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Monday, February 20, 2017

"Bootycandy"

Bootycandy

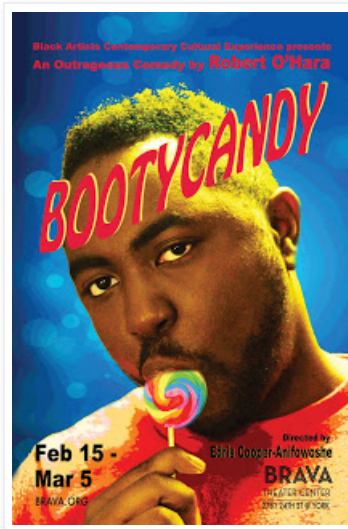
Robert O'Hara

[Black Artists Contemporary Cultural Experience](#)

[Brava Theatre](#)

"You have to pull yourself back and wash so you can keep your bootcandy clean." So says little Sutter's snappy mother who has quite explicit ideas what her pre-pubescent son needs to do when bathing each day (now and forever), opening him up to ask questions like, "Mama, what is a blow job?" (Her answer, if it is not in the dictionary, it is not a word, period.)

And thus opens *Bootycandy*, Robert O'Hara's usually hilarious, often poignant, and sometimes tragic exploration of the attitudes and stereotypes (outlandish to poisonous) he sees within the African American community towards homosexuality. With a fine and accomplished cast, Black Artists Contemporary Cultural Experience presents *Bootycandy* in a



Contact Information

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Ratings Legend:

5 E's - Loved It - A classic, would see it a second time.
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 1 E - Did Not Like It - Waste of time.
 No rating - A work in progress (reading or workshop), or children's production.

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Two gay, Jewish dads (Eddie and Ed) share their adventures, travels, thoughts and opinions. Their [GuyDads](#) blog features their

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production honest in its approach, raw in its language and depiction, and daring in its willingness to lay situations right on the table that may be uncomfortable to witness. At the same time, Edris Cooper-Anifowoshe's choices in bringing Mr. O'Hara's script to full life lead constantly to laugh-out-loud moments galore, sometimes bringing tears of hilarity followed quickly by tears of the pathos behind the humor.

Bootycandy is structured as a series of varying length comedy sketches, any one of which could actually stand alone as a short segment on an SNL-type show. At first, it appears they are unrelated except for a running theme of dealing with sexual attitudes within the black community of America, mostly in relation to gay men. But the further the evening progresses (and especially once into the second act), it becomes clear that many of the segments (but not all) explore the sexual identity journey of Sutter, the little boy – played by the grown Sutter – of the first scene. We see Sutter as a kid, a teen, and a grown man; and we view him in conversations, confrontations, and consultations with close relatives, best buds, and possible pick-ups at home, in bars, in a seedy motel room, and in a old-folks home.

AeJay Mitchell spans well all the age and maturity requirements as he portrays time-specific glimpses into Sutter's life. He is a persistently curious and cute kid, nagging his reluctant mom about birds-and-bees inquiries that hint greatly at his interest in his so-called "bootycandy" and other boys. As a teen, he glides about and talks in a soft but precise style and manner that speaks to his interest in theatre, Whitney Houston, and Jackie Collins' books. As a young adult, he is explicit about his sexual desires of a possible partner but also cautious and wary due to an experience at a younger age with an older white man – a connection that continues to haunt him in memory and in the man's association with someone he later meets. Throughout, Mr. Mitchell shows an acute ability to convince us of the complexities Sutter has to face and power through as an African-American, gay man -- both within his own family and within the black minority and white majority worlds around him.

Surrounding Sutter in these sketches are a variety of people who sometimes link as the same person from one skit to the next but who more often play a variety of unconnected roles and are often in scenes that are not about his life at all. Chief among the four cast members for his ability to be outrageously, over-the-top funny is Rotimi Agababiaka. As Reverend Benson, he begins a Sunday sermon about the "I Heard Folks" in his congregation – those people "who love to



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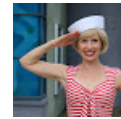
Anything Goes Cole Porter (Music & Lyrics) P.G. Wodehouse, Guy Bolton, Howard Lindsay & Russell Crouse (Or...

come around whispering” about some of the choir boys who they say are “a little freaky” and “a little twisted” because they “smile at one another” and “have a look see at one another.” With ever-increasing volumes of a voice that distinctly in preacher rhythms underlines words for emphasis and exaggerates consonants like spitting bullets, the Reverend attacks his congregants’ underlying prejudices against gays without ever using the word. As his long fingers point, his arms flail, and his whole body jerks, jumps, and eventually jives, this preacher has a few surprises of his own under his holy robes.

