

Alumni clash over memories in dark comedy at Williamston Theatre

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If you think college reunions are awkward, imagine what happens when two alumni — women with very different memories of the past — get trapped in a bathroom.

Such is the premise of the dark comedy playing at Williamston Theatre from now until April 23. It's the Michigan premiere of “Mrs. Harrison,” the winner of the 2022 Lambda Literary Award for LGBTQ drama.

Directed by Jasmine Rivera, who directed “The Cake” at Williamston last season, the two-person show features Janai Lashon as Aisha, a successful Black playwright who is on the cover of the alumni magazine and Alysia Kolasz as Holly, a struggling white stand-up comedian.

When a storm hits the reunion, they both retreat to the women’s bathroom where a long-brewing confrontation takes place. They have different memories about whether and how they have encountered each other before, and Aisha’s most successful play bears an uncanny resemblance to a tragic event in Holly’s life. They both have a story about the past and even though they conflict, they are determined to hold on to their version of their memories.

It's an encounter that Rivera describes as both fascinating and volatile.

“It’s a very complex piece with two women who are fighting for their cause,” Rivera said. “It’s very intense and it is a short play. It brings up a lot of questions that don’t have easy answers. There’s a lot in there that folks can relate to and I think it is something that resonates very well with a wide audience.”

Rivera said it is important to her to make sure both points of view in this show are balanced in their presentation. She doesn’t want to spoon feed the audience or give them a clear picture of who is right and who is wrong. Rather, she wants to leave any conclusions to the audience.

“I wanted to make sure that both characters were fully fleshed out and had a case to make – whether you agree with them or not,” Rivera said. “It’s something that rings true as not a one-sided sort of argument or issue, but something that is very true to their human experience and, in that way, it resonates with ours.”

The show, written by R. Eric Thomas, the long-running host of *The Moth* in Philadelphia, touches upon issues of cultural appropriation, representation, who owns any given story and who gets to tell it. It raises the sort of questions that are being debated and wrestled with in modern culture and in the news.

Lashon, who earned her bachelor’s in theater from Western Michigan University before going on to earn an MFA from Ohio State University, describes herself as a thespian, poet, teaching artist and activist who invites others to join her in changing the world for the better. She said she chooses work that tells stories of people who are underrepresented and belong to marginalized communities.

“She brings an intensity and steel to her role that is present, but it is also very complex and tempered with kind of an authentic undercurrent underneath of a real belief in fighting for her cause,” Rivera said. “That’s something she’s able to do with layers that are very, very hard to juggle and balance throughout the play. There are a lot of turns for her character and a lot of pivots she has to make, so there’s many, many choices she needs to contend with.”

Kolascz, a graduate of Albion College and Detroit-based actor, has appeared many times on the Williamston stage in such shows as “*The Taming*,” “*Pulp*,” “*The Gravedigger: A Frankenstein Story*,” “*Ebenezer*” and “*It Came From Mars*.”

“Alysia also brings a weight to her role which would, I think, normally shrink in the hands of a lesser actor,” Rivera said. “She brings a pathos to it and an authenticity that while the character might say things that would put off an audience, she’s still creating a human being who we can relate to.”

The show’s setting creates some challenges for the cast and crew given the entire story takes place in the bathroom of a prestigious university. Rivera said it was tricky to figure out how to make that work — a challenge that was met by the scenic designer Kirk Domer, a professor of scenic design at Michigan State University.



“Kirk Domer is a genius at scene design,” Rivera said. “He’s created a center sort of sink where the actors can revolve around. In the back wall, there is a huge set of mirrors that they also utilize that happens to include the audience in the show in a way.”

The show requires a great deal of realism up to a specific point where things take a different turn. To make that work, Becca Bedell’s work was called upon. Bedell is the show’s lighting designer and a former apprentice with Williamston in 2019-2020.

“The lighting design by Becca Bedell is very subtle,” Rivera said. “Becca’s work painting with the light very suddenly was really wonderful.”

Other technical artists include Karen Kangas-Preston as the costumer, Michelle Raymond designing the props and dressing the set and Stefanie Din as stage manager.

“Mrs. Harrison” is the sort of show, the director said, that is more likely to leave you stirred up than satisfied. It is a show that she finds both provocative and thoughtful in a way that can generate conversation followed by action.

“It is definitely the kind of thing that you would want to watch with a friend or group of friends and to have a conversation afterwards,” Rivera said. “It is a play that I feel would be extremely compelling to readers who are not looking for an average Saturday night at the theater.”

If you go

- What: “Mrs. Harrison” by R. Eric Thomas
- Where: Williamston Theatre, 122 S. Putnam St., Williamston
- When: Now through April 23, 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 3 p.m. Saturdays beginning April 1 and 2 p.m. Sundays.
- 75 minutes with no intermission, call the theater to learn about trigger warnings
- Williamstontheatre.org
- 517-655-7469