

## ***Actors get Mojo working, but at slow speed; [FIN Edition]***

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It's 1955 and Elvis Presley, with his recording of "Big Boy" Crudup's "That's All Right, Mama" for Sun Records in Memphis Tenn., has begun to fulfil Sam Phillips' vow he'd make a million dollars "if only I could find a white man who could sing like a black man."

Across the river in a barbershop in West Memphis, Ark., Frank, a veteran itinerant blues singer, has just returned from a recording session where he laid down some tracks by Elroi, an idealistic young songwriter.

Frank puts the 78 on the turntable and a distressed expression flashes over Elroi's face.

"You got it on the right speed?" asks Elroi urgently. "It's too slow. That ain't the right tempo . . . It's supposed to be faster, like a jump tune."

Elroi's observation, which comes in the second act of West Memphis Mojo, is also valid as a comment on the plodding, at times, 2 1/2-hour production of Martin Jones' play now running at Theatre Passe Muraille.

Directors Brian Richmond and Peter Hinton have set Jones' deftly written script to the deliberate pace of a traditional blues tune, instead of an uptempo beat more appropriate to the era.

Jones' play is a poignant evocation of the pre-civil rights movement days of rock 'n' roll. The historical setting, meticulously mirrored in Leslie Frankish's period set, is a backdrop to an examination of how our personalities are defined by the size of our dreams.

For black blues musicians, Presley's sudden success has altered the shape of their aspirations. Now, their dreams are tied to the hopes of getting a white singer to popularize one of their songs.

As the action unfolds, Elroi (Richard Yearwood) and Teddy (Jeff Coopwood), a pair of budding songwriters, are in Teddy's barbershop waiting for Frank, who has arranged an unauthorized recording session through a black engineer at Sun. The young Elroi bubbles with enthusiasm, while the older Teddy, guarding against disappointment, bounces between optimism and pessimism.

It soon becomes obvious Frank isn't going to show. Maybe the recording session didn't even exist.

When Frank (Tyrone Benskin) does turn up several days later, he's weighed down with money he was paid recording songs, some of them by Elroi and Teddy, for a smaller label. It's typical of the cynical Frank, who sees himself as a pragmatist, to have sold the songs for cash, waiving the rights to any future royalties.

Unable to turn their frustrations against a society that has limited the scope of their dreams, the three turn to squabbling and fighting amongst themselves. Near the end of the play, when a white housewife from Mississippi (Nicky Guadagni) brings the disillusioned Elroi home from a drunken binge, Frank and Teddy give vent to their pent-up hostility.

The production is buoyed by strong performances from the three leads. Coopwood gives no signs whatsoever of having been brought in as a replacement during the last week of rehearsals. And Yearwood, despite occasionally overdoing Elroi's excitability, is solid.

But it is Benskin's swaggering performance as Frank that breathes life into the second act. He shows how compelling this production might be if, as the poster suggests, it was indeed "fast. . . as a jump tune."

West Memphis Mojo

Written by Martin Jones. Directed by Brian Richmond with Peter Hinton. Set and costumes designed by Leslie Frankish. Lighting designed by Richard Moffatt. Musical direction by Michael Taylor. To April 2 at Theatre Passe Muraille, 16 Ryerson Ave. 363-2416.