CagedBird99’s video game avatars.

The play is, by design and script, explicitly conscious of history. The present day is framed and interwoven with a historico-mythical visionary evocation of cotton fields, slavery, and heavens of the moral, material, and possibly spiritual sort.

I want to quote the promotional blurb in full because it summarizes so well what the play means to be about: “Everyone in Ruffrino’s life is content to live in the shadows of paradise, but he is young, gifted, and militant and can no longer stand to have heaven’s gate just beyond his reach. He’s out to save the world, wake up the zombies, and prove by any means necessary that Black Lives Matter.”

The set design by Lewis Folden is economical, layered, projected, and aimed at realism. Costume designer Danielle Preston has triumphed, particularly, with the period outfits that carry us back to slave days. Alberto Segarra’s lighting design, and David Lamont Wilson’s sound design, suit the material well. It should be noted for those sensitive to such things, that the production makes use of strobe lights and the sound of gunshots.

At its heart, *Br’er Cotton* is a conscientious problem play about the legacy and currency of one of America’s most intractable – and devastating – social problems, systemic racism against African Americans. In its most powerful moments it is difficult to watch, though it is not a uniformly “heavy” play. verall, it seems to aspire to comparisons with Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Topdog/Underdog* and Quiara Alegría Hudes’ *Water by the Spoonful*.



Nadine (Ime Essien) is faced with the ghosts of her family's past. Photo by DJ Corey Photography.

But *Br’er Cotton*, despite its virtues, is uneven. At the macro level, it wants to be a tragedy, but moment by moment it faces a constant danger of falling into the twin traps of, on the one side, well-written but less than theatrical situation comedy or, on the other, overexpressed, sentimental kitchen-sink melodrama. Its plot and themes can be a little diffuse, and overall the play relies a bit too much on the power of its situational givens versus their deep probing and further development. Nevertheless, there is a seed of greatness in *Br’er Cotton*. A tighter structure and a less literal design approach would have served it well.

But the play works, certainly – I left the theater overwhelmed, cogitative, and disquieted, disturbed.

Running Time: Two hours, with one 10-minute intermission.



Br'er Cotton plays through February 20, 2016 at The Catholic University of America's Hartke Theatre – 3801 Harewood Road NE, in Washington DC. For tickets, call the box office at (202) 319-4000, or purchase them [online](#).

RATING: ★★★★★

Sam Hall

Sam Hall is a writer and theater lover from Alexandria, Virginia. He is currently doing archival research for the National Park Service and co-writing an updated administrative history of the Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts. He is a graduate of the University of Mary Washington and is now studying theater at George Mason University, with a focus on dramaturgy.