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Show Guide

East

Off-Off Broadway June 09, 2003

American Menu

Reviewed By Jeanette Toomer

The New Federal Theatre's production of "American Menu" serves entrees of oppression, racism, and Jim Crow with sides of long, demanding work hours. Written by Don Wilson Glenn, this drama builds slowly but steadily as it exposes the lives and hopes of five black women toiling in a segregated diner in 1968.

"American Menu"

Theater: Harry De Jur Playhouse, Henry Street Settlement

Location: 466 Grand St., NYC

Starts: April 24, 2003

Ends: May 25, 2003

This captivating ensemble of actors, led by the strong performance of Sharon Hope, expertly captures the divide between the old and the new. The old way of life, personified by Hope's character, is submission to Jim Crow. The new way, after the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., takes form in the unrelenting, angry demands for equality and justice.

As Na, the eldest kitchen worker, Hope is emotionally weary, but tireless in her commitment to prompt service to the white customers, who remain unseen in the dining area. She makes sure that the women stay on task in spite of the ongoing revelatory conversation between them.

Benja K plays the outspoken cook, Johnnie Mae. She loudly expresses her displeasure with Buella, the favored waitress who works the floor in the restaurant. Kimberly "Q" is the attractive and smiling Buella, who enjoys her visibility among the white diners. Her friendship with the boss is also the subject of much resentment from the others. The reason that binds Buella with her employer is what she reveals in the second act -- much to her coworkers' surprise.

M. Drue Williams is perfectly cast as young Mary, who presents a strange mix of hope and pain as she is very affected by the unresolved murder of a black boy. Martha, portrayed by Patricia R. Floyd, is on the verge of aborting her unborn child.

The direction of Ajene D. Washington underscores the heavy toll of the characters' daily work. He doubles as set designer with creative historical detail.

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