

Sentimentality and Satire in Philadelphia: "The Old Settler" and "Spin"

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"The Old Settler"



"The Old Settler", the season opener at Philadelphia's Freedom Repertory Theatre, is what you might get if you crossed *Having Our Say* with *Steel Magnolias*. Two middle-aged African-American sisters share a home, a routine, and a couple of skeletons in the closet. Playwright John Henry Redwood shamelessly lays on the pathos, drops hints, and tugs at the heartstrings; hold the subtlety. The audience loved it.

Brenda Pressley and Cathy Simpson in Freedom Theatre's production of "The Old Settler." Photo: Posse Studios

Director Walter Dallas, who is also Freedom's Artistic Director, is occasionally heavy-handed in his staging and underscoring of hokey lines. The cast, however, bring wit, sensitivity, and deep feeling to their roles, all of which offer moments to shine.

Brenda Pressley as Bess emerges like a butterfly from a cocoon and blossoms as she experiences passionate courtship. She is guide, friend, and guardian angel to Husband. Pressley's concern and dignity make you wish she were your very own aunt or sister or closest neighbor. The play is largely Bess's story. When she finally has it out with her sister and we learn the secret that kept them from talking to each other for eight years, Pressley's hurt is as compelling as was her earlier nurturing.

Cathy Simpson's Quilly is all fuss, gossip, petulance, nosiness, and appetite. Simpson can sashay, shuffle, break into a dance, go deadpan, crack a joke, wheedle, connive, and -- late in the game -- expose a broken heart with panache. Quilly disapproves of her sister's post-menopausal flirtation and engagement, but she holds her peace when asked to do so. The revelation of the fear that she has been holding much longer opens a new dimension that a lesser actress than Simpson might have buried in either bathos or numbness.

The younger couple are broadly sketched. Husband goes from Act I bumpkin to Act II swain aided by changes in costume (by Andre Harrington), hairdo, and conversational devices. (Mercifully, by Act II the character stops saying "Mama always said...") Actor Victor Mack gradually shifts registers but also manages such details as continuing to hike up his pants to expose a hefty length of calf no matter how flashy a suit he's wearing.

Mack knows you can't take the country out of the boy overnight. Lou Bessie, the former small-town nobody who now knows every club and every pusher in Harlem, verges on

caricature, but Lisa Summerour wisely keeps from going over the top as she tells Bess (the doubled names are another blunt instrument) off.

The production is well served by the lighting, set, and sound design. An early evening tryst that never happens is also never discussed; Troy A. Martin-O'Shia's pink-to-blue-to-navy sunset tells us all we need to know. Nick Embree's rendition of the sisters' apartment sits on the cusp between shabbiness and respectability. The framed photos, 1920s stove, antimacassars, and houseplants are arranged to be recognizable without being merely by-the-book. Sounds of traffic when the windows are open and the nonstop chatter on the party line every time Quilly picks up the telephone testify to Steven Smith's ear and expertise.

No one would call this play groundbreaking. But old isn't always bad in the theatre. Freedom Repertory is housed in a building that was once the home of nineteenth century superstar Edwin Forrest and the venue is a physical reminder that theatre can be a kind of time-machine. "The Old Settler" is an unabashedly 1940s vehicle, even if it does have a 1990s copyright, but it is no less entertaining or engaging than a ride in a vintage and well-tuned Edsel. Relax and don't expect to break any speed limits.