

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Kuntu rescues neglected Hughes look at good versus evil

By Christopher Rawson
Post-Gazette Drama Critic

A theater company is never just a purveyor of a product: It also has its own inner and outer lives, potentially as rich as the plays it stages. The company itself may even provide its most compelling text.

That's not true of all companies, but it sure is with the Kuntu Repertory Theatre, the African-American community-student company based at Pitt, now staging "Tambourines to Glory" by Langston Hughes (1902-67). This is community theater in its fullest, most satisfying sense: Amateur theater by, for, of and about a community with a rich history, sociology and art.

I've said that before about Kuntu and I'm sure I'll say it again, because this sense of community is the prideful subtext of every Kuntu production. But this year it has an extra dimension, because Kuntu is dedicating its whole season to the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance, that flowering of literature, music, art, scholarship and theater during the '20s and '30s.

The local black community, that is, pays tribute to the larger one, the present celebrating the past. Not incidentally, Kuntu also performs its members' own self-calling attention



Nyjah Moore
Driven by greed

to playwrights largely ignored by other theaters.

Hughes is a famous poet, of course, a man of letters at the heart of the American canon. But how many also know him as the author of many plays, an active man of the theater who founded black companies in Harlem, Chicago and Los Angeles, a founding father of the

STAGE REVIEW

"Tambourines to Glory"

Where: Kuntu Repertory Theatre
at Stephen Foster Memorial,
Oakland.

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through
Saturdays, 4 p.m. Sundays,
through Oct. 11.

Tickets: \$8 to \$15; 624-7298.

national black theater movement? Except for his "Black Nativity," this is the first Hughes play I can recall seeing in 15 years in Pittsburgh.

So, Kuntu to the rescue.

A play filled with music, "Tambourines" makes it into this season as a tribute to the Renaissance's most famous figure, rather than as an invocation of that time itself. One of Hughes' last plays, written in 1963 when it had a substantial New York run, it is set in '60s Harlem.

But its subject is the timeless one of good and evil. Rich-voiced Laura (Nyjah Moore) and Essie (Tasha Smith) found a streetcorner church. The former is moved by entrepreneurial greed and sexual desire, the latter by fervent devotion, but each accepts more and more compromise as their church prospers financially. Populist religions are



Mark Southers
Embodies the devil

apparently as weak and corruptible as longtime institutions.

But just as in many hellfire sermons, Hughes finds more life in the vice he attacks than in the virtue he defends. Embodying that vice is his most compelling if self-conscious creation, Big-Eyed Buddy Lomax (Mark Southers), who serves as a satanic agent, introducing himself

frankly and humorously as the eternal principle of evil.

Just so the Devil doesn't get all the good lines, Hughes also finds humor in the personable members of the church, such as the enthusiastic deacon of music (Franklin Westbrooks), drummer and frequent testifier (Janice Staggs), ditsy dancer (Chanel Smith) and naive young musician (M.J. Henderson, who also choreographs).

This is an invariable Kuntu pleasure, the personality and individuality shown even by its amateur actors. In place of professional slickness, Kuntu offers a range of abilities united by commitment and community purpose. And in this case, the potpourri is given jubilant backing by the St. Paul Baptist Church Choir, singing gospel songs mainly written by Hughes.

"Tambourines" is a sprawling play, longer than it needs to be at 2¾ hours (scene changes are slow). Even so, don't miss the talk-back, a Kuntu tradition that always discovers a continuity of insight between actors and audience.

None of what Kuntu does would be possible without its founder and most frequent (as here) director, Vernell Lillie, who manages to unite many components into a sprawling but entertaining whole.