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ishmael reed

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Dance is the universal art, the common joy of expression. Those who cannot dance are imprisoned in their own ego and cannot live well with other people and the world. They have lost the tune of life. They only live in cold thinking. Their feelings are deeply repressed while they attach themselves forlornly to the earth.

Ishmael Reed, Mumbo Jumbo

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Ishmael Reed, "Eavesdropping on the Gods" from Why The Black Hole Sings the Blues

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He kept falling backward every time
He was about to reach the top
Now they tell him that he has no free will
That bacteria inside his gut have goals
That don't jibe with his
Or as the scientist says,
"Microbial manipulations might fill in

Some of the puzzling holes
In our understandings about food cravings”
In other words,
For his microbiome he is just a delivery system
that
Brings them sugar

For them his body is a bakery

Is there no end to subservience?

from: [the diabetic dreams of cake](#), ishmael reed on *the paris review*

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#is there no end to subservience.....#words#ishmael reed#the whole poem is very good but this stanza especially haunts me a little#the poem is longer than this and it's very good but this stanza especially hit me like a ton of bricks as someone who has diabete-like metab#*metabolism problems#just...yeah#ok to rb

... **See all**

Blaze

116 notes

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I recently read *The Haunting of Lin-Manuel Miranda* by Ishmael Reed, thinking I was going to do a writeup on it. Then totally forgot to do a review! So here are my thoughts:

It's a really interesting piece. It's less like a proper play and more like an essay in the form of a play. It would likely be somewhat boring to watch in a theatre, since a lot of the monologues are closer to lecture. However, I really like that Reed published it in play format. Essays about race and history and the failures of various history books are many, as are critical analyses of theatrical pieces. But meeting the medium with the same medium, writing a critical analysis of a play (or musical, as it were) in the form of a play, is a cool technique. Even if something doesn't work perfectly in its medium, sometimes why that medium was chosen is important. Reed is famous for satire, and this is an interesting blend of genuine education and satire; the satire comes mostly in the form of the white historical figures talking about/to each other, and in the way he writes the present-day figures like Rob Chernow and Lin-Manuel Miranda himself, while the monologues of the Black and indigenous historical characters are mostly educational.

The most important overarching critique in this piece, I think, is that history books, especially those written by white people, are selective both in who they decide to portray and from what angle, and will very often omit or gloss over individuals or incidences that might paint their subject in poor light. Reed writes Miranda as a clueless victim of this type of selective omission, which I find to be an interesting choice. The Miranda portrayed in this play used only Chernow's book as a source for the musical, which means that all the individuals Chernow omitted from his book are ignored in Hamilton, or any prejudices or angles expressed in the book exist in the musical. I don't know if that was the case in real life, if Lin-Manuel Miranda did any further research to make sure he wasn't overlooking important people or information, but I think it's actually a rather kind portrayal. I would be a bit shocked if he did no other research, and no one around him during the process, whether it was producers or dramaturgs or someone else, did any other research either. So writing him as cluelessly using only the one book as a source rather than choosing to ignore other sources seems like a moment of niceness, or perhaps it's intended to be something more like condescension.

The basic plot is that Lin-Manuel Miranda, stressed out and unable to sleep, is given an Ambien by his agent, and dreams various historical figures coming to him, A Christmas Carol-style, to inform him of all the facts Rob Chernow left out of his book about Hamilton's relationship to slavery. This includes slaves, indigenous people, (white) indentured servants, and Harriet Tubman.

Most of the monologues are essentially Reed filling in the historical gaps while criticizing Miranda for ignoring the documented plight of enslaved people, indigenous people, and others. But I really like the way he does this; allowing the named and unnamed Black and indigenous historical figures to be portrayed by living actors also gives them a way to be embodied while their history is explained. That's why I think the vehicle of theatre is very cool: the monologues are, essentially, mini history lessons on the people whose stories Chernow's history book (and therefore the musical) has forgotten or omitted, but by making them into monologues it allows that person to "tell" their own story through the actor and therefore connect more to an audience, rather than a reader just consuming it on a page in a nonfiction book. There's a big emotional connection, a pathos that comes across more easily when watching a person speak about their (or "their") experiences than when reading it as text in a book.

The monologues themselves were actually very eye-opening and interesting; some characters were based on real, named individuals enslaved by the Hamiltons/Schuylers, their relatives, or others in their social circle, and their monologues both explained historical contexts and told their individual stories. Others are anonymous characters portraying indigenous or enslaved people, and their monologues are more general, expressing broader historical experiences. This was a good vehicle for covering bigger picture and more detailed parts of history, I think.

Much of the criticism is about the Schuyler sisters rather than Hamilton himself, and their abuse of people they enslaved. I think Reed focuses

on this because the sisters are portrayed as innocent and sweet, and he wanted to emphasize how much that was not the case, and how much they treated human beings like commodities they didn't care about. But even through the Schuyler sisters, Reed criticizes Hamilton, because he points out over and over that when the sisters wanted something done, the men had to be the ones to put it in motion, meaning Hamilton and the other men in the sisters' lives were just as complicit in their treatment of the enslaved.

