

As Much As You Can

by Paul Oakley Stovall, directed by Krissy Vanderwarker • **West Coast Premiere**

Celebration Theatre • January 3-27, 2008 (Opened 1/4, rev'd 1/6m)

Last year, two local productions showed the benefits of writers directing their own work in Ed Begley Jr.'s 'Ruben & Cesar' and Jane Anderson's 'The Quality of Life,' both highlights of the season. In the West Coast premiere of Paul Oakley Stovall's 'As Much as You Can,' now through January 27 at Celebration Theatre, we see that a writer's vision can be equally well-served when the playwright assumes the pivotal role. Stovall, a talented actor keenly attuned to the rhythm and nuance of his language, takes his place in a seamless ensemble to play Jesse, a brother who will no longer apologize to his loved ones for one he's chosen to love.

Celebration Theatre, celebrating its 25th season of presenting theater of particular relevance to the Gay and Lesbian community, has in Stovall's play, as much as one can imagine, a signature production. It is at once kitchen-sink direct and – for mainstream audiences at least – revolutionary. Its nuclear unit of six family and friends creates a racial and sexual rainbow with enough diversity to serve as a starter kit for the world-at-large to learn understanding and acceptance.

Stovall's microcosm has one major conflict: Jesse's strained relationship with his older sister Evy (Tony Award-winner Tonya Pinkins, except on January 17 and 18, when J. Karen Thomas steps in). Evy is well-aware that Jesse is gay, but she prays for divine "intervention" to "reorient" him.

Appropriately, the Jesse-Evy head-on is fated to occur during a family reunion required for younger brother Tony's (Andrew Kelsey) wedding. Coming to Chicago for the nuptials means a visit to the traditional family home (maintained by Evy and her husband) and an earful of the traditional family values (mainlined by Evy). Arriving from Europe is half-sister Ronnie (Yassmin Alers), a bi-cultural, bi-racial, bi-sexual beauty. Driving in from New York with Jesse is his life-long soul mate Nina (J. Nicole Brooks), a confirmed and constantly prowling Lesbian. The willing newcomer to the menagerie is Jesse's Swedish-born lover, Christian (Wes Ramsey), father of a 12-year-old son he hopes to have live with him and Jesse at some point. It doesn't take long for Christian, a professional photographer, to sense that his assignment to video-tape the wedding is part of a clumsily applied beard to make him appear Jesse's "hire" rather than "husband."

Director Krissy Vanderwarker exhibits a light touch. There are no forced moves, and she does well battling a stage left post that cuts into anything more than halfway upstage. (Attendees are advised to sit house left even if it means getting closer to the proscenium.) Her cast fills their roles admirably, not only in terms of acting, but in terms of physical qualities that support the variety of racial mixing. While the two-person face-offs sizzle with authenticity the group scenes have a spontaneous feeling, like we're spending an afternoon with lively friends who have great facility for playful truth-telling. They just happen to be going through some major family dramas that are instructive for society as a whole.

Vanderwarker and her designers/production people have allowed the show a family-room comfort. A simple couch sits like found art center stage. It doesn't budge, regardless of the setting. Scenes are all played out around the set, with the only alterations being a card table that is unfolded for a couple



Paul Oakley Stovall

PHOTO DAVID ELZER

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scenes, and upstage drapes that are opened for “outdoor” scenes played against the theater back wall. It gives a nice linkage to the old Chicago home in which this drama might have really taken place.

The deceptively familiar drama wears its sense of importance lightly, but seriously. Repeated references to James Baldwin’s second novel, 1956’s out-reaching ‘Giovanni’s Room,’ promote that seminal book to audience members who may not be familiar with it, and there is much discussion of Bayard Rustin, the out Civil Rights leader who is credited with introducing M.L. King Jr. to Gandhi’s philosophy and organizing many of King’s biggest rallies, including the March on Washington.

Of course, in this crowd (on both sides of the apron) the decks of sympathy are stacked against Evy’s cause. Talk of “reorientation” sounds especially Medieval inside the Celebration. So it is that what lets ‘As Much as You Can’ get as good as it does is the honesty of the characters. What’s more, the scenes of openness, and the universe of intra-sexual, intra-familial and intra-racial stratifications, surprisingly well represented in just a six-character play, could position the television version Stovall is working on for landmark status. It would be a smart move for HBO; a slam-dunk for Logo.

– **Cristofer Gross**

WITH Yassmin Alers, J. Nicole Brooks, Andrew Kelsey, Tonya Pinkins, Wes Ramsey, Paul Oakley Stovall (J. Karen Thomas in for Pinkins 1/17 and 18) **PRODUCTION** Heather Graff and Rich Peterson, set/lights; Krissy Vanderwalker, costumes; Josh Horvath and Andre Pleuss, sound; Amy E. Stoddard, stage management