



BWW Reviews: TRAV'LIN at The Ensemble Moves into Our Hearts and Souls

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Aisha Ussery, Regina Hearne and An'Gelle Sylvester in TRAV'LIN

We are drawn to the theatre for various reasons, and I was hippopotamus-happy to see TRAV'LIN, a musical that I've never heard of, come to the Ensemble. In the ever-changing theatre culture with pop/ movie stars headlining musicals, and the invasion of Mickey Mouse, The Great White Way has influenced many theatre-goers new and old. Houston is the fourth largest city in America, and home to a growing and thriving theatre community. Many theatre companies stay true to the commercial theatre blueprint, and then there's The Ensemble! The Ensemble was founded in 1976 by George Hawkins. His mission was to create a theatre that would provide diverse roles for black artists. Here we are 39 years later and The Ensemble is taking the Houston theatre scene by storm with their Houston premiere of TRAV'LIN - the 1930's Harlem Musical.

I thought I was in for a re-vamped version of AIN'T MISBEHAVIN, but this story is full of heart and soul. With a book by Gary Holmes and Allan Shapiro, TRAV'LIN had me hooked from the beginning. Wonderfully composed music by J.C. Johnson & Friends had me tappin' my toes and

singin' the "Empty Bed Blues" by intermission. TRAV'LIN follows the story of six characters on the road searching for love, and some in the wrong places. George ([Anthony Boggess-Glover](#)) has left his roots in Louisiana to take care of his niece in Harlem. He leaves his true love, Billie, (Regina Hearne) behind and she is angry, playing into the mantra "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." George's niece Ella (An'Gelle Sylvester) is the naïve ingénue looking for a knight in shining armor. She thinks that she has found him on a train ride from Chicago, until her uncle reveals to her that the beautiful, one-of-a-kind green scarf given to her by the cunning and sly Archie (André Neal), has also been given to the local beautician Roz (Aisha Ussery). The highly energetic and loving Nelson (Brandon Delagraentiss) isn't the stereotypical guy; he is looking for love, and thinks that he has found it in Roz. But after meeting Ella, his heart begins to sing a different tune in "What's Your Name." There aren't any spoilers in this review, but I will tell you that there are a few Shakespearean elements with young lovers and quarrelling elders. The Act I finale is reminiscent of [Jennifer Holliday's](#) "And I Am Telling You, I'm Not Going." Now with that being said, you know this production has all the elements for a fonky good time at the theatre. And yes, I said fonky!



André Neal, [Anthony Boggess-Glover](#) and Brandon Delagraentiss in TRAV'LIN

Now let's get this part over with so we can get to the good stuff! I was a bit disappointed in the sound. Now this is by no means saying that it was horrendous, I have been in that boat, but the mics were a bit hot and there was an excessive use of an echoing effect that wasn't needed on the beautiful voices in this production. Winifred Sowell's set design was monochromatic and lacked the razzle dazzle usually employed in musical comedy. My eye didn't have a pleasant experience and the transitions were distracting. There's no denying skill here, but if the creative envelope had been pushed a little more, I think there would have been no issues. I loved how the street sign helped the audience understand time, place and action from scene to scene, and the tree in the park scene was magnificent. This is a proof positive example of how you can reimagine something and create a breathtaking landscape with a tree made of fabric and other textiles. The cyclorama was underused in this piece. Often we were forced to look at a blank

white background with a few washes of color or gobos here and there. Eric Marsh's light design was the weakest technical aspect of this production. The gobos were hokey and the light design didn't enhance the mood or move the story from scene to scene. Greg Horton's costume design was vibrant and well researched. I love the days when men were dapper from head to toe and the costumes for the men were nobby (just a little dirty 30's slang for you kippyy kats)!



Andre' Neal and Aisha Ussery in TRAV'LIN

I'm at a show and my critical mind isn't killing the moment, I can say that I am having a great time. The casting for TRAV'LIN was perfect. Each actor in this production was committed from hair follicle to toenail, and the physical comedy of Brandon Delagraentiss was priceless. I was taken back to the days of Amos & Andy. Along with his physical commitment, his vocal execution was smooth as butter! Paying homage to the crooning style of the 30's, Delagraentiss's voice was soulful with a tinge of comedic flare. Anthony Boggess-Glover set the tone of the night and reminded me of a young Fats Waller. An'Gelle Sylvester's rendition of "You'll Come Back to Me" was her shining moment in this musical. Sylvester is a classical chanteuse with a soulful sensibility. André Neal was very sly and entertaining to watch, just oozing panache. Aisha Ussery was a bold triple threat. Her comedic timing was on, and a joy to watch from scene to scene. "How Many Friends" was her vocal highlight of the evening. This was a toe-tapping, hand-clapping gospel number which required the participation of the audience. Everyone knows that I love great singing, and that I love great sangin'! Regina Hearne is a theatrical treasure here in Houston. When a voice goes through your ears, clenches your heart and pulls you into its world on stage, then it has done its job. Regina Hearne's character Billie was a show-stealer. Her Act I Finale, "Basin Street Lover" brought down the house. I was taken back to the Act I Finale of DREAMGIRLS and the power of "And I Am Telling You." Ms. Hearne took this number and made it her own. Judging by the roar of the crowd at the end of the number, I knew I had witnessed a monumental moment in Houston theatre history. The 11'o'clock

number "Trav'lin All Alone" was heartfelt, combining the awesome vocal stylings of Hearne and Boggess-Glover.

Every great show has to have a competent team to interpret a score/libretto and carry out the vision of the creatives. The Direction/Choreography of Mr. Patdro Harris was intuitive and fresh. His understanding of musical comedy is evident in the staging and choreography. Musical Direction by Carlton Leake was melodious and full of heart and soul. The band was tight, and the levels were perfect for the intimate space. At times, I wondered if I was listening to backing tracks.

Outside of the minor technical flubs, this show is pitch perfect and will have you enamored from start to finish with a powerful cast full of talent and a show that is full of heart. TRAV'LIN's message is crystal clear. Life is a journey, and in spite of the roadblocks, detours and potholes, if we continue on the journey, love and prosperity will be at the final destination. TRAV'LIN runs now through July 26th at The Ensemble Theatre in Houston. Buckle up, my Broadway Babies, because this is going to be a great ride!

For more information on tickets and other productions at The Ensemble, visit www.ensemblehouston.com.

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