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By the Book: *Fucking A* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

A flat update of Hawthorne; a disappointingly tidy Kesey adaptation.

BY **GLEN WELDON**

POSTED: JULY 29, 2009

Fucking A

By Suzan-Lori Parks; Directed by Keith Alan Baker and Rahaleh Nassri

At the Studio Theatre's 2nd Stage to Aug. 9

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

By Dale Wasserman, based on the novel by Ken Kesey; Directed by Susan M. Rhea; Produced by Keegan Theatre

At the Church Street Theater to Aug. 15

As staged at Studio, Suzan-Lori Parks' astringent, ambitious take on abortion and revenge is missing something important at its heart—and it ain't blood. There are buckets of the stuff in Studio's production, oozing from wounds, splattered on faces, smeared across aprons. Neither does the show lack for whores, corruption (both spiritual and municipal), murder, rape, or peppy little Brecht/Weill-inflected ditties about sperm, butchery, and mother-love.

And it's certainly not missing a grimly satisfying visual style—Studio's design team has seen to that. Giorgios Tsappas's iron cages and gunmetal-gray sliding doors rise from Justin Thomas's vast shadowy murk, where a row of operating tables stands like a seawall and the yellowing antiseptic tiles of an abortionist's examination room look, if anything, pro-septic.

No, what's missing is urgency, that sense of inescapable momentum that should send us hurtling toward the doom that awaits Parks' characters. In its absence, *Fucking A* evinces the aimlessness of an expansive, if unusually caustic, shaggy-dog story.

Which is a shame, because beneath all its impressive trappings—the songs, the gimlet-eyed feminist sensibility, Mark Toorock's *parkour* choreography that hurls performers against walls and across empty space—the show's an old-fashioned revenge melodrama. And when melodrama gets this mellow, its drama deflates.

Fucking A represents the second time Parks has keyed off *The Scarlet Letter* (1999's *In the Blood* navigated these same conceptual waters), and once again she isn't so much interested in finding strict parallels to Hawthorne as she is in coming at this staple of seventh-grade reading lists from her own oblique angle.

Here, the setting is an urban dystopia, Hester (Jennifer L. Nelson) a world-weary abortionist, and that scarlet, titular letter a brand burned in Hester's skin to mark her as a baby-killer. She ministers to whores, and to the dallying wife of the town's bluff, misogynistic mayor (an underused Craig Wallace), in the vain hope of earning enough money to pay her son's way out of jail, where he has languished for 30 years.

We're told that it was the mayor's wife (Jjana Valentiner) who sent Hester's son to prison, years ago, and it's Hester's keening hatred of the woman that is meant to set this dramaturgical roller coaster in motion. But because Parks's script takes Hester's antipathy as read, it's up to co-directors Keith Alan Baker and Rahaleh Nassri to manifest that mixture of dread and delight we feel as the carny lowers the coaster's restraining bar and it clicks into place: *No turning back now.*

But Nelson finds her rage too early and often, holds it too tightly and asserts it too flatly for us to be able to share it with her. It's a complicated role—part Medea, part Mother Courage, part Sweeney Todd—and if Nelson seems to struggle with the alchemical formula, she's not helped by the crowd of half-formed ideas dutifully served up, without comment, by Baker and Nassri.



Blood Toil: Nelson gets her hands dirty as Hester.

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The Issue of Jul. 30 - Aug. 5, 2009

We keep coming up against elements that seem, in this production, like placeholders in need of a fuller imagining: We learn that Hester's scar begins to weep and smell when customers are on their way; we hear the lilting vowels of an argot called "TALK" spoken only by women; we briefly meet a drunken character named Scribe who seems to represent the fecklessness of art, or language, or journalism, or something.

If *Fucking A* moved faster and more inexorably to its conclusion, such aspects would help create a richer, more realized world. In this production, however, they only steal focus from a staging that's already lacking it; the result's an attractive but indecipherable blur.

As it does every year, Keegan Theatre toured Ireland last fall with a play from the contemporary American canon. This last time it was playwright Dale Wasserman's adaptation of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which it's brought home to roost at Church Street.

Wasserman, who died in December, adapted *Cuckoo's Nest* back in 1963, just one year after Kesey published his novel. It's a different beast from Miles Foreman's 1975 film, hewing even closer to the clean, simple allegorical lines of Kesey's plot.

Too clean, too simple, too allegorical? Maybe a bit—there certainly isn't much nuance to the script, and Susan Marie Rhea's direction seems hell-bent on buttressing Wasserman's downright Manichean setup:

Enter the two-fisted, anarchic troublemaker McMurphy (Mark Rhea, all hearty guffaws and back-slapping brio). Watch him vie for control of the mental ward with coolly manipulative Nurse Ratched (Sheri S. Herren). Watch Authority crash Individuality, Order trump Chaos. It's certainly a tale worth telling, even if its throughline is to provide an opportunity to cheer the hero and hiss the villain.

But Wasserman's script has loftier ambitions, and it forces many—too many—writely thoughts about the nature of freedom into halting monologues delivered by Kevin Adams's putatively deaf and mute Native American giant. (If that first glimpse of Keegan regular Adams in a padded muscle suit and *F-Troop*-Injun wig elicits a reflexive snicker, hang in there. It doesn't take long for the actor's essential dignity to kick in and help save it.)

The plot's essentially a Ratched-ing up of tension, as Rhea continues to goad Herrin's icy Nurse while his fellow patients fall under his sway. (Joe Baker and Mike Kozemchak notably lend their characters a roundedness that helps keep them from reverting to type.)

But Rhea and Herrin never connect; it's as if they're pitching their performances past one another. The needed sparks don't fly, the requisite tension never manifests, and this *Cuckoo's Nest* ends up a disappointingly safe and tidy place to spend a couple hours.

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