

While I Yet Live.

Michael Dinwiddie

By Billy Porter / Primary Stages at The Duke on 42nd Street. October 2014)

While I Yet Live, Billy Porter's semi-autobiographical drama about coming of age in a Pentecostal household, is praiseworthy for its topicality, its extraordinary performances, and its message(s). With gay marriage legalized in more than thirty states (and more to come), the Christian right is feeling the 'heat' of a changing society, and Porter shows us how one young person can withstand the vituperative, fundamentalist cant and emerge as a fulfilled, fabulous and somewhat flawed person despite the emotional and physical abuse he must endure.

Calvin is the only son in a household dominated by religious women. They are salt-of-the-earth church mothers: hardworking, loving and worshipful of the Lord in every aspect, which includes a literal reading of the Bible when it comes to the traditional interpretation on homosexuality. Calvin's mother Maxine, played with steely determination by S. Epatha Merkerson, is slowly losing a physical struggle against a debilitating physical ailment that doctors are unable to diagnose or treat. Even though her best friend Eva (Sharon Washington) is dying of cancer, she and Maxine are able to sit on the side of a bed upstairs and share a lightheartedness born of trust and ribald humor.

They are in hysterics conjuring images of the church sisters who "feel the spirit" during Sunday service when Calvin flamboyantly bursts in with wigs for Eva to choose from to conceal her hair loss. Maxine finds nothing humorous in the gigantic Afro wig atop Calvin's head; his "put-on" strikes a deep chord. In a menacing tone, she hisses at him to "Take that off!" And we at once feel her palpable disdain for this 17-year-old son who is slowly coming into a plain-spoken self-awareness of his identity as a gay man. The tension becomes even more difficult to witness as Mother and Son go at it in front of Eva, who sits staring in a mirror wishing she could disappear.

Downstairs in the kitchen is Gertrude, the family matriarch, and her sister, Delores, preparing a sumptuous feast while Calvin's stepfather Vernon sits in the living room in front of his televised sports game. Lillias White's Gertrude is a calming presence, a grandmother more accepting and indulging of Calvin than anyone else in the household. Great-aunt Delores, as depicted by Elain Graham, is a judgmental taskmaster deeply frustrated by Maxine's shortcomings and inability to earn her keep. Later, in those ironic twists that happen in families, Maxine becomes the caregiver for an aging Delores as she descends into dementia.

Calvin's younger sister Tonya, as portrayed by Sheria Irving, is an impish creature who delights in tormenting her brother as only little sisters can. She has several brilliant turns as a narrator of the play's action, but fortunately her character is so well drawn that we easily accept her in-out fourth wall moments. In a climactic scene, Vernon (a very frightening Kevyn Morrow) takes off his belt to dispense punishment, but Calvin isn't backing down this time. In fact, he is ready to fight his stepfather rather than let him touch him again. Suddenly, we know that there is more to this standoff than can be revealed. Later, when Calvin confesses the truth to Maxine, we

feel that their shattered relationship may never be repaired. Luckily, Mr. Porter forces us to see that second acts in life are not predictable as we grow and expand as human beings.

Director Sheryl Kaller did an excellent job of calibrating a remarkable cast into a family that is held together by an evolving understanding of what love can become, and while all the performances are solid, special mention must be made of S. Epatha Merkerson's soul-wrenching Maxine. Ms. Merkerson proves with this role that she is simply one of the finest actresses working in the American theatre.

James Noone's set invites us into a working-class home that is comfortable and "lived in." Esosa's costumes let us know that he knows these women; his color palette and choice of materials are perfect. Lighting designer Kevin Adams creates an environment that never crosses into the macabre, even with ghosts sitting –and speaking-- at the dining room table. Mr. Porter's writing is at times operatic and too near voicing the subtext. But when he lands on the mark, he creates moving and memorable theatre. An artist who can move an audience to a collective gasp is working with powers and control that bespeak a command of the language and of dramatic structure that is all too rare these days. **While I Yet Live** is a thrilling, poignant drama, and it deserves a long life in the theatre.