

***The Best Lesson*** by Jeanette Hill.

Ursula Robinson

Directed by Chris Scott  
Produced by JW Hill Productions  
Atlanta Black Theatre Festival  
Atlanta, GA October 11, 2014

“What do you do when you are too old to be young, but you are too young to be old?” This is the question at the crux of the play, *The Best Lesson*, written by Jeanette W. Hill and presented at the Atlanta Black Theatre Festival in Atlanta on October 11, 2014. What does an older mature woman (Donna) do when she loses her husband (Jake) to a young and vibrant woman (Brelyn) who not only broke up her marriage, but is now pregnant? Add to the mix that Jake has been friendly with Donna since the divorce and wants to cut off their sexual romps now that he is about to be a father again. It is this rip in her life that causes Donna to go into a midlife crisis that tears her family apart and ultimately places her child in the position to be raped.

In her frustration to find a way to deal wither new identity as a woman alone with a child, Donna begins to have physical relations with men all over town. At the same time, she tries to fulfill all of her roles as a mother, a youth pastor and as a friend, but that comes to a crashing halt when her secret life shows up at her front door. She makes that final decision to redefine herself, just when she loses everything. It is only after she picks herself up off the ground and testifies about the rape of her daughter that she begins to find the new Donna that is emerging.

Kimberly Ginyard-Mitchell’s believable and honest portrayal of Donna, as the typical newly single mother, made her a woman with whom the audience could connect. Jake, played by Theo White, was lovable and his demeanor contradicted his actions, which caused the audience to be thoroughly shocked at his behavior. The vibrant energy on the stage definitely came from Charmayne, played by Nina J., who created a lovable and mature child that captured the audience’s attention. The one character that stood out and made the audience gasp, however, was Frank, played by Jae Ellis. Frank was a pedophile who only spent a brief moment on stage, but still had a powerful impact. Ellis did a great job of creating a convincing character.

With *The Best Lesson*, Hill uses contradictions to illustrate her points and to bring the story into our hearts. For example, Donna admonishes her daughter to be a good girl, but is herself behaving in a bad way. Jake is a great father, but a lousy husband. Donna’s best friend is a woman who is very sexually active, while Donna is more modest—that is, until she becomes the old lady in the club looking for answers in the eyes of every man that she sees. The use of these contrasts helps us to see just how far this family has been driven into chaos.

In an audience made up of middle aged women and men, this story hit home for several reasons. First, it was an opportunity for men to see themselves through the eyes of the women that surround them. The man who wanders away from home and still wants to maintain peace can see that there is a high price to pay for it, when he has not fulfilled his end of the bargain. Second, women could identify with being in a place in life where you are forced to deal with

another person's choices and still try to live a fulfilling life. This story touched the heart of what eats away at family unit; Identity. It is hard to define yourself when your life changes so drastically that you do not know who you are anymore.

Playwright Hill is great at speaking to the family and to the situations that can cause us to lose ourselves. She is a master at appealing to the heart of her audience and giving them a story that seems so simple, but has such complex consequences and underlying themes. *The Best Lesson* demonstrates that the axis upon which our lives swings is always dependent upon our choices. And the lesson is that your identity is always connected to who you believe yourself to be at any given moment of time.

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