



‘Mrs. Harrison’ at Williamston explores who possesses a story when there is money on the line

REVIEW

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WILLIAMSTON, MI—Theater is a great place for people to deliberate over important questions and have critical discussions about societal and cultural shifts. It happens most successfully with high-stake stories told by believable characters.

At Williamston Theater, R. Eric Thomas raises issues of appropriation, acknowledgment and storytelling in *Mrs. Harrison*. It presents the audience with a scenario in which a story experienced by one person is told by another.

While the debate is a necessary one and the show doesn’t dictate answers, it never quite achieves the authenticity of a complete story first and a lesson second. The characters exist only in service to the questions Thomas wants to raise and not first and foremost as relatable people. It takes a long time to get to the central question of the play; and when it does, it makes little sense that the characters would have held back as long as they did or had the exchanges that they did. The only reason they held back was for purposes of dramatic tension, not for character or story-driven reasons.

Not that there aren’t entertaining moments. There are.

Both actors put in performances that squeeze as much as possible out of the characters they are given. Janai Lashon and Alysia Kolasz get boatloads of credit for adding dimension to the political debate stand-ins the script gives them to work with. Director Jasmine Rivera makes a valiant effort to not manipulate the audience (with the possible exception of a lighting special at the end that existed only as an emotional underline and was a break from the otherwise realistic lighting in the show).

Williamston is hosting the Michigan premiere of ‘Mrs. Harrison,’ a script that won a Lambda Literary Award for LGBTQ drama. They’ve given the story top-notch acting and high production values—everything the show needs to shine.

Rivera takes a very talky show and makes sure there is movement that keeps the audience engaged. The actors prowl around a bank of sinks that are in the center of the set, often switching roles of predator and prey, using the set piece as a shield to keep distance between them.

Lashon beautifully creates Aisha, a successful playwright making a triumphant return to her 10-year college reunion. Her work has gotten national attention and she is rightfully proud—even when she

pretends to downplay it to Kolasz' character, Holly. Lashon instills the character with dignity and strength, a warrior who isn't about to let anyone corner her with micro- or macro-aggressions.

Kolasz undertakes a challenging role of the woman who has struggled for the past ten years over how to make her voice and her stories heard. The script requires her to hold back on revealing her real motivation, trickling it out over multiple exchanges.

Both rise to the challenge of playing characters who are hiding things and who aren't particularly likable or sympathetic. The script drags out the reveal for far too long. It's an attempt to build dramatic tension, but it fails to maintain it in part because it is not reasonable that two real-life characters would wait so long to get to the point. The choices thrust upon the actors are artificial, but both artists strive to make it as believable as possible, often communicating volumes with their expressions and body language.

Kirk A. Domer did his usual superlative job in creating a set that accurately evoked an upscale bathroom at a prestigious university. The faucets work when they are supposed to (controlled by the stage management staff led by Stefanie Din, for whom this marks the 50th show she's been a part of at Williamston Theatre) and the mirrors serve a metaphorical purpose as they draw in the audience, reflecting their reactions. Little touches such as an open window at the far upper corner of the set contributed to the realistic feel of the setting.

Michelle Raymond dressed the bathroom with the sort of amenities one might expect in a hotel or spa washroom, very clearly the "special" faculty bathroom spoken about in the script, one that is several steps higher in quality than the one the students use.

Becca Bedell ensured there was a well-lit space that responded to the noises of the thunderstorm provided by Kate Hopgood. Karen Kangas-Preston helped draw attention to the social differences between the two characters with Aisha wearing bright pink silk that spoke to her vibrancy and power while Holly donned a more demure pantsuit that would have had her disappearing in a crowd.

The topic itself is an engaging one—who owns stories? Who has the right to tell them? At what point does something become appropriation? When should a person seek permission to tell a story? All these questions are raised with points made on both sides. The argument has long been debated in the music world—did the Beatles and Elvis Presley have the right to elevate music created and performed by black artists who did not make the millions made by their white counterparts? Did Paul Simon do right when he integrated South African street music into his mega-selling Graceland album? The debate happens less often in theater. The playwright doesn't give answers, though one might suspect what his opinion is given that he is a man writing about two women in that sacrosanct location of a women's bathroom.

Mrs. Harrison is the sort of show that should be a good fit in the Williamston season. The topic is important, it has a diverse cast and provides a stage for a story written by a person of color. All those are good things. And others have felt the script worthy of praise and awards. In its execution, however, it drags out the debate while unfortunately sacrificing character and more thorough plot development.