

THEATRE REVIEW: WEST MEMPHIS MOJO

BY RICK GROEN Monday, March 06, 1989

West Memphis Mojo. Written by Martin Jones Directed by Brian Richmond with Peter Hinton Starring Jeff Coopwood, Richard Yearwood and Tyrone Benskin.

Like a partially developed photograph, West Memphis Mojo is a play in search of some intensifying focus. The outlines are visible, the texture can be made out, but there's no central resolution to rivet our attention. It's as if Martin Jones, the U.S. author, has settled for an essay in dialogue form, one that's informative enough, even entertaining at times. Clearly, Jones has a firm hold on his material; what he hasn't found is a consistently effective way of dramatizing that material.

The setting is West Memphis, circa 1955, a black shantytown separated from Memphis "proper" by much more than the Arkansas River. Leslie Frankish's designs, in the Canadian premiere now on view at Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille, perfectly convey a sense of time and place: the faded Coca Cola posters, the bare-bummed Coppertone ad, the album covers celebrating the crooning likes of Johnny Ace, and the bottle-green walls of the tiny barber shop that contains the action. A barber shop that sells "race" records on the side and boasts a heat vent in the floor - yes, this is the South, but it's the cruel South in a cold winter, when Jack Frost and Jack Daniels keep mighty close company.

There, we meet Teddy (Jeff Coopwood), a cranky veteran of a war that left him with his barbering skills and a frustrated sense of possibilities, and the elder man's spiritually adopted son, Elroi (Richard Yearwood). All jive and pomade, the boy - "My mama said my name means 'The King' in French" - is a songwriter atwitter about the latest news. Across that watery divide, the King-to-be has done a cover version of an Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup tune: yep, Elvis has just recorded That's Alright Mama, and rock 'n' roll is on the rise.

So, albeit a little verbosely, the first act establishes a familiar premise with a poignant twist. A young talent dreams of stardom, but since the talent is "colored," even the dream is constricted. As the beaming Elroi puts it: "We get some white guy to sing our songs . . . we gonna make it."

Enter the soul mate (he hovers unseen over act one) with the power to turn fond hopes into firm reality. A veteran singer-guitarist, Frank (Tyrone Benskin) has contacts in the music biz. But, inevitably, the dream-maker arrives as a truth-speaker. For Frank has made his compromises with the system's inherent racism, selling the kid's songs for a song: a flat fee that amounts to a pittance of cold cash. To Elroi, the crushed pretender, his explanation drips with irony: "Royalties is for kings." (A factual addendum, unmentioned in the text: a decade later, Elvis would give Crudup his traditional gift of a shiny new Cadillac, which Big Boy presumably used driving to and from his duties on that sharecropper's farm.) The problem here is not that the racial themes are self-evident, but that the play's structure fails to crystallize them.

Certainly, the production is sound. Co-directors Brian Richmond and Peter Hinton make inventive use of the blues riffs at the heart of the piece, and the cast is uniformly solid. Yet, despite these strengths, both acts wind down without achieving any focused resolution. Such intensification that exists, like the sudden appearance of a pseudo-liberal belle (Nicky Guadagni) near the climax, or like the image of the magical mojo in the title, seems grafted on, a mere cranking up of the volume that does nothing for the clarity. Jones is the first white playwright to have his work performed by New York's Negro Ensemble Company, and it's easy to see why. He has a keen ear for the Southern idiom, along with a strong feel for atmosphere and mood. This is no Mississippi Burning, not a case of black history filtered through the revisionist lens of well meaning ignorance. But it is less a finished play than a work-in-progress - esthetically, at least, West Memphis Mojo still has its own sizeable river to cross.