
'Bootycandy' a treat for the theatrically daring

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Photo: Kolmel W. Love, Black Artists Contemporary Cultural Experience

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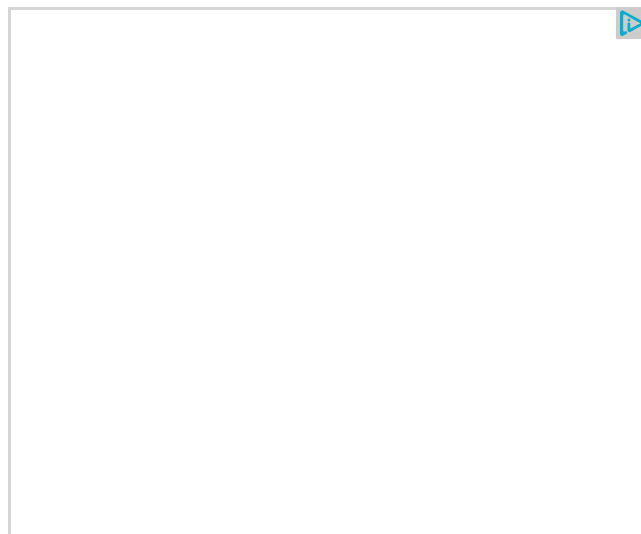
Aaron Wilton (left) and AeJay Mitchell.

The thing about truly fearless, no-holds-barred playwriting is that as an audience member, you might often think it's gone too far, that it's in bad taste or that you don't even like it.

Yet every time you start to shift in your seat or avert your eyes in "Bootycandy," a series of interrelated comic sketches about growing up black and gay, playwright Robert O'Hara lovingly reels you back in. A Northern California premiere at Brava Theater from Black Artists Contemporary Cultural Experience, the show is at times pornographic in its discussion of sexuality and merciless in its depiction of humans' capacity for vice and cruelty, debasement and humiliation. If all that can be trying to watch, that's because O'Hara's vision centers on a forbidden truth: the way we are slaves to our desires, our pretensions of dignity always hollow and fragile.

That makes "Bootycandy," seen Friday, Feb. 24, sound like it's grave in tone. It is emphatically not. In taking on over-the-top subject matter, the show affords its five-person ensemble, under the direction of Edris Cooper-Anifowoshe, myriad opportunities for bravura comic performances.

Worth the price of admission alone is Rotimi Agbabiaka's turn as a flamboyant preacher railing against rumors and homophobia in his congregation. It's not just the way he judiciously contorts his face on a particular syllable, or, with a clown's gift for illustration, drives each phrase toward the one word that makes unmistakably clear, to Brava's highest rafters, each point. At a certain juncture, it becomes clear that he's dispensed with the normal rules of monologue scoring, which dictate that you vary your cadence, pitch and volume



according to even very slight new shades of meaning, intention and tone. Agbabiaka, by contrast, fires on every cylinder for so long, seeming to fray his own vocal cords in the process, that a part of you starts to worry about him: How long can he keep this up?

Eventually, though, the soliloquy breaks through to new theatrical territory, charting its own rules about how a speech is supposed to operate. Agbabiaka creates his own peaks and troughs out of what would seem to be a single, endlessly soaring peak.

Also comically delightful is Kehinde Koyejo in a variety of ensemble roles. She distills her characters' essences to just one or two motions — the way angry lover Intifada (her partner's name is even more outrageous) caresses her own long braids; the way a little sister zealously licks an oversize lollipop — that communicate everything you need to know about who these people are, even though you don't often get much time with them.

Many of the sketches follow Sutter (AeJay Mitchell) as he alternately struggles and reckons with his sexuality at different stages of his youth: peppering his mother (played by both Koyejo and Indiaa Wilmott) with questions about his genitalia, which she refers to as "bootycandy"; trying to forge a relationship with a white man (Aaron Wilton); soliciting help from his parents when a man tries to follow him home but getting only blame and nonsense advice: "Build a snowman for once in your life." (In these moments, O'Hara shows just how fruitful and satisfying absurdism is as an artistic response to homophobia.)

Mitchell doesn't always excel. In one sketch, a performance that ought to suggest callousness comes off more as sleepy and disengaged. But on the whole, structuring the whole show as riffs on and refractions of Sutter gives epic heft to a sort of character that American theater doesn't normally elevate: black, gay and full of shameful, dark desires. In O'Hara's imagination, even if those first two attributes don't describe you, the last one will look all too familiar.

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Bootycandy: Written by Robert O'Hara. Directed by Edris Cooper-Anifowoshe. Through Sunday, March 5. Two hours, 10 minutes. \$15-\$40. Brava Theater, 2781 24th St., S.F. (415) 641-7657. www.brava.org



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