

Greenwich Village Gazette

Another Country - Review by Arlene McKanic

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When the reviewer learned there was to be a production of James Baldwin's *Another Country* at Columbia Stages she was both thrilled and apprehensive. *Another Country* was the first grown up book she ever read and for years she wondered how anyone could possibly stage it.

It's not just that the subject matter is difficult -- race/gender relations as well as malleable sexualities in pre-Kennedy assassination America, after all -- but it takes place in Manhattan, the American south, and the south of France. More, it's full of flashbacks and authorial digressions (Baldwin was a much better essayist than he was a writer of fiction). It's a messy and courageous piece of work, but director and adaptor Diane Paulus has managed to put on a splendid, moving show.

No, the show's wonderful actors aren't exactly what the reviewer envisioned (she always saw Vivaldo as a John Travolta/Robert DeNiro hybrid, Eric as red haired, Yves as hardly more than a child, and Richard as stout and blond) but who cares?

The actors all bring out their characters' vulnerability, capacity for love, anger and humor. And the book can be funny in places, despite its anguish, no more so than when Ida (the brilliant Tonya Jones) flings a colorfully worded tirade at Viv (Maury Miller) because he's too much of a coward to bring her home to meet his family. You think the scene would end in the terrible violence that we've seen between say, Ida's brother Rufus and his sad girlfriend Leona, but Ida and Viv end up on the floor, laughing. Nor would one have ever thought Rufus' funeral scene could have flashes of humor, but Ashley Samona Baker's Reverend Foster brings them out.

The play, like the novel, begins with Rufus (Huling Foster), a talented musician plagued by a cauldron full of demons: his tortured bisexuality, American racism, and other torments which are probably specific to him. His girlfriend, Leona (Laura Campbell), has her own afflictions, and has fled Georgia for New York to evade them. Unfortunately, her problems and Rufus' cling to them like Greek furies, and they destroy each other.

The performances by Foster and Campbell are heartbreaking. Campbell's Leona, though damaged long before she even meets Rufus, is not as pathetic as she seems to be in the novel, and she gives Leona her own strengths and insight, even if they don't help her much. Foster's Rufus is sweeter and less hard than in the book, though his humiliations of Leona and Eric are made clear.

Miller's Vivaldo is a slightly built man, with a wispy beard, and he brings an openness to the role that wasn't as obvious in the books. Anna Marshall plays his ex-girlfriend Jane with a nasty, startling energy. In the book she was all but a nonentity. Meg McLynn is Cass, the woman from a wealthy background married to the just published novelist Richard (John William Schiffbauer). McLynn shines as she portrays Cass's goodness and dignity as well as her grinding frustration as the wife of an utter boor.

Richard, of all the characters, is truly despicable; he's Baldwin's Tom Buchanan. Schiffbauer makes you want to slap him. Despite his liberal credentials he's racist, misogynistic, and openly jealous of Vivaldo, an unpublished author but one who has real talent.

Oh yes, let's not forget that he's homophobic -- when Eric returns from France Richard can barely stand for the young actor to touch him. He's also not great shakes as a Dad, and Kiat-Sing Teo and Liz Eckert are both great as Michael and Paul, his and Cass's young sons.

One of the most sorrowful aspects of the play and the book is when the little boys discover racism via a playground brawl. ("Is it because they're colored and we're white? Is that why?" Paul demands). Nick Maccarone's Eric, quiet, small and black haired, is an angel of sexual healing; he has enlightening encounters with Cass and Vivaldo, and his relationship with Yves saves the French boy from a life of prostitution. (Eric's brief, agonized affair with Rufus had mixed results).

Kila Packett may be a bit too old to play Yves, but he captures his loving sweetness and improbable innocence. Jones brings out Ida's fierce complexity. She's both terribly vulnerable and very tough; she's determined to survive at all costs, even if it means she has to cause pain -- or maybe even destroy -- her lover, but this is what racist and sexist oppression has forced her into. Rony Sheer makes an oily Steve Ellis, the impresario who tries to exploit Ida via her nascent singing career. Other actors serve as narrators and minor characters.

The staging of the play would probably always have to be a bit experimental, and the action all takes place in a narrow space surrounded by the audience. A live band plays behind a bar that serves as Benno's, the bar where the friends tend to hang out. Props are simple, and include chairs, shaded lamps that descend from the ceiling, a bicycle, an old manual typewriter.

Congratulations to set designer Anka Lupes for using the space so creatively. Lupes' costumes capture the look of the early 60's, with the men wearing those short sleeved striped shirts and porkpie hats and the women in period dresses with cinched in waists and full skirts (though there's one very lovely cheongsong). One hopes that they didn't have to wear girdles and long line bras beneath them.

Aaron Black's usually subdued lighting give the scenes a contemplative mood, though in one scene he captures the strobe light effect of an old fashioned subway car as it barrels beneath Manhattan. Matt O'Hare's sound design highlights the racket of New York: traffic, subways, rain.

In Another Country Paulus brings out the humanity of a group of troubled people in a troubled country. It will be at Columbia Stages till November 17