

Director runs show, but ladies do heavy lifting

By Bert Osborne
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Strictly speaking professionally, mind you, Thomas W. Jones II sure has a way with women.

In a career spanning three decades, Jones has earned his reputation as one of the most consistently interesting directors in town.

Somewhat more surprisingly, in a lot of his recent work with Lisa Adler's Horizon Theatre, he's developed a particular flair for so-called "feminist" fare: "And Her Hair Went With Her," "The Bluest Eye" and "Three Sistahs" (which he also wrote).

Jones' latest Horizon show, "Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery," ranks among the theater season's finest hours, but not even a talent of his caliber deserves all of the credit himself. If it's true that behind every good man stands a good woman, in Jones' case, you can multiply that by nine.

First and foremost, there's former Atlanta playwright Shay Youngblood, whose lovingly written and intricately woven tapestry of vignettes offers Jones his richest material in years.

The play's central character is Daughter (Amber Iman), a young black girl coming of age in the rural South of the 1980s. Through her experiences with the various women in her life — and the alternately humorous and heartfelt stories they've lived to tell about — she learns the value of "seeing with your heart" and not just the eyes.

As one of them puts it to her, "You've got to know where you come from to know where you're going."

In addition to Iman, Jones' eight-member cast features some of the most formidable actresses around, and the episodic structure of the piece allows each of them individual moments to shine as the "Big Mamas" in Daughter's life.

It's beautifully fitting, somehow, that several of the actress-

Theater review "Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery" Grade: A-

Through Aug. 22. 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays; 4 and 8:30 p.m. Saturdays; 6 p.m. Sundays. \$20-\$30. Horizon Theatre, 1083 Austin Ave. N.E. (in Little Five Points). 404-584-7450, horizontheatre.com.

Bottom Line: Inventively written, acted and directed — what's not to love?

es have personal histories with the play, which Horizon premiered in 1988.

Both Marguerite Hannah and Margo Moorer appeared in that original production. Andrea Frye directed the remount a few years later. Tonia Jackson has done the show out of town.

To be sure, their performances ring utterly true.

No less splendid are Naomi Lavette and the especially resourceful Cynthia D. Barker (virtually unrecognizable in different scenes as a mischievous brat, a brazen hussy and a prim mortician).

In a few choreographed interludes, dancer Danielle Deadwyler rounds out the ensemble as the spirit of Daughter's long-lost mother.

In a sense, these women do most of the heavy lifting — Youngblood in constructing a compelling and poignant story, and this cast in bringing the characters to such vivid life — but Jones more than sufficiently pulls his own weight, as it were.

His pacing is quick and his transitions are smooth and precise. In periodic flashbacks and dream sequences, he incorporates African tribal music or drapes the stage in multicolored fabrics to arresting effect.

It seems unlikely that any director could really "Mess" it up. But if Jones is the man, so to speak, it's the ladies who've got his back.