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TRAV'LIN - The New 1930s Harlem Musical (Regional Premiere)

Music by J.C. Johnson & Friends

Book by Gary Holmes and Allan Shapiro

Reviewed Performance 4/5/2013

Jubilee Theatre

Director - Tre Garrett

Music Director - Geno Young

Choreographer - Jennifer Engler

Set Designer - Michael Skinner

Costume Designer - Barbara O'Donoghue

Lighting Designer - Nikki Deshea Smith

Projection Designer - Christopher Ash

Sound Designer - David Lanza

Stage Manager/Board Operator - Ashley Oliver

Technical Director - Michael Pettigrew

Assistant Director - Michelle Rene

CAST:

George - Marvin Matthews

Billie - May Allen

Archie - Oris Phillips Jr.

Roz - T.K. Bell

Nelson - Michael Anthony Sylvester

Ella - Thelma Mitchell

Reviewed by [Kristy Blackmon](#), Associate Critic for John Garcia's THE COLUMN

There is nothing fancy about the Jubilee Theatre itself. Located in downtown Fort Worth, the tiny space is unremarkable. The lobby holds about thirty people comfortably, the actors double as ushers, handing out programs before the show, and the seating is cramped and far from luxurious. None of that matters, however, to the community that has built up around this theatre, its mission, and its productions. On the opening night of the regional premiere of Trav'lin, The New 1930s Harlem Musical, the audience felt more like a church congregation than strangers happening to attend a musical on the same night. Friends called to one another, children were gushed over, and the anticipation for this show was electric.

The sparse set consisted of three wooden benches, two small wooden bookshelves, and a doorframe. It seemed right in line with the humble theatre, which made the huge projection screen taking up nearly the entire back wall quite the anomaly. Director Tre Garrett chose to have the first projection up and running as the audience filed in and got settled, so that the impressive park scene on the screen was commented on and noticed before the action began. By the time the screen began to change with the scene - the interior of a beauty shop, outside of a dancehall, inside of a church - it was impressive without stealing the show. Of all the technical elements in Trav'lin, the combined efforts of Lighting Designer Nikki Deshea Smith and Projection Designer Christopher Ash were far and away the most noteworthy.

The same park projection mentioned earlier was accompanied by a dappled lighting design that mimicked sunlight shining through trees, for example. The lighting and projection transitions were seamless, pure artistry in and of themselves. They were specific and beautiful without distracting from the action, with the one exception being the nostalgic ode to the South, "Louisiana", when the projectionist took us inside the memories of a man who had not seen his home in over forty years. It was a powerful moment in a show of powerful moments.

Garrett made another technically wise and bold decision when it came to transitions. A single table became in turns, a desk, a street-cart, and a restaurant table, all with a few clever adjustments by the actors themselves who also played stage crew. They wheeled set pieces on and offstage, rearranged (and in some instances reassembled) furniture, and kept the action moving from scene to scene without the need for any blackouts during which they could have lost the audience.

With as many transitions as there were in this show, it was a testament to Garrett's direction, Set Designer Michael Skinner's innovation and the dedication and skill of the actors that there were no slip ups at all. The result was a thoroughly engaged audience from beginning to end.

Trav'lin follows three African-American couples from three generations in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s as they struggle to find love and success in a fast-paced new world. There are young Nelson and Ella, played by Michael Anthony Sylvester and Thelma Mitchell, wet behind the ears and too naive to adequately play the game of love.

They both took a little while to grow on me; their youthful enthusiasm was perhaps played with a little too heavy of a hand. By the end of the first act, however, I was rooting for them both, and genuinely impressed by Sylvester's dancing abilities.

Archie and Roz, played by Oris Phillips Jr. and T.K. Bell, have more street-smarts and experience than their young friends, but they both stubbornly refuse to grow up. Archie is a skirt-chasing traveling salesman with a particular knack for seducing women. Phillips plays him with a mixture of cockiness and vulnerability that charms as it exasperates. Roz, his "New York queen," is pure sass. Her self-assured, take no prisoners attitude is the perfect antidote to Archie's womanizing tendencies, but it's clear beneath her snappy one-liners that she genuinely loves her man. Bell had a sensuality that sizzled, and a sensational voice, and she and Phillips played off of one another nicely. Their timing was spot-on, especially in their duets. "You Better Finish What You Start with Me" in Act II was the epitome of musical comedy, a well-rehearsed lover's quarrel with high energy and a hilarious nod to the notorious Demon Barber of Fleet Street.

George and Billie are the patriarch and matriarch of this little clan. They are the wise ones, the two who should know better but don't. The other two couples were entertaining, but George and Billie broke your heart. Marvin Matthews as George sang his numbers with a voice straight out of old Broadway, a booming baritone that in turn was jazzy and playful ("Somebody Loses, Somebody Wins") and heartfelt. He carried a big presence every time he was onstage while also managing to spotlight his fellow actors, an ability one only learns through many years treading the boards. I believed him as Ella's overprotective uncle, as the somewhat shady "unofficial Mayor of Harlem", and as the regretful man who let life carry him away from the only woman he ever loved, his Basin Street girl from New Orleans.

Without taking anything away from the other five players, Thelma Mitchell as Billie was perfection. Mitchell played Billie with nuance and sensitivity, and showcased her comedic talents in numbers like "Empty Bed Blues", in which she engaged beautifully with the audience, and portrayed a weariness and decades-old sadness in songs such as "Basin Street Lover." The audience could not keep quiet during her jazzier numbers as her husky voice took on a belting bawdiness that evoked whoops and hollers. But they barely breathed when she opened her heart up and let it spill out in her dramatic songs. Rarely have I heard anyone sing the blues the way Mitchell sang the blues.

Every time the woman opened her mouth, I was moved. Her talent went beyond a great voice to touch on the essence of what made Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald so great. Her voice carried the sorrow, the humor, the vulnerability and the strength of what it is to be human; to love and live and to lose, to take joy where it can be found and reveal those certain wounds that never really heal. She sang with utmost authenticity, and her performance was absolute magic. When Mitchell and Matthews sang their duet "Trav'lin", there were a good four or five beats of silence during which the audience simply breathed in their combined talents before erupting into applause and cheers.

The songs, in large part pulled from the repertoire of J.C. Johnson, were in turns playful and soulful, and the book by Holmes and Shapiro was funny and genuinely moving. The two writers were in the audience and I hope they were as pleased with what they saw as the rest of us were. Go for the great music, go for the high energy and laughs, or go simply to let Mitchell's voice reach into the corners of your heart. Go for any reason - just go see Trav'lin at the Jubilee.