

SCENE

FROM THE HOUSE

OCT.
2022

THE

TILL

TRILOGY

BY IFA BAYEZA

DIRECTED BY TALVIN WILKS

A THREE-PLAY EVENT PERFORMED
IN ROTATING REPERTORY

A Creatyve Stage Review
by
Naelis A. Ervin

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TILL TRILOGY OVERVIEW

This three-part stage play experience uniquely highlights stories of the historical figure, Emmett Till, his tragic death, his community, his mark on history and the effects his passing had on a nation for decades.

The Ballad of Emmett Till boldly shares the story from Emmett's perspective of past and present events. *That Summer in Sumner* follows the story of the infamous trial and the Black journalists who sought justice while facing injustices in unfair media conditions. Lastly, *Benevolence*, the final play of the trilogy, gives audiences insight to the transformation of communities through the intimate perspectives of two women and the men in their lives post Till's death.



Let's just say that the theater is not for the faint of heart.
- Phylicia Rashad

Theatre/Company

Mosaic Theater Company at Atlas Performing Arts Center
@MosaicTheaterDC

Reviewer

Naelis A. Ervin
@Creatyvegenius



Playwright
Ifa Bayeza



Director
Talvin Wilks

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MOSAIC THEATER
THE TILL TRILOGY

Mosaic Theatre Company Marquee
for The Till Trilogy
Photo Cred. -Naelis A. Ervin

CREATING THE ATMOSPHERE

If you're going to sign up for a million e-newsletters like myself, the least you can do is sort through them once in a while hoping to come across an experience as great as The Till Trilogy.

The show was officially ready to hit the stage for viewers but this unique opportunity for a weekend presented itself where patrons could purchase a special package to attend ALL three performances, participate in a talkback with the playwright and Honorary Chair, Ms. Phylicia Rashad, and also have a great meal sponsored by The Pursuit Wine Bar and Kitchen.

It seemed like a no-brainer so I treated myself to a ticket and within a few weeks I stepped into the theatre, surrounded by board members, a few regulars on the scene, and quite a few patrons who were sizing me up to determine my presence.

Not only was I riding solo for the event, but I was probably the youngest patron who didn't run in the same circles as those who were present. In 24 hours, I was asked constantly "who do you know in the show?" or "What's your affiliation with the theater?". The response, "I'm simply an artist and arts advocate and looking to continue immersing myself in the world of theatre here in the DMV", didn't seem to be sufficient enough. It was a little off-putting and I'd be lying if Imposter syndrome didn't slide it's evil way in (briefly), but a quick self-check helped to recenter my mind and presence as an artist and educator.

Despite the interrogation from a few, most board members I met were warm and inviting, looking to discuss the importance of the project we were there to see. Let's not forget about The Mosaic Family who went above and beyond to be more than accommodating to ALL of the guests. Something as simple as Serge Seiden (*Mosaic's Managing Director*) calling me by name before a formal introduction and walking ahead of the group to open doors to the theatre made the weekend experience much more personable.

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TAKE A BOW

Director Talvin Wilks worked his magic on and around that stage. The choices were bold and the talent was next level. There was not one weak link in the cast of *The Till Trilogy* but after three performances, I'd be lying if I said that the stage lights didn't shine just a bit brighter on a few actors.

Antonio Michael Woodard (*Emmett Till*) and Billie Krishawn (*Mamie Till-Bradley*) commanded the stage in every scene they appeared in. Woodard's effortless capture of Till's youthfulness and his overall vibrant delivery was next level. The joy and innocence created through Woodard's wide-eyed expressions and larger-than-life movement on the stage sold his performance as Till and humanized him more than I've seen in past productions. It reminded us that he was a child whose life was cut far too short. The booming vocal presence in Woodward's stage mother, Krishawn, took my breath away every time she delivered a line. Krishawn's voice surely woke up the house and her seamless transitions in and out of other characters in the trilogy made me an instant fan.

Artistic Director, Cast, Playwright, and others
The Till Trilogy
Photo Cred. -Naelis A. Ervin

As I mentioned, no one in the cast fell short. In fact, I watched each actor deliver such an emotionally charged performance in each play that may have temporarily blurred the lines of reality and theatre for me. I'm still in awe of the fact that Rolonda Watts could serve a convincing pestering pre-adolescent child, as much as a grown woman reporting from *Jet Magazine* and back again to the role of a matriarch figure.

