



BALTIMORE CITY PAPER | 10/12/2005

Stage | Theater

Against Type

Playwright Embraces African-American Stereotypes To Subvert Them



EACH ONE, TEACH ONE: Cristal Chanelle Truscott (second from left) and the rest of the cast of *Peaches* School audiences on the stories behind two-dimensional images of black life.

By **John Barry**

Ethnic archetypes are tough to handle in any medium, particularly onstage. Progress Theatre, which presented the Baltimore premiere of *Peaches* Oct. 7-9, responds in a roundabout fashion. Instead of trying to crush stereotypes onstage or throw them back in the audience's face, playwright Cristal Chanelle Truscott grabs at the most simplistic clichés of black womanhood and works with them—the strong slave mother, the jazz diva, the revolutionary, the welfare mom. And by the end of this funny, high-energy presentation, Truscott gets them to march to their own drummer.

Truscott wrote *Peaches* while an undergrad at New York University's School of Theater, and she occasionally uses the word "deconstruction" to explain her approach. That feels a little abstract in discussion, but onstage it becomes clear what she is driving at: The familiar images are

gradually tweaked until the comic-book characters turn into real human beings.

"I've always been interested in stereotypes," Truscott says between shows during *Peaches* three-day run at Theatre Project. "So I had a lot to say about stereotypes about black women—that they're angry, or they have attitudes, or they've had a lot of kids—and to follow the legacy of those from slavery to the present."

The play itself includes several sketches that stretch across three centuries of African-American history and allusions—Kunta Kinte, *Good Times*, Billie Holiday, Angela Davis, the welfare queen. The pace is furious and funny—actors shriek out "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" while picking cotton or rush through a frantic church service. The arc itself is loose, connected by the experiences of African-American women trying to figure out who they are in the scheme of things.

When beginning *Peaches*, Truscott decided that these somewhat hackneyed figures could actually inspire her. Since she completed the play in 2000 (the title comes from by a Nina Simone song of the same name), Truscott and other NYU theater graduates—Maiesha McQueen, Dana Bowles, Aaron Goodson—have been taking *Peaches* around the country between their day jobs as theater instructors. The play has changed in the five years since its inception, but the intent has remained consistent: using theater to show that some of the ideas we're fed about black women go deeper than we may first believe.

With *Peaches*, Progress Theatre encourages its audience to make new connections between, say, the life of a slave woman and the life the young, black "welfare mother." It's a theoretical association academics have made for decades; *Peaches* makes the connection quite simply. An opening scene in which a young slave



BALTIMORE CITY PAPER | 10/12/2005

Stage | Theater

(cont.) girl has to deal with a hovering young slave boy is clearly linked to a later sketch in which a young mother of four remembers her pregnancy at 15. For Truscott, the connection is evident: In both of these dismal scenarios, human beings were actually falling in love.

“I wrote it because I was wondering what it must have been like to be a slave who may be 14 or 15,” Truscott says. “[She] may have been beaten or raped, working all day long, and still experience the same thing everyone else is supposed to experience—that first moment when someone is in love with them.”

While the play focuses on women, the men have their moments. Aaron Goodson, the sole male performer, delivers a rave-up sermon as a preacher about trying to catch buses without having the right amount of change. You don’t have to go to a black church to recognize that role model. “I mean, the idea of a black preacher is used in McDonald’s commercials, with the gospel choir singing in the background,” Goodson says. “But people have gone to these churches for the same reasons they’ve gone to jazz clubs. It wasn’t just a place where people sang songs. It was a place where they wanted to find out about who they were or where they came from.”

Because they’re seen as “young, gifted, and black,” as Truscott puts it, Progress’ members find themselves dealing with a few misconceptions of their own. First, Truscott says some audience members tend to look at the play as their personal journey, instead of a theatrical piece. “After a show we have people come up to cast members asking, ‘Oh, is this what happened to you darling?’” Truscott says. “Sometimes we wonder if that’s all they’re going to walk away with.

“I think it goes to American needs to label things, because we’re young and black,” she continues. “But we’re traditionalist when it comes to theater—characters, a beginning, a middle, an end, a struggle, a journey, all that stuff. If you want to put a turntable onstage, that’s great, but those elements have to be there.”