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Review

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Review: T.N.B. | Dead White Zombies | A Residential House - Dallas

Anything But Typical

Dead White Zombies might amaze or enrage you with its immersive production of *T.N.B.* Either way, chalk one up for a theater that's shaking things up.

by Mark Lowry
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Dead White Zombies' immersive theater production ***T.N.B.***, written and directed by Thomas Riccio and performed in a former "drug stash" house (crack house) in West Dallas.

My initial reaction was that it was an utterly fascinating theatrical experience, and a review the next day would have been filled with adjectives like "brazen," "fearless" and "unrepentant." Those feelings still stand. But admittedly, it was tough to watch, especially the scenes in which the main character Spooky (David Jeremiah) snorts cocaine, dodges gunfire and, most disturbingly, sexually assaults a woman. And all this merely inches away from the audience. (At one point, I sat next to Spooky on the sofa when he was coking up—doesn't get more intimate than that.)

Worse, my white liberal guilt got the best of me every time the N-word was spoken/yelled—which was a lot.

Tough to watch, tougher to write about. Could I have the courage to even type the words behind the titular acronym: "Typical Nigga Behavior?"

Before I get into specifics of the play and my reactions to it, let me state my hesitation in writing about it. I cringe when I hear or see the N-word used in a hateful way, or any way, really. Still, I like to think I understand it in the context of, say, a hip-hop lyric, and I'll defend the word when it comes to discussions of

banning books like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where historical context has to be taken into account.

History isn't always pretty, and you know what they say about what happens when lessons aren't learned from it.

My reservations about a white guy commenting on the N-word is why I felt it necessary to also have a black writer, Lindsay Jenkins, see *T.N.B.* and share her thoughts. You can read her commentary here.

While I don't pretend to understand what that word feels like when a black person hears that word as a demoralizing epithet, I can empathize as a gay man who has heard derogatory terms for "homosexual" used in all kinds of meanings behind it. For instance, it has been sobering and infuriating to read the comment sections of digital media and blogs as marriage equality has gained considerable momentum in recent years. And, much like gays have reclaimed the word "queer" for empowerment, the N-word (with the -a ending rather than -er, as if that softens it) has, for some blacks, been taken back in the vernacular.

But word choice aside, *T.N.B.* is a piece of theater, and it's the kind of out-of-the-box performance that this area needs. It's not perfect, dramatically, but it does represent a kind of risk-taking that should be more welcome on the local arts scene. If it elicits a strong reaction from either side, and therefore starts a conversation, then it has to earn respect.

I haven't loved everything Dead White Zombies has produced thus far, but I have, for the most part, appreciated it. Riccio, who in the interest of disclosure, contributes a series of audio interviews to TheaterJones, created two performance installations in 2012, *Flesh World* and *(w)hole*. They were presented in a 3,000 square-foot warehouse in West Dallas, a few blocks from the frame house where *T.N.B.* takes place, as a walk-through interactive experience. With elliptical narratives, they were journeys into surreal worlds. Riccio is inspired by ritual, mythology and indigenous cultures (he wrote about his work in Ethiopia in 2009 for us, here), and if those shows might have been dismissed as merely "interesting," DWZ is at least carving out a niche for something that hasn't been done in North Texas theater.

The narrative of *T.N.B.*, which also brings in a supernatural elements and is inspired by ancient healing rituals, is a more straightforward narrative than those other works. Its grounding in a harsh reality—that of a certain type of Black man—is what makes the show both difficult to watch and impossible to ignore. In this West Dallas house, which smells of cleaning solvent attempting to mask the odor of cat piss and decay, the audience follows the action through four rooms and several outdoor spaces, as if wandering through a haunted house at Halloween.

The scariest diorama of all can be the reality that you're scared to face.

The audience is encouraged to take video and photos, and undoubtedly some of the more harrowing sequences have already ended up on Vine and other social media outlets. This is another unique aspect of the show, and therefore, I participated.

Below is an attempt to guide you, the reader, through the show via the video I shot on a handheld device and then my phone. For the most part, I've tried to edit out video that shows faces of other patrons, although given the intimate nature of the performance, this was impossible. And in case you haven't been warned, many of these clips contain mature and disturbing language.

The immersive experience

When the audience first enters through the backyard and the back porch of the house, we get a chance to walk through the rooms and explore the sights, sounds and smells (and if you're not in the room where the action is happening, there are small TVs in every room to show what's going on elsewhere in the house; talk about surveillance).

Before any significant action starts, the character of Mama (Becki McDonald) is cooking up collards and offers them to the patrons. I noticed the patron before me didn't finish her greens, so I asked Mama about it. What you won't see is the subsequent conversation I had with her, in which she talked about the gentrifying of this West Dallas neighborhood in the Trinity Groves area. ("When the hipsters move in, you know it's over.")

