

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Crazy Is As Crazy Gets

Sylvie · Wednesday, October 30th, 2019

Between Riverside and Crazy is having its Los Angeles premiere at The Fountain Theatre in Hollywood, and also happens to be only the second play by Stephen Adly Guirgis that I've been lucky enough to attend.

The first one was an insufficiently heralded production of *The Motherf****r With the Hat* that I saw at the request of one of its actors; it took place in a four-wall venue in an Inglewood park. I am now glad and grateful to have seen both, because I wouldn't want to miss any opportunity to see more of this playwright's work.

Most of Guirgis characters are the invisible types that rummage around society's lower rungs. There's plenty of grit and bad behavior in what they do and not much opportunity or dedication to finding a more productive path. Yet Guirgis manages to scratch through the roughness on display and uncover the better angels hiding in the cracks. It's a trick and a half. It's also why the plays resonate with so much complexity.

No matter how defeated or unaware these people are or how directionless, they're real and they are good at concealing an honorable streak. All this confliction hides the underlying humanity that redeems them. There's a hankering deep inside for doing the right thing, even if they haven't entirely figured out how to do it.

Between Riverside and Crazy, which won the 2015 Pulitzer, introduces us to an aging and brusque African American ex-cop named Walter "Pops" Washington (Montae Russell) who lives in a comfortable upper Manhattan rent-controlled apartment that he has opened up to a few strays and hangers on. They include Oswaldo (Victor Anthony) a recovering addict who calls him Dad, his own son Junior (Matthew Hancock), fresh out of jail and drifting, and Junior's girlfriend Lulu (Marisol Miranda) who may or many not be pregnant.



I-r, Montae Russell, Victor Anthony & Marisol Miranda in *Between Riverside and Crazy* at The Fountain Theatre.

The widowed Walter presides over the lot, nursing a glass of Scotch and other grudges, especially that of being shot while off duty by a white cop in a situation that might be seen as compromising. The incident inflicted lasting physical damage and Walter is angry that a lawsuit he filed at the time remains in limbo with his demands unmet.

When a self-inflated police Lieutenant Dave Caro (Joshua Bitton) and his fiancée, Detective Audrey O'Connor (Lesley Fera), Walter's former partner on the beat, show up for a seemingly convivial visit, it disintegrates into an attempt on their part to persuade Walter to accept a settlement of his lawsuit that he thinks unfair. Despite their insistence and dire warnings, Walter digs in his heels. The rejection forces them to leave without the agreement they so desperately sought.



Montae Russell & Lesley Fera in *Between Riverside and Crazy* at The Fountain Theatre.

A visit of a startlingly different nature from a Brazilian church lady (Liza Fernandez) goes a long way to compounding Walter's extreme agitation. It leaves him on the floor with a heart attack whose ravages he appears equally determined to reject.



Montae Russell & Liza Fernandez in *Between Riverside and Crazy* at The Fountain Theatre.

The second half is where the play changes its tone and finds its most secure footing, offering uncharted emotional twists and turns that depart widely from anything we've witnessed earlier. It is also where Guirgis delivers his most subtle writing and, without a shred of mawkishness, his most tender resolutions.

Walter not only finds a way to vindicate and redeem himself, but also how to share some of that good stuff with those who helped him do it: the church lady with her uniquely unorthodox methods—and the son who, for all of his missteps, is able to persuade his father that the apple has not fallen far from the tree. The long-battered bond that binds father and son emerges as solid as the struggles that separated them—struggles they both generated and will have to work to overcome.



Matthew Hancock & Marisol Miranda in *Between Riverside and Crazy* at The Fountain Theatre.

It is a seductive and unpredictable ending made all the more satisfying by the gentle pacing of Guillermo Cienfuegos' direction that lightly strikes all the necessary notes. The play could shave some of the ramble of the early meandering conversations, but once it starts to fly, it refuses to be kept down. Russell's performance as Walter is the action's fulcrum, especially since he makes it look so much easier than it is. He is the anchor, kept in place by an able and carefully selected supporting company and creative team that delivers with energy and precision.

In the end it isn't just that Guirgis can write. Of course he can. It's that the conflicted emotions comingle so fruitfully among his characters, and the complicated plots and subplots they generate, reward us with the rarest of gifts: the pleasure of a raffish grace where you least expect to find it.

Top image: l-r, Montae Russell, Joshua Bitton, Lesley Fera, Marisol Miranda & Matthew Hancock in Between Riverside and Crazy at The Fountain Theatre.

Photos by Jenny Graham

WHAT: *Between Riverside & Crazy*

WHERE: The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90029.

WHEN: Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2 & 8pm; Sundays, 2pm; Mondays 8pm. Ends Dec. 15.

HOW: Tickets, \$25-\$45, available online at www.FountainTheatre.com or by phone at 323.663.1525. Premium seating, \$45; Regular, \$40; Seniors \$35; Students (w/valid ID), \$25; Mondays, regular seating is \$40 and pay-what-you-can, subject to availability.

PARKING: \$5, secure, stacked lot on site. Also street.

RUNNING TIME: Two hours, 15 minutes, with an intermission.

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