

Flyin' West—The Sitcom

Audiences are warmly stroked during Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West*, at the Long Wharf Theatre through June 26. The patter is sharp and witty. The opening night crowd I observed behaved like a studio audience at a TV taping, clapping on cue in the blackouts which followed each short scene. The format is so televisual the producers might as well stage commercials in those pauses.

There is even a bouncy theme song. The Pavlovian applause during the breaks is a pity, because the ovations obscure composer Dwight Andrews' exquisite musical interludes. Andrews' updated, ethereal spirituals are what Cleage's script could be but isn't—a comforting contemporization of lessons learned from history.

As a whole, *Flyin' West* is reminiscent of the crowd-pleasing Lloyd Richards years at the Rep, not just because it's a slice-of-life African-American drama in the sentimental-history August Wilson vein, but because of its production style—a squeaky-clean set, lots of spotlights, an American underclass grandeur, and silly symbolism. Stylistically, *Flyin' West* plays very much like the nationally-touring straight plays which find their way into the Shubert—bigger and more orderly than life, the performances broad, the actors assured and well-rehearsed and more at home with the script than with the specific theater or its environs.

But structurally and emotionally it's a sitcom. *Flyin' West* is difficult to compliment without appearing to insult. "It's MELODRAMA!" someone recently spat at me viciously as a blanket condemnation of the entire *Flyin' West* enterprise. But excellent melodra-



Flyin' West: Melodrama yes, but excellent melodrama.

ma is what *Flyin' West* often is.

A group of black women, proud of their heritage and engaged in immortalizing it through storytelling and books, has successfully farmed their land into some successful real estate. A family member visits with her new husband, a light-skinned mulatto who "lets people draw their own conclusions" about his racial identity, and constantly reminds anyone within earshot that he'd rather be white. I won't reveal the denouement, which is amusing and tidy, but the hurried ending does a shocking disservice to the characters' much-touted morality.

The plot is full of tacky clichés—the precious deed to the land, the evil drunken gambling husband, the good man that's hard to find (a dimensionless nice guy simply there to contrast the slick-mustached villain), the bad-news telegram. You marvel at how good some of the monologues are, but that pleasure is a run-off from the realization that the plot is so predictable.

The drama's textual subtext, that life stories are worth preserving, is vital to an appreciation of *Flyin' West*. Memories of slavery pervade discussions—the year in which the play is set, 1898, is carefully chosen so that a character

in her mid-30s is said to have been born into slavery while a "Sister" only four years younger was not. The act of storytelling is frequently the only physical action occurring onstage. By that standard, doing the dishes, braiding hair, chopping wood and serving food become major events. Characters have a tendency to disappear alone into their bedrooms for long periods, an acknowledgement of a meditative, self-motivating impulse in this otherwise very interactive social circle. I found all these softened edges quite soothing. With a little more reflection and more "gumption to try something new" (as

one of her characters describes the Nicodemus settlers), Pearl Cleage could have presented us with much more than a beautifully-written, well-acted melodrama. She could have given us a real story, a real drama, worth passing along. ■

Present Laughter —The Travesty

Flyin' West (see above) is melodrama, but it's self-aware, responsible, skillfully concocted melodrama. It dignifies a chastised, ghettoized form. *Present Laughter*, at Hartford Stage through June 12, or until playwright Noel Coward rises from the grave he's been spinning in and puts an end to it, whichever comes first. When he wrote the title *Present Laughter*, it probably never occurred to Coward that he'd have to specify *how*.

Unpresentable, misrepresentative, and above all disrespectful—of form, content, atmosphere, playwright and audience—Vivian Matalon's production is a sad, sad insult to our collective intelligence. It assumes that the days of measured, polite comedy are dead, and that we have to have jokes yelled at us so before we realize that they're jokes.

Impertinence is not the problem—a healthy disrespect for text and production-history has fueled some great theater in our time. Sometimes new

rhythms need to be found. The agony is that there is no appreciable rhythm, no consistency, level of access here. No single voice (directorial, actorial, scriptorial) can be heard over the din of conflicting styles and concepts.

As the world-weary actor Garry Essendine (a role originally played by the master himself, though not in America until 1957, and then only for six performances), David Birney gamely shuffles from pose to languorous pose, trying to maintain order—without ever really taking responsibility—in his home, career, and love life. That's the plot.

But Birney's trapped in one of those George S. Kaufman "Man Who Came to Dinner" crazy-quilts from which any self-respecting Coward character (or is that a contradiction in terms) would run screaming in horror, witty repartee be damned.

Unbelievably embarrassing interlopers like Jack Wetherall's (with a spasmodic George Raft impersonation), or Greg Pierotti's ridiculous Tom Kennesque cartoon of a playwright, or Katie Finneran's abominably-accented yowling lovestruck wealthy naïf, scramble around looking for the other two dimensions they've somehow misplaced when developing their characters.

The set is tastefully decorated but thrust too far forward to give the necessary drawing-room presentational distance. It also gives all those louts on stage too much scenery to chew, and too much floor to slide and pratfall around on.

Now, I love George Kaufman a lot. And I love Coward just as much. I also love both beer and martinis. I wouldn't have minded if *Present Laughter* had been made with bruised bottom-shelf gin, too much vermouth, and too many olives. But it's a warm bottle of Rolling Rock and I say the hell with it. ■