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A Young Man of Promise Who Has Lost His Way

by Peter Marks

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The music swirls and flows in remarkable waves throughout the 75 minutes of "Running Man," a new musical theater piece that is carving out a river of heartbreaking pleasure in a tiny performance space in SoHo.

Based on the moving poetry of Cornelius Eady and the plaintive, sweet-and-sour music of the jazz composer Diedre Murray, "Running Man" occupies a category of theater all its own. Operating at the exotic juncture where chamber musical, jazz session and opera might converge, the piece, performed spectacularly by a cast of six and a five member orchestra, taps a well of feeling so deep at times it seems spiritual. By no means is this a conventional musical — there are no show tunes in this show — but it shares with the successful versions of more mainstream forms an eloquence in structure and storytelling.

The story of "Running Man," directed with a spare sophistication by Diane Paulus, is both elegantly simple and terribly complicated: Tommy, a young black man of great promise played by Darius De Haas, has lost his way in life, and the people close to him, his mother (Roberta Gumbel), father (Robert Jason Jackson) and sister, Miss Look (Kimberly Jajuan), summon him in song, both as a grown-up and a little boy (Chris Rustin). Their memories and reveries are encouraged, embellished and disparaged by a singing narrator, Seven (Ronnell Bey), who, seven years after Tommy's disappearance, asks the kinds of aftermath questions reporters always pose: What made him go bad? What made his luck turn on him?

Mr. Eady and Ms. Murray, who collaborated on a previous work, "You Don't Miss the Water," presented at the Vineyard Theater in 1997, know that finding the answers could take a lifetime. Confining themselves to a decidedly more economical time frame, they toss suggestions of a life gone wrong at us in offhand, lyrical ways, riffing on the sexual and social pressures brought to bear on a sensitive young man by a father obsessed with discipline and a mother in love with learning, determined that her song "bring me the world." In one especially wrenching scene, Mr. De Haas sings on his confusions, of his ecstatic pain, while applying lipstick to his mother's lips.

Every element of "Running Man," presented by the Music-Theater Group at the Here theater, has been lovingly thought out, from the set designer Myung Hee Cho's evocation of the Virginia slave cemetery where, symbolically anyway, the story of the running man intermingles with the dust history of his ancestors, to the stunning musical direction by Linda Twine. Ms. Murray's arresting score for guitar, violin, accordion, cello and percussion gives anguish a discordant language; aching songlets and meandering melodies are passed back and forth among the performers like collection plates, in harmonies that are at times both beautiful and difficult to listen to.

The actors, gifted singers all, seem organically in tune with their material. Mr. De Haas gives one of the best musical performances this season. Assured and impassioned, his running man is a figure of mystery and pathos, his failure to thrive the stuff of modern tragedy. Ms. Gumbel is a lovely and ultimately sorrowful figure. Mr. Jackson is equally good as a father of foolish fortitude, and Ms. Jajuan proves to be a sister of dignity and strength in pulling away when the brother threatens to drag her down. Ms. Bey is both commanding and droll, and Mr. Rustin shows himself to be a young actor with grace and presence. Together, they paint with music the only new world in a long while that I'd like to visit again.