

REVIEW CityPULSE

‘Mrs. Harrison’ strikes at the heart, earns gasps and laughs



Photo by Chris Purchis
In “Mrs. Harrison,” Holly (Alysia Kolasz), a stand-up comedian turned *The Moth*-style storyteller, encounters her old classmate Ayesha (Janai Lashon), a now-successful playwright, in a bathroom during a college reunion. When Ayesha can’t get the water to run, Holly helps her, beginning the suspenseful rekindling of their past. COURTESY OF CHRIS PURCHIS

Thursday, April 6, 2023

Chelsea Lake Roberts

What if one person’s story had the power to impart a profound insight, to crack you open in a way that let in light? What if, upon hearing this story, you had an instantaneous and incredible creative breakthrough? You wrote, for example, an entire play in just one night, when before you

had been blocked. Now, with your energetic confidence sparkling, this incredible tale not only gives you a purpose but catapults you to near stardom. This is the story of “Mrs. Harrison.”

But consider the same story in the hands of someone else. Someone who isn't like you. Someone who isn't emboldened by the tale you found so much to learn from but is dragged down and suffers in purgatory because of it. The same story that inspired you haunts another woman to her core. She's bitter. And, what's worse, she wants her story back.

“Mrs. Harrison” comes to the Williamston Theatre from the national bestselling author and former Elle columnist R. Eric Thomas. The award-winning play has been billed as a dark comedy, but I disagree. The 75-minute drama (performed without an intermission) may contain elements of calculated humor, but what I experienced was a tense and thrilling matchup of wit and words between two old college “friends.”

Holly, a stand-up comedian turned The Moth-style storyteller, encounters her old classmate Ayesha, a now-successful playwright, in a luxurious faculty bathroom during a college reunion. Kirk Domer's set design impresses with a technical flourish that delivers onstage running water and large, ornate mirrors. When Ayesha can't get the water to run, Holly helps her, beginning the suspenseful rekindling of their past. The costumes, sound and lights work together seamlessly to highlight the journey both women traverse as they slowly unravel each other's actions and their own desires.

Jasmine Rivera's craft shines through in her deft direction of this psychologically complex script that requires equal measures of power and restraint. Actress Alysia Kolascz plays a Holly that goes from snarky to sinister. Although talkative, her true intentions slowly creep up on the audience as her demeanor darkens.

Williamston Theatre newcomer Janai Lashon plays a nearly impenetrable Ayesha, filled with the presence and poise that come from a purpose connected to – but also greater than – one's self. Ayesha's arc is one I have been longing to see on the stage, even though her story is not mine to fully grasp. Her character's explanations to Holly are gifts sincerely given by the playwright, who undoubtedly understands the demographic makeup of America's theatergoing audience and is writing to move you – yes, you. Each woman's depth and conviction continue to unfold even after you leave the theater. With a five-week run, I would recommend viewing the play twice.

The show tackles big ideas: race, power, belonging, history and ownership. It's also about art school. Anyone who has taken a theater or English class will resonate with the scene where Ayesha calls out Holly for glorifying a personal tragedy in an attempt to make her story important for a college class.

On my drive home, I considered my own true, sometimes tragic stories that I've tried to make important. Falling into predictable suburban categories like friends in rehab, family deaths and illicit affairs that impacted but didn't involve me, these stories feel important, yet they sit on my shelves even after rounds of revisions. Why don't they work?

As I pulled up to a stoplight, I could feel something cracking open, the slight twinge of a new thought entering my brain. The light turned green. I was still thinking about “Mrs. Harrison.”

“MRS. HARRISON”

Through April 23

8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday

3 p.m. Saturday

2 p.m. Sunday

Williamston Theatre

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williamstontheatre.org