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Pros outweigh the cons in A Lesson Before Dying

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A Lesson Before Dying

Rating: ★★★★★

Romulus Linney's *A Lesson Before Dying* packs a pretty powerful punch. Based on a novel of the same name by Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* challenges on many levels and resonates long after the cast takes its final bow. Despite the inexperience of several cast members, [American Theatre Company's](#) production of *A Lesson Before Dying*, currently running at the [Tulsa Performing Arts Center](#), bravely tackles this challenging work and the end result is something which is both moving and memorable.

Set in Louisiana in 1948, *A Lesson Before Dying* tells the tale of Jefferson, a poorly educated black boy who is sentenced to death for a crime he didn't commit. With Jefferson's body condemned to the electric chair, the battle for Jefferson's mind, heart and soul begins to unfold. At the insistence of Miss Emma Glen, Jefferson's godmother, local teacher Grant Wiggins is enlisted to help the disillusioned Jefferson face death like a man. The equally disillusioned Grant is none too pleased about this, nor is the Reverend Moses Ambrose, a spiritual snob suspicious of education. Sheriff Guidry, who is forced into honouring Miss Emma's wishes, allows the reluctant Grant and the disinterested Jefferson to meet for one hour a day. This they do in the presence of conflicted Deputy, Paul Bonin, who along with Grant's principled girlfriend, Vivian, offer Grant another bearing on his moral compass to consider. In what follows, Grant's search for meaning parallels that of Jefferson's as both men are forced to face questions neither of them wanted to ask in the first place.

In American Theatre Company production of *A Lesson Before Dying* the design team of Richard Ellis (Scenic Designer), Jessica Elliot (Lighting Designer), Paulette ReCord (Costume Designer) and Aaron Veale (Sound Designer) show consummate skill in seamlessly blending their individual designs to realise director Robert Walter's vision with a truly atmospheric set. Walters also keeps the action moving along nicely, achieving a wonderfully paced delivery throughout. However in the area of casting, some of his choices are not as successful as others.

The decision to give fledgling performers an opportunity to develop their craft is always to be

encouraged, mindful of the actor's ability and experience. As Linney's script would challenge even the most experienced actor, an inexperienced actor suffers unfairly from being thrown into the deep end when they've only begun learning to swim. While the inexperienced Charles Alec Harris II in the pivotal, leading role of Grant Wiggins is to be applauded for taking up this challenge in his first performance outside High School, his performance struggles to meaningfully inhabit the character. His obvious voice skills, honed in Speech competitions, also play against him, as his vocal delivery never completely engages with the emotional quality of the character, which requires a different set of performance skills. With the inexperienced Harris essentially carrying the play by being onstage for most scenes, and with performance being an exchange of action and reaction, performances overall are affected. But Harris' quite confidence and engaging presence partially compensate for this, strongly suggesting that, with some proper training, he might well become a talented actor.

Keith Daniels as Jefferson, another fledgling performer currently studying theatre at the University of Tulsa, shows himself as a serious talent in the making. Though his character's uneducated drawl becomes difficult to understand in places, his performance of a lost soul who has lost all sense of dignity avoids the histrionic and is carefully understated. As is BJ Johnson as Rev. Moses Ambrose, whose performance becomes more believable as proceedings progress. Chris Williams, another relative newcomer with some previous experience, shines in the supporting role as Deputy Paul Bonin, and along with Keith Daniels, makes his characters transition throughout the play completely convincing.

The three stage veterans of the production all give well nuanced performances, which on occasion are frighteningly good. During the scene of the condemned man's last meal, Andy Axewell as a racist Sheriff oblivious to those around him is utterly compelling, highlighting the normalised racism of what might be an otherwise decent human being. Shrae Johnson as Vivian, operating as the play's moral and social conscience, embodies the play's underlying sense of dignity in a pivotal scene where she visits Jefferson in prison. Vanessa Adams-Harris as the diminutive Miss Emma, a frail, caring old woman whose sheer presence and unremitting determination could move mountains, is simply breath taking and illuminates those too few scenes in which she is present.

American Theatre Company's production of *A Lesson Before Dying*, despite placing unrealistic demands on its lead, manages to be both engaging and thought provoking. Few plays have the power to make a real, lasting impression on the audience. With *A Lesson Before Dying* Romulus Linney, who passed away earlier this year, has created one of those rare, unforgettable works which truly deserves to be seen.

A Lesson Before Dying runs at the Tulsa Performing Arts Centre till May 14th.



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