I later ate some greens, which were pretty good.

In another room dominated by posters of Tupac and Biggie Smalls, Roosevelt (Justin Locklear), the white brother of Spooky, is spinning hip-hop and setting the mood.

Then, the action begins. After several scenes of realistic and gritty dialogue (yes, with pervasive use of the N-word) and guns waving, we get the first taste of Riccio's foray into exploring Spooky's past on a spiritual and psychological level. It's not just his own past, but that of the African-American male experience. We've seen Jeremiah, in various productions over the years, play the Angry Black Male. He does it to the hilt here, but as you'll see in this scene, also has a way with comedy.

Later, we move into the backyard, where Locklear is playing a yokel interrogator and Spooky is in an electric chair. When he doesn't answer "correctly," he's given

a shock. The big gasp from the audience comes with the reveal of an forensic artist's "sketch" of the criminal. Stay with this one to the end.

Why is Spooky haunted by these ghosts, even more so than any of us dealing with specters of the past? (Warning: strong language.)

Enter Charleene (played by the terrific Rhianna Mack), a sassy woman decked out like a—to use another derisive term that's been beat to death in pop culture—hoochie mama. Here's the initial flirting, which soon turns to harsh truths. (Warning: sexually explicit language.)

Charleene doesn't give Spooky what he wants, and doesn't say what he wants to hear. "I'm sick of working like a dog and not eating," he reasons.

She's still not playing along. So he finds other ways to occupy the time, including doing this, which is not the only time this action happens in the play.

Then Charleene drops the truth bomb, again. "Make your happiness right here," she pleads.(This scene shows how close the audience is to the action.)

Spooky retaliates, which is hands down the hardest scene to watch. At the performance I saw, it happened next to a woman who had such a strong reaction that she ran into the kitchen and put her head over the sink, as if physically nauseated. (I saw Riccio and producer Lori McCarthy comforting her, and the woman stayed for the rest of the performance.) During this scene, Mama is in the kitchen, ignoring the crime in the other room, as if the wrongs will just magically disappear if she sings loudly.

Meanwhile, upstairs, the mystical character of Storm Crow (played by Brad Hennigan when I saw it; Jonathan "Gno" White in other performances) hangs out. I ventured up there early on, before the action began, and was angrily chastised by him. From downstairs, in that upstairs room, you can see looping video images of race riots, lynching and other horrific sites, plus landmark moments in African-American history, flashing on the ceiling. Here's an example.

Was Spooky's fate sealed by the lack of a father figure, or by a history that has rarely, if ever, been on his side? What role did his Mama have? Here, Spooky lays it out with evangelical fervor. They reconcile before she gives him another dose of truth.

Finally, dinner is served—a helping of bullet shells—and Spooky's fate plays itself out. Here's part of that scene.

The final image, involving Spooky, Storm Crow and the street in front of the house, which serendipitously has the spooky name of Poe Street, is one of the most memorable visuals you'll ever have in any theatrical experience.

It's epic, cinematic and gut-wrenching.

Final thoughts

Throughout *T.N.B.*, so many thoughts ran through my head.

What did the black theatergoers in my group feel about it? (This was similar to my curiosity about the black patrons' reactions when Undermain Theatre staged Young Jean Lee's *The Shipment*, which also starred Jeremiah, in 2011.)

Considering what George C. Wolfe wrote in his play *The Colored Museum a*bout the "mama on the couch" character he felt was exemplified by Lena in *A Raisin in the Sun*, what would he have thought about this "mama in the kitchen?" What would he think about this play, especially knowing it's written by a white man? What would the late August Wilson have thought about it?

Riccio's play is not nearly as poetic as Wilson's work, but it does share the concept of using a supernatural element (such as in *The Piano Lesson*) to exorcise demons of the past; demons that will undoubtedly continue to haunt long after Spooky is dead and buried.

Critic and theatermaker Robert Brustein, who famously feuded with Wilson, once wrote in criticism of Wilson's work that "theater works best as a unifying rather than a segregating medium."

I suspect the biggest segregating factor among audiences at *T.N.B.* will be their reaction to it. You might see it as a theatrical thrill ride like none other; or you might angrily dismiss it as ghetto porn. But a strong reaction, especially of outrage, means that the art is doing something right.

To paraphrase a quote sometimes attributed to Brecht (and also to others), it's not just holding a mirror up to society—it's the hammer that's helping shape it.

◊ If you're curious what patrons think of the show, below is video with some reactions, including by African-American theatergoers, shot by Riccio. And don't forget to read black writer Lindsay Jenkins' commentary on the work, here.

TJ