

'Minstrel Show' makes mark

SPARBER from page 12

of catharsis for many black people searching for an outlet in an era of fearful discrimination.

Sparber, who wrote the play in a dialect that dropped the jaws of actors (the first cast called it "divine intervention"), wrote much of the dialogue based on what he heard growing up in a heavily black Minneapolis neighborhood. His interest in black literature and old radio shows such as "Amos 'n' Andy" helped him give final shape to his minstrel characters.

"Although it's easy to criticize the show, it featured African-American actors and the vernacular is actually accurate," Sparber said.

When he shopped his script to Omaha's Blue Barn Theatre, the verdict was unanimous: Sparber knew what he was writing about.



MATT HANEY/DN

Taking the stage

David Lewis, a long-time local talent in Omaha theater, starred as one of the minstrels in the plays' first run at the Blue Barn Theatre.

"I think he's one of the most brilliant playwrights I've ever known," was his first comment on Sparber. Lewis credits him with writing the "role of a lifetime," which he plans to pursue by starring in, producing and directing the show in California, where he now lives.

Having earned standing ovations for the show's first opening in Carmel, Calif., Lewis said, Sparber helped reclaim minstrel heritage as a source of pride.

"The way (Sparber) was able to capture the essence of these characters that has long been a source of embarrassment, anger and humiliation gave them a dignity and intelligence that people don't assign whenever they come across images of minstrel actors.

"He was able to capture them as intelligent people with souls, passion for their art and with social consciences."

The marriage of a minstrel show with one of the darkest, most horrifying moments in Omaha's history seems not only bizarre but even a corruption of the evil nature of the crime.

But this was in fact the greatest triumph of "Minstrel Show" — not the accolades nor the awards — but the telling of the story itself, as exposed through the voices of black entertainers witnessing the racist hysteria of a mob lynching. It was a story so personal to the actors of the cast that in repeated performances in New York they broke into tears.

Director Rob Urbinati headed the production at Queen's Theater in the Park in January and February. The show became one of the theater's biggest hits, ("a cash cow," according to Urbinati) and is scheduled to be recast for a bigger opening later in the year.

"The actors found it very tough to

remove themselves from the anger and the anguish of the lynching," he said.

The unscripted emotion worked for the audiences as well as the reviewers who, according to Urbinati, didn't just write good reviews but ones that "were over the top."

Urbinati said the critic from Newsday was so impressed, he took it upon himself to nominate the play for the prestigious Oppenheimer Award.

Encores

While critics glowed and audiences wept, Urbinati and Sparber remained unsatisfied. The play was supposed to be told from the perspective of minstrels, i.e. entertainers who are giving this testimony before a committee in their own unique flavor of storytelling.

The earnest emotions of the actors changed the focus of the play to the tragedy rather than Sparber's original mix of minstrel humor as a means of coping.

"The actors were amazing," Urbinati said. "But here's the truth with them: What's so distinct about the play is the angle of the characters and the fact that they are just ordinary guys."

"Their concern is that he is moaning and groaning and keeping them awake. The characters are not necessarily sympathetic to the man who is being lynched."

In future productions, (plans for which are already under way) Urbinati hopes to cast actors who can bring more life to the nuances of the roles as written by Sparber.

Not that the playwright finds his subject matter funny. Sparber's sensitivity to the blight of racism and the celebration of black history is what has garnered his play such respect among audiences of all colors.

Denouement

When Sen. Chambers denounced the play, he hadn't even seen it;

instead he declined free tickets and a written invitation to the Blue Barn Theatre performance.

Of course, the controversy only fueled the play's popularity and turned Sparber into a hero of sorts among some people for the bravery of turning the tragic event into one accessible, enjoyable and enlightening.

While "Minstrel Show: The Lynching of William Brown" faces a bright and even profitable future, Sparber hasn't made grandiose plans as a playwright. In fact, he hasn't started work yet on any new projects for the stage. But Sparber has already made his mark by confronting racism and crafting entertainment into a means of catharsis and historical

preservation.

As Sparber explains, his play is not about racism and it's not about the idea that lynching is a horrible crime. Those are obvious.

"I think racism has been confronted to death," he said. "My take on racism is simple: I think it's bad, and I don't understand it very well."

"The play was very much an attempt to try to understand history through using art. As minstrels (the characters) are more than just humorous entertainment; in some ways they are repositories for cultural experiences."

As Sparber has proven, so are playwrights, when they can turn a tragedy into a lesson, and a forgotten culture into standing ovations.

A&E Briefs

Kilborn 'not arrogant,' says his former coach

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — Talk show host Craig Kilborn may be a smart aleck with "the greatest hair in television" but he's certainly not arrogant, his former college basketball coach says.

Kilborn, a 1984 Montana State graduate, takes over "The Late, Late Show with Craig Kilborn" tonight.

In one of many promotional spots for his show, Kilborn says he played Division I basketball at Montana State in Bozeman until his senior year, when his coach told him he was too selfish and arrogant.

"Now I have my own talk show on CBS," he says in the ad.

But his former coach, Stu Starner, says he never thought of Kilborn as arrogant.

"He was a neat guy. We chuckle when we see that because Craig was just a solid guy," he said.

'Simpsons' creator mourns show's loss of controversy

NEW YORK (AP) — Matt Groening, creator of "The Simpsons," is a little sad that Bart, Homer and the gang don't offend people like they once did.

"The Simpsons" used to be the downfall of Western civilization," says Groening, adding that he loved complaints that the show undermined parental authority.

Groening also says in TV Guide's April 3 edition that he has a lot of confidence in his new animated series, "Futurama," a science fiction spoof set 1,000 years in the future.

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