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WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 04, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "Barber Shop Chronicles" Offers A Clean Shave

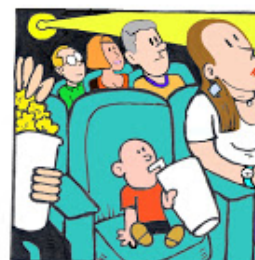
BARBER SHOP CHRONICLES *** out of ****
BAM -- HARVEY

Apparently, wherever you go in the world, men will boast about their sexual prowess, watch sports, bicker, joke and old men casually dismiss young men as clueless. Oh and occasionally get a haircut.

Playwright Inua Ellams captures this with his globe-spanning comic drama. It's set in barber shops dotting Africa -- Uganda, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Ghana -- with the sixth one in London. The action occurs on a single day when Chelsea plays Barcelona in a major football championship, *Barber Shop Chronicles* does precisely what you hope and expect it to do. It showcases a strong terrific cast, introduces us to a talented playwright and while it most definitely has much on its mind, it never fails to entertain.

The fun begins before the show as the cast mingles with the audience, urging people to come onstage and get a haircut. (Not a real one, naturally.) Music is played, actors sing along on certain tunes, dance in small groups and then suