

Flyin' West

Theater Review: *Kuntu Theatre opens its season with pioneer spirit.*

By Lydia Strohl

In 1898, in a town called Nicodemus, KS, former slaves looked for freedom and their own bit of soil. Many of these pioneers were women, who took advantage of the Homestead Act to build new lives for themselves and their families. *Flyin' West*, the story of four of these female settlers, finished a short run last week at the Stephen Foster Memorial in Oakland.

The band is led by Sophie (Chrystal Bates), a stomping, rifle-toting agitator, eager to consolidate black solidarity in the town against the threat of infiltrating white settlers and speculators. Tough, masculine Sophie has a heart of gold — having brought young Fannie (Deborah Starling Sims) and her sister Minnie (Karla Washington) from Memphis, and taken an older nearby homesteader, Miss Leah (Victoria Bey) under her roof. Minnie, however, has since met and married and moved to London. The story starts when she and husband Frank, a writer and the illegitimate mulatto son of a plantation owner, come for a visit.

There is little love lost between Sophie and Frank, who is devastated by the news that his father, who has recently died, did not recognize his paternity and left him nothing. Frank denies all that is black, including his wife. Sophie, however, celebrates the news. In giving Minnie the deed to 1/3 of their land for her 21st birthday, she gives Frank the

ammunition he needs to break up the family and their dream. But these women are not without ammunition themselves — one bite of poisoned apple pie solves the Frank problem fatally.

Until the final solution, the script by Pearl Cleage is beautifully wrought. Miss Leah's history, the details of which reveal the personal repercussions of the atrocities of breeding slaves and selling their babies like livestock, is woven delicately through the action, adding historic depth and education to the play. Unfortunately, however gently and cleverly it is done, the sisters decision to kill Frank still invokes violence as the great problem solver.

Directed by Eileen Morris, artistic director of the Ensemble Theatre in Houston, TX, this show was the first in



**Eileen Morris
directs *Flyin' West***

the Kuntu Repertory Theatre's Professional Director/Producer series. The staging could best be summed up by the fact that a canned cock crow opened the show — it's at times campy and overdone. The set was cleverly designed, if a little too spanky for the old homestead. The acting varied, but the amateur moments were overcome by some beautiful ones, as Cleage's dialogue revealed a host of important messages. ■

Lydia Strohl is a freelance writer living in Pittsburgh.