Things I loved-

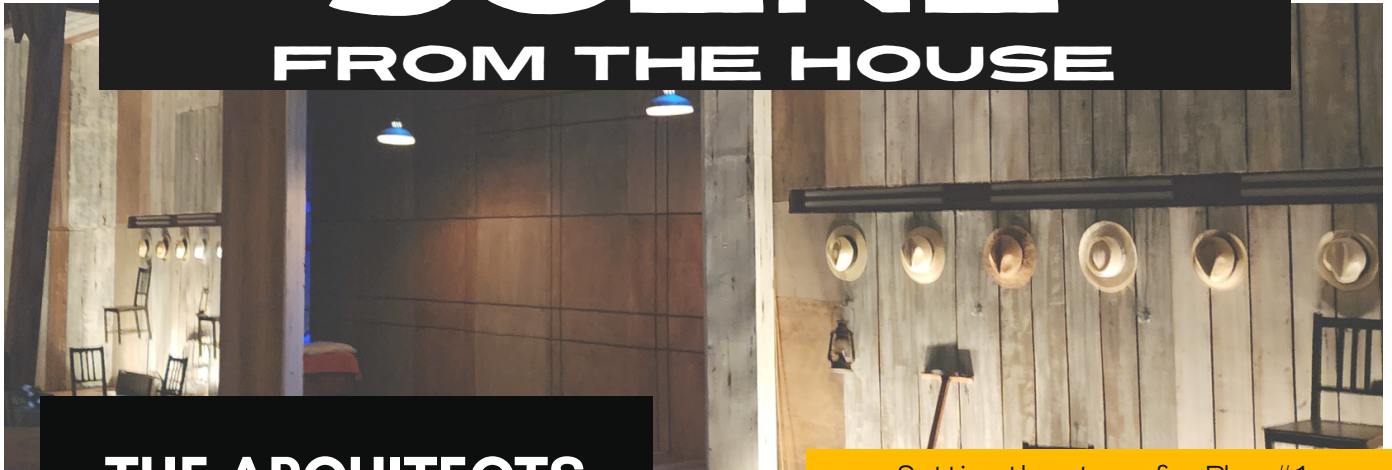
Every performer. **Krishawn's** voice. **Woodard's** vibrance. **Jaysen Wright's** emotional reactions- (*I'm pretty sure that I teared up every time he did*), **Watt's** comedic timing, **Jason Bowen's** soothing singing voice and his portrayal of Mose Wright, and **Anna DiGiovanni's** stressful yet smug portrayal of Caroline Bryant.

Things I Questioned-

There was an interesting choice to not use white actors in *The Ballad of Emmett Till* and I'm still curious to know why. Not sure if it was written to be staged that way or if that was a decision made by Wilks for this run.

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THE ARCHITECTS

This show not only had a phenomenal cast and director but the designers did their thing, bringing Bayeza's stories to a new level. The well-aged barnwood aesthetic of the stage floor, ceiling, and wall panels instantly took me to another region and era of the US. Each character's look and quick change gave them a new identity, making the connection between their "multiple personalities" and the audience more believable in each scene. Shout out to the choreographers. The dancing, intimacy, and fight choreo was some of my favorite that I've seen when depicting a historical account on stage. The collaboration between Wilks and his team was evident in some great stage moments (*Mamie's entrance with the press, Emmett's floating movements, the kidnapping of Emmett, and so much more.*) Lastly, the projections of real headlines, courtroom footage, and other historical images, created truth through Till's tragedy. It was without a doubt, An In-your-face humanization of Black History and American history.

Setting the stage for Play #1

The Ballad of Emmett Till

Photo Cred. -Naelis A. Ervin

FINAL THOUGHTS

Three plays, Two Days, and One intense weekend of art doing what it does best- telling stories that create conversations for community that also have the power to affect change. The tragedy of Emmett Till has been told in films, on the stage, in schools, and in museums, but the unveiling of Emmett's legacy and Mamie's warrior spirit reaches new heights in Ifa Bayeza's Till Trilogy. *The Ballad of Emmett Till* was by far my favorite as Woodard's jovial energy was prevalent throughout. It moved well in each piece of choreography and each light beam that illuminated the emotions of the actors. The pacing of Act 1, in *That Summer in Sumner*, was a bit slow for me, but I loved the focus on highlighting the struggle of Black journalists during Till's trial. I wish time allowed for a longer talkback and engagement from the audience in between shows. The blessing of hearing from members of the Till family, including Wheeler, Emmett's last living cousin to witness his kidnapping, helped me to start considering next steps for healing and further educating others. The conversations with other patrons are indicative of the work that needs to still be done in healing and further educating our communities. I look forward from all creatives who made magic with this body of work.

RATING

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