Mr. Agababiaka returns in several more sketches in roles such as the sullen, mostly silent, but always sneering step-father of the teenage Sutter who thinks the boy needs sports in his life to overcome his tendencies toward glamour and books. He also appears in curlers and robed nightgown as the aged, nursing-home-bound grandmother of Sutter in a scene full of sentimental nostalgia as Sutter orders her favorite-but-now-forbidden baby back ribs on his cell phone. At the same time, he plays snippets of past conversations to trigger stories and memories the two share (and act out to both sweet and hilarious effects). In each and all of his roles, this is the actor worth the price of the ticket to see.

But holding their own is the rest of this excellent ensemble, too. Kehinde Koyejo and Indiiia Wilmott appear as chatting friends on the phone (as well as each of their call-interrupting sisters) who cannot stop gossiping, cackling, and rolling their eyes about one of their daughters who is about to name her baby daughter “Genitalia.” Much later, the two actors appear with the Reverend Benson and a hippy-looking white guy (Aaron Wilton) as a lesbian couple (the grown Genitalia with her wife, Intifada) all dressed in white for a full ceremony that is step-by-outrageous-step the polar opposite of a marriage ceremony. Together with competitive antics of screams, accusations, and sneaky tricks, they pledge their non-commitment -- promising eternal “faith, hope, and hatred.” (While both of these sketches are hilarious, their connection to the whole overall jigsaw puzzle being constructed throughout the evening is as strange, outlier pieces.)

Aaron Wilton, as the lone Caucasian in the cast, also has the opportunity to play a wide range of personalities. He is la-la goofy as a bare-chested, beaded, new-age leader of the aforementioned ceremony of dissolution. He is clearly out-to-lunch but with no visible clue of being so as a white moderator of a panel of four black playwrights –



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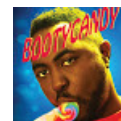
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the supposed writers of four earlier scenes we have just seen in earlier sketches. But it is when he plays two different scenes as a straight man desiring sex with Sutter at two points in Sutter's life that Mr. Wilton shows his true moxie as an actor, with each scene evoking the pain, inner shame, and total frustration of such situations (and each scene further allowing Mr. Mitchell to show his acting prowess as he further examines the sexual-identity journey of Sutter).

Sean Riley has made good use of the staging possibilities of the large Brava Theatre stage, including its backdrop curtains, in designing simple sets that flow in and out with relative ease for the evening's many short scenes. His vision is greatly enhanced by the lighting design of Jenny B (Shady Lady Lighting) that uses a mixture of colors, spots, and full-stage lighting to establish beautifully the needed moods and foci. Much of the night's humor emits not just from the script, direction, and acting but also from the many changes of costumes Andre Harrington has been called upon to create – from “non-wedding” attire to fabulous, teenage gay boy to uptight parents and gossiping church ladies.

Robert O'Hara does not shy from alerting the sometimes-reluctant African American community that there are gays lurking among them and that their lives and loves count as important even as the culture makes it difficult for them to see themselves as normal and loving. But his message of course applies to every sub-culture within America and to a society as a whole where entire swaths of U.S. geography are still packed full of people with all the prejudices of the “I Heard Folks.” Kudos goes to the Black Artists Contemporary Cultural Experience for staging this regional premiere and doing so in such a compellingly funny and thought-provoking manner.

Rating: 4 E

Bootycandy continues through March 5, 2017 in production by the Black Artists Contemporary Cultural Experience at the Brava Theatre, 2781 24th Street, San Francisco. Tickets are available online at <https://www.brava.org/all-events/2017/2/15/bootycandy>.

Posted by [GuyDads](#) at 9:40 AM

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