

LOOK



IF IT'S
ensemble
ber Iman
D. Barker,
Margo Moor-
er, Andrea
Lavette

BLESS THIS MESS

Horizon succeeds in *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*

BY CURT HOLMAN

Horizon Theatre's brassy, bumptious production of *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* feels like one of those family reunions that sprawls so far and wide, it comes with its own T-shirt. Horizon's remount of its first world premiere recasts actors from

SHAKIN' THE MESS OUTTA MISERY

Through Aug. 22. \$20-\$35. Wed.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 4 and 8:30 p.m.; Sun., 6 p.m. Horizon Theatre, 1083 Austin Ave. 404-584-7450. www.horizontheatre.com.

the original 1988 production, including Marguerite Hannah and Margo Moor-
er. As an 18

month old, Moor-
er's daughter, Amber Iman, attended the original's rehearsals and has grown up to be an aspiring actress, playing the central role of Daughter.

Horizon's opening night proved particularly festive, coming on the heels of the playhouse's successful campaign to balance its budget before the end of its fiscal year. All the love in ►

◀ the room can almost eclipse the actual play, but *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* shines when it emphasizes storytelling and star power.

In the play's episodic action, Daughter describes the life lessons she picked up while being raised in a small Southern town by an extended family of mama figures and other female role models. In addition to world-wise Big Mama (Andrea Frye) and liquor-selling Aunt Mae (Moorer), there's folk-magician Miss Mary (Tonia Jackson), hardheaded hair-dresser Miss Corine (Hannah), singer/prostitute Maggie (Cynthia D. Barker) and African-garbed Miss Lamama (Naomi Lavette).

When adolescent Daughter "gets her blood," the women share stories and sing occasional songs to help her come of age as a woman. Iman brings plenty of appealing energy to the role of Daughter, but she's essentially a grown woman playing a child, and some of that precociousness can wear thin after awhile.

The script doesn't stint on platitudes such as "Pretty is as pretty does" or "What doesn't kill you makes you strong." Playwright Shay Youngblood's best moments, however, use specific details to bring the anecdotes to life, such as the popularity of dipping snuff among women of Miss Corine's generation. Because most of the women worked as housekeepers in the Jim Crow South, several tales turn into

harrowing accounts of racism. In one, Miss Corine spits her tobacco juice out the window of a bus, but accidentally hits a white woman, incurring the wrath of a white police officer. Revenge against racial injustice serves a powerful role in many of the episodes.

For every harrowing or tragic tale, though, *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* offers at least two funny ones. Director Thomas W. Jones II brings out the actresses' flair for playing larger-than-life personalities with a punchy approach to comedy. The cast's propensity for chatting and even flirting with audience members gives the show a warm, inclusive feeling. Moorer may give the most vibrant and funny performance: When Aunt Mae feuds with another woman, she immediately begins whipping off her earrings for if and when the argument comes to blows.

Daughter's birth mother left to pursue dreams of being a dancer, and Danielle Deadwyler serves as a recurring, wordless presence at key moments throughout the show. When Deadwyler dances or dangles circus-style from lengths of fabric, *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* demonstrates that it appreciates the power of quiet, as well the value of a good story. **A!**

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