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SPA

“The Bluest Eye uses a fabulous sense of space to tell the story of 1940’s racism”

By Kelby Wittenberg, St. Paul Academy and Summit School

Sometimes plays are so powerful they take a physical toll on the viewer. “The Bluest Eye” is no exception. Its impressive use of visuals and profound dialogue is an example of what magic can happen when actors embody the characters they’ve been entrusted to portray.

“The Bluest Eye,” an adaptation of the novel by Toni Morrison, is brought to life by Lydia R. Diamond on the Guthrie's thrust stage. In it, the playwright bases the action around a preteen girl named Pecola who wishes that her eyes would change to the color blue in order to ensure her beauty in a world that is frightening to her.

Pecola spends most of her time with her friends Claudia and Frieda, a set of sisters who often find themselves trying to cheer Pecola up through actions of well-meaning and reassurance.

The play opens with Pecola drawing on the back wall of the stage to dissonant hums which are the creation of the composer Justin Hicks and sound designer Scott Edwards. The music remains fairly constant throughout the show: it’s never too intrusive as to draw attention away from the action but it keeps the theatre from being silent.

The play is set to take place on the split sidewalks of Ohio in the 1940s, evident by the fact the stage is covered in what looks like concrete and surrounded by waist-high weeds. The scenic designer, Matt Saunders, attempts to display the space much like Pecola’s reality: cracked and fragile. A trio of dandelions grow up through the largest cracks, serving as symbols of resilience and power and the face of adversary. During some scenes, water falls from the ceiling and runs down the wall, adding an extra dimension of reality to the performance and accentuating dramatic moments.

The movement of characters, fabricated by Leah Nelson, is powerful and sharp. Every action is deliberate and serves a purpose in furthering the story. The way the characters accentuate their movement is largely reflective of the common stressed mental state. The fight scenes, choreographed by Aaron Preusse, feel fitting in a story where tensions run high and serve their purpose by showing a fraying family.

Brittany Bellizeare, who plays Pecola, truly embodies the challenges of being a young African-American girl in 1940s America. She is a character that is broken and despondent, evident in how she carries herself and shown by the longing to be someone she’s not.

Claudia and Frieda, played by Carla Duren and Deonna Boyne, balance out one another nicely. Their portrayed lack of age causes them to have a simpler and less-developed outlook on life which is a refreshing change to the heavy subject matter dealt with later in the performance.

The ending, while solemn, still speaks volumes in our world today. Those who are close to Pecola witness firsthand the physiological devastation caused by growing up in a society where children cannot live child-like lives. The messages it delivers are raw and biting, but serve a necessary purpose in the telling of this story.

Rape culture and 20th century racism are difficult topics to cover in this day and age. More often than not, modern culture tends to turn a blind eye to both. “The Bluest Eye” serves as a refreshing reminder than these are not issues to be forgotten and portrays both through the despondent minds of little girls. Through this lense, the principles of each are explored and whittled down to their most basic. “The Bluest Eye” is a must-see, as it educates viewers in a way far more effective than any other art form could.

**Details:**

*The Bluest Eye runs through May 21st at the Guthrie theater.*

*Tickets range from $29 to $72 and can be purchased by calling 612-377-2224 or visiting guthrietheater.org.*