There's a moment in the middle of the piece where the anonymous indigenous character and one of the anonymous enslaved characters start fighting over, essentially, who was more oppressed by the colonizers. Eventually they're interrupted when another character points out that this "divide and conquer" strategy is used by imperialists to pit them against each other and that they should be working together to support liberation from oppressors. I thought this was a nice touch because, along with the educational monologues from each character, it emphasizes the importance of mutual support in the face of oppression, and shows that the colonizers wanted that kind of fighting because it was/is an effective way to prevent people from joining together to push back as one and therefore become stronger as a group.

There's a fair amount of criticism of Miranda's poor writing, too, and the clumsy and sometimes uncreative rhymes in his raps, which I also appreciated. Not only that, but there's also an important criticism of how little the actors and crew in these productions get paid compared to producers, backers, and Miranda himself. There's also criticism of

the ticket prices, which I was very happy to see. I was always frustrated by the prices being so high that only people with quite a lot of disposable income (who more than likely were white, especially in major cities where the show tickets were higher) and who probably weren't going to question any of the show's content, were the ones who were going to see the show, rather than poorer BIPOC who might have been in the intended audience. (Although tbh I do think the intended audience was white people who wouldn't care enough to criticize the show.)

In the play, Miranda does go through an emotional arc and redemption; in another dream, he speaks to Alexander Hamilton and realizes that Hamilton is a racist and a slave-owner and not as wholesome as he thought, and Hamilton praises him for scrubbing his image clean via the musical so people think he's a hero. In the end of the play (which is also the most heavily satirical) he attempts to confront Chernow about his book, but Chernow dismisses him. Miranda is offered a chance to write a musical about Columbus in the same vein as Hamilton, and refuses.

I think this is a piece that would do well as a reading, or done in the style of (and this is the first theatre production that comes to my head, I'm sure there are others) Les Miserables 25th anniversary concert, in which there are no sets (or a very simple one), but the costumed characters stand to speak their lines in front of microphones at the apron of the stage.

I also think a massive criticism that was missing (but I think is a complaint specifically in the theatre fan community and maybe less obvious outside of it) is that Lin-Manuel Miranda could have and should have written a musical about a historical figure or figures who were BIPOC if he was trying to have a primarily non-white cast. The fact that there are *so many* Black historical figures whose lives would make incredible pieces of musical theatre was completely ignored by Miranda in favor writing a show with a non-white cast portraying and smoothing over the history of colonization. He could have written about so many BIPOC historical figures, or events in American history that don't get enough attention in school. Larger productions with casts of primarily non-white actors are few and far between in mainstream theatre, and telling their historical stories even more rare, and I think Reed should have pointed that out as well.

Overall I really liked this piece, but I think I understand why others might not understand it, as it's written in a medium that seems odd for its long-winded style. But I think it's attempting to meet Miranda in a similar medium, and I think to some extent even the long-winded-ness (which is still full of really good history and critique) is sort of a tongue-in-cheek way of showing how difficult it is to portray history in a way that allows for a person or people's whole story to be told, while simultaneously saying "Look, if you omit the negative aspects of a person's history, you are failing those who lived and died in oppression by scrubbing the historical figure's image clean." Many people who went to see the musical didn't go on to do more research on Alexander Hamilton and learn about the things that were left out of this portrayal of him as a go-getter, dream-chaser, heroic figure. And anyone who was on social media spaces like Tumblr during the height of the

Hamilton craze remembers how many people suddenly treated these real historical figures like adorable fictional characters who were innocent of wrong-doing, who they could attach various characteristics to in the same way people do to fictional characters in fanfiction etc.

I definitely enjoyed this play, and I think while it's closer to a multi-voiced history lecture than a proper story with a full arc, I think the medium of theatre is a very cool way to criticize Hamilton and Lin-Manuel Miranda, and I really love the combination of satire and genuine historical education. It fills important gaps, gives often overlooked details, and tells the stories of people who still remain ignored or nameless in history. It takes the white historical figures down a peg and gives narrative control to the Black and Indigenous characters. The sheer amount of words spoken by Black and indigenous characters compared to white ones is a pretty big ratio, and I think it's a subtle but powerful way to give their stories the focus. The satirical end that portrays the racism of Hamilton himself and the selectiveness of Chernow's book, and also has Lin-Manuel Miranda himself learning a lesson and attempting to redeem himself is also I think a good touch; it doesn't allow anyone to bow out uncriticized, and it is an obvious attempt to encourage the real life Lin-Manuel Miranda to look at his choices compared to the historical evidence, and the things he could do or say to try and undo some of the damage the musical has done to the memory of the enslaved and oppressed.

[#miscellaneous#the haunting of lin-manuel miranda](#)