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Queer kaleidoscope

Theatre

by Richard Dodds

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Kehinde Koyejo and India Wilmott plays sisters debating the wisdom of naming a baby Genitalia in Robert O'Hara's *Bootycandy* at Brava Theater Center. Photo: Courtesy Brava Theater Center

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In the world of *Bootycandy*, the Bible contains the psalms of RuPaul and the wisdom of Cicely Tyson. The play also references child molestation, hygiene for keeping your dick from falling off, post-rape suicide, a fire-and-brimstone pastor who prefers drag, a baby saddled with the name Genitalia, and a game of truth-or-dare that results in a penis being plopped on a barroom table. In other words, we're in a tilt-a-whirl world that defies predictability. Yet predictably, it's an uneven ride that bumps and twists its way to an ultimately satisfying conclusion at Brava Theater Center.

Bootycandy is made up of 11 scenes of near and distant connections that vary in tone, but contain the discernable through-line of playwright Robert O'Hara's often oblique and indirect exploration of what it means to be black and gay in America. Many of the pieces stem from some part of O'Hara's experiences as a boy, teenager, and adult – but he adds that these tales were born out of the "infancy" of any incident. The short pieces written over a long period were not meant to be a whole, and a loose connective tissue being unfurled across the play includes a meta-theatrical device that even mocks the play itself.

Although he does not figure into every scene, the primary recurring character is Sutter, skillfully played by AeJay Mitchell at various points in his life. Inklings that Sutter may be gay come early on, and his no-nonsense mother (fiercely played by India Wilmott in middle age, and as just fiercely by Kehinde Koyejo as a young mother) tries to straighten him out. "You can't do no more musicals because you have to go wrestle or bounce a ball. I don't give a damn what kind of ball it is, but you will be spending this coming summer with balls in your face." A vaguely engaged stepfather pipes in, "You need to start bending your knees when you pick stuff up."

Knee articulation and being denied a role in *The Wiz* do not make Sutter straight. Later we meet him in a series of bars where he's trying to negotiate the parameters of his sexual relationship with a married straight man (the versatile Aaron Wilson, convincing in several later personas as well). In these scenes, O'Hara displays a keen ear for dialogue that can say a lot in just a word or two, and what is said travels from the light amusement of bi-curious flirtation to the melancholy of

eventual solitude.

O'Hara leavens the more somber scenes with interludes of broad humor, but still with an edge if you look for it. In a conversation, a sister is trying to convince her sibling not to name her daughter Genitalia. The borderline absurd conversation is written in a vernacular that would be impossible to transcribe upon hearing, and probably seem racially insensitive as well, so here I will turn to O'Hara's script: "You need ta take a lil time out and think about what it means to be putting all that on a lil chile who don't know nuthin n can't tell you ta go ta hell fo naming it that, I'll call you a bit you still going ta the bingo?"

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Another high-comic moment starts promisingly before turning into something of an obvious cliché. A preacher is excoriating his congregation on the matter of rumors, especially those suggesting that male members of the choir "have been seen giving each other knowing looks" that seem a prelude to homosexual behavior. Before long, the pastor is in full drag, ranting on the need to allow for full self-expression. This piece is largely saved by Rotimi Agakabiaka's fiery performance as the preacher.

Agakabiaka's best scene comes at the end, when he plays Sutter's grandmother, now confined to a nursing home. This is a canny, demanding woman who has perhaps rewritten her own history, but who knows how to get what she wants now, and Agakabiaka takes the character to the hilt.

Edris Cooper-Anifowoshe has directed the West Coast premiere of *Bootycandy* smoothly, moving through the changing scenes and capturing the distinct flavors in each. In one scene at a symposium among black playwrights, Sutter tells the gathering, "I think the audience should choke. After you've choked on something and you've struggled to get it down your throat, you can feel its presence in the space it went through." Either purposefully or in misapprehension, O'Hara overstates the asphyxiating power of *Bootycandy*. It may shock or surprise, but I swallowed just fine.

Bootycandy will run at Brava Theater Center through March 5. Tickets are \$30. Go to brava.org.

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