

Los Angeles Times

Culture Monster - June 10, 2010



Theatre review:

'Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine' at the Lounge Theatre

Watching someone else's comeuppance is such a pleasure: All the schadenfreude and moral uplift with none of the flop sweat. The rubbernecking is terrific in "Fabulation, or The Re-Education of Undine," Lynn Nottage's delicious satire of an uber-bitch turned welfare baby mama, now at the Lounge Theatre in Hollywood. West Coast Ensemble's down and dirty production may be rough around the edges, but it delivers the comic goods.



PR guru Undine (Adeye Sahran) is too busy booking celebrities for her Fallopian Blockage charity event to notice her husband, Herve (Carlos Acuña), has gone AWOL, leaving her penniless and knocked up. The Dartmouth-educated, overachieving buppie has no choice but to return to the projects and the family she claims died in a fire. Upscale Undine must live out her pregnancy as her former self, Sharona Watkins, just another poor black woman in America. Let the life lessons begin.

Nottage, who penned "Intimate Apparel," a delicate study of forbidden love in 1905, and last year's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama "Ruined," lets her hair down here to highly entertaining effect. Writing in sketch style brings out her comic edge ("There is nothing less forgiving than bougey Negroes"), generating priceless moments like Undine's first purchase of street drugs. "My entire life," she deadpans to the audience, "has been engineered to avoid this very moment."

Sure, this picaresque comedy occasionally suffers from underwritten characters or easy targets. But director Ben Campbell's ebullient cast is having too much fun to care. Ace Gibson storms through his scenes as Undine's ex-rapper beau, Mo'Dough, and later as her brother Flow, whose magnum opus deconstructing Br'er Rabbit is one of the play's running jokes. Lyn Michele Ross nicely underplays her roles as an inmate and addict. And you can almost smell the overpriced cologne on Acuña's unctuous Herve.

But "Fabulation" is ultimately driven by a winning, full-throttle performance by Sahran, who nails the play's extremes of satire and heartbreak. We root for Undine even as we see how Sharona's narcissism and rage have corroded her humanity. Everyone works off a cover story. The trick is to never to believe your own.

-Charlotte Stoudt

"Fabulation, or The Re-Education of Undine" The Lounge Theatre, 6201 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday. Ends June 13. \$18-\$20. Contact: (800) 595-4TIX or www.westcoastensemble.org. Running time: 2 hours.

Photo: Ed Baccari, from left, Ace Gibson, Adeye Sahran, Lyn Michele Ross, DeJon Mayes, Carlos Acuña and Regina Randolph in "Fabulation, or The Re-Education of Undine," now playing at the Lounge Theatre in Hollywood. Credit: Carla Barnett.



Fabulation: or the Re-Education of Undine

West Coast Ensemble at the Lounge Theatre

Reviewed by Jennie Webb

June 08, 2010



"Re-invent yourself." In our mega-modern world of big-time options, that's a positive message, right? It validates our inherent right to pick ourselves up and start down a new path without looking back. But it doesn't remind us about what happens when we shut—and try to lock—the doors behind us to open new ones. In a bang-up Los Angeles premiere, which initiates West Coast Ensemble's "Diversity Initiative," Lynn Nottage's wickedly funny play takes an unflinching look at the price paid for abandoning one's history.

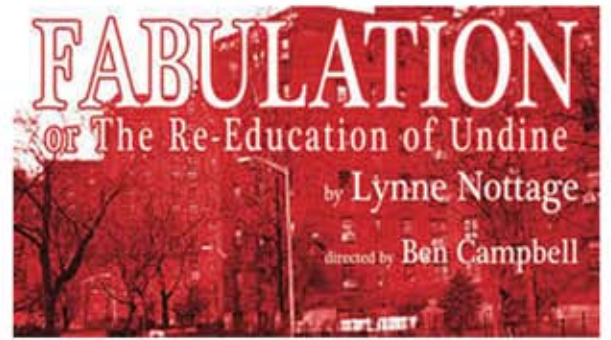
We first meet Undine Barnes Calles, the play's more than slightly fabulous central character, at the top of her game. She's a self-created 21st-century black entrepreneur, capitalizing on "the vanity and confusion of the African American Nouveau Riche" to start her own fierce PR firm in Manhattan. Undine's take no prisoners attitude about causes, photo-ops, and celebrities on spiritual journeys is pretty much irresistible; with star presence to spare, actor Adeye Sahran manages the character's breakneck dialogue and laser-like focus brilliantly. But after Undine's player husband Herve (Carlos Acuña, rico, suave, and then some) drains her bank accounts and disappears, her fall is quick and merciless. And when her social circle turns its back on her, Undine knocks on the only door she can think of: her childhood home, located in the Brooklyn projects. Here we begin to learn just how much of a creation Undine's savvy self is.

Working wonders with a simple black-box setting (lighting by Lauraen Wemischner, sound design by Rebecca Kessin) director Ben Campbell has put together a marvelously tight production. Sahran and the exceptional ensemble cast (Acuña, Ed Baccari, Sachandra Grandiot, DeJon Mayes, Regina Randolph, Lyn Michele Ross, and a red-hot Ace Gibson), each actor playing multiple roles, deliver powerfully comic yet nuanced performances that embrace the playwright's fearless use of stereotypes and her fantastic ability with language. The play successfully crosses lines of class and race to take us on a journey that's surprising in some very unexpected ways and ultimately quite moving. This is a lesson that's most certainly worth watching—and sharing.

Presented by West Coast Ensemble at the Lounge Theatre, 6201 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. June 4-13. Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. (800) 595-4849. www.tix.com

Fabulation: or The Re-Education of Undine

By Tom Provenzano



Though placed specifically in an African-American context, Lynn Nottage's frightening fable speaks of earthly karma and dire comeuppance for all who turn their backs on those who gave them life and sustenance. In a potent performance, Adeye Sahran portrays Undine, a high-powered Manhattan PR mogul whose world collapses as her sleazy Argentinean gigolo-husband robs her of her lifestyle and her fortune. So it's back to Brooklyn and the projects to face the family she had been pretending had died, when she created her manicured identity 14 years earlier. Though there is some sense that this story is about a particular injustice to black folk who try to rise too high, it is much more interesting as an examination of any person who loses humanity through personal greed and arrogance but reclaims it through acceptance of responsibility and empathy. Brisk direction by Ben Campbell and a remarkable ensemble who jump in and out of multiple roles at a moment's notice keep the play exciting, and alternately moving and funny. Particularly effective is Lyn Michele Ross, who plays the most extreme characters with confidence. All of whom Campbell creates with a dearth of physical production values; this compromises the event's integrity somewhat but does not ruin it. West Coast Ensemble at the Lounge Theatre, 6201 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; through June 13. Tix.com, (800) 595-4849.