

## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT

## Kuntu's 'The Trial' entertainingly dissects black stereotypes

By Tony Norman  
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If there's one thing in the world we all agree on it's the perniciousness of stereotypes.

Having said that, most of us are more deeply indebted to racial shorthand than we feel comfortable admitting.

So, what is one to do about the prevalence of uncritical biases? And what happens when the onerous weight of a stereotype originates from one's own side of the color line? One tried-and-true American solution is to sue for damages to self-esteem.

That's exactly what one of the title characters does in the Kuntu Repertory Theatre's "The Trial of One Short-Sighted Black Woman

Versus Mammy Louise and Sa-freeta Mae," at Stephen Foster Memorial Auditorium in Oakland.

Victoria Dryer (Chanel Smith) is an upwardly mobile buppie on the slow track at Ace Productions, a video transfer company.

Victoria can't explain why she's been in the executive trainee program for five years or justify her undistinguished work record, but she is excited about rumors she'll be named director of dust control, a newly created position that doubles as a metaphoric slap at her abilities.

Things don't go sour for her until she's nearly passed over for the job. But she doesn't blame her boss; Victoria blames the prevalence of mammy stereotypes and plantation seductresses in popular movies.

## STAGE REVIEW

**'The Trial of One  
Short-Sighted Black  
Woman Versus  
Mammy Louise  
and Safreeta Mae'**

**Where:** Stephen Foster Memorial Auditorium, Oakland.

**When:** 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and 4 p.m. Sunday, through Oct 5.

**Tickets:** \$10.

Out of frustration, Victoria takes plantation archetypes Safreeta Mae (Yasmeen Andersen) and Mammy Louise (Linda Hunt) to court for reflecting badly on her.

For their part, Safreeta and Mammy Louise are bemused by Victoria's pretensions during the trial and deal with the veiled insults of the prosecuting attorney (Karla C. Washington) with spirited irrev-

erence and antebellum grace.

The duo's defense attorney (Tahirah Turner) attempts to demonstrate why their compromises with the plantation system — and by extension white America — were necessary acts and shouldn't be reduced to matters of personal failure.

Depending on where you stand on the continuum of opinion, you'll be impressed by the arguments the lawyers advance to demonize the other side's intentions.

Even the Judge (Doris J. Moore) seemed to vacillate in her sympathy as the trial got going.

Besides a wealth of talented actresses wrestling with great material, I can't remember the last time I've seen so many black women arguing all points of the ideological spectrum in an American play.

I was especially impressed by the respective attorneys and the plaintiff. I have to single out Andersen

and Hunt as well for giving life to archetypes who've generated little sympathy in black history.

Mark Clayton Southers plays all four of the play's male characters with a schizophrenic dash. (He also plays a woman in a bit that shows up on the television monitors.)

Despite being set in a court room that doubles as the bow of a slave ship, the pun doesn't wear out its welcome.

Directed with an empathetic and clever hand by Paul Carter Harrison, "The Trial" avoids giving into the didactic potential of the material. To his credit, Harrison pulls the characters back just before the stultifying excesses of self-parody can settle in.

If nothing else, "The Trial of One Short-Sighted Black Woman Versus Mammy Louise and Safreeta Mae" defuses the power of stereotypes that continue to haunt us a century after they were supposed to be passe.

