

'Mississippi Delta' will touch your heartstrings

By Virginia Lucier
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BOSTON - Perseverance, endurance and humor are tightly meshed in Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland's splendid autobiographical memory play, "From the Mississippi Delta."

At the heart of the opening production of the Huntington Theatre Company's 12th season is the extraordinary Aint Baby, who lives among the ruthless white folk and works in the cotton fields for \$3 a day. A woman of great strength, she is bent on leaving her Mississippi Delta surroundings to "be somebody."

Aint Baby finds her niche when she becomes a midwife, and she is so good at it, she proudly earns the name of Second Doctor Lady.

But the central character of the play about a black woman's personal triumph over poverty and oppression is Aint Baby's daughter, Phelia, who, like her mother, doesn't have an easy time of it. Possessing the same determination and stamina, she faces her uphill battle for success with humor and optimism.

Three splendid actresses — Ebony Jo-Ann, Melody Garrett and Mona Wyatt — become all of the characters in the play, which explores the different stages of Phelia's life. Over the course of 20 years, we watch her grow from a fatherless 11-

year-old raped by her white employer and a young local prostitute, to a candidate for a Ph.D. at graduation day at the University of Minnesota.

Along the way, we are introduced to many local characters — black and white, women and men of all ages, who have influenced her life, including members of the Civil Rights Movement.

Perhaps the funniest character in the play is the irascible old woman who sits on her porch day and night to keep trespassers from stepping on her water meter, thus causing her water bill to increase.

Kenny Leon has directed this unforgettable piece of theater with a masterful hand. All three of his actresses shift from role to role with ease and authority, and make the characters real people rather than actors performing in a play.

Much of the appeal of "Mississippi Delta" stems from the fact that while the subject matter is intense, it is never maudlin. It is laced with music, (composed by Dwight Andrews), humor and just enough pathos to make its impact.

All of the actresses are magnificent, but it's a tour de force performance by Ebony Jo-Ann as Aint Baby.

Huntington's design team has scored once again. Hats off to Marjorie Bradley Kellogg for her simple but effective set; Ann Wrightson's lighting; and Susan E. Mickey's costumes.

An extraordinary play that will touch the heartstrings, "From the Mississippi Delta" is here through Oct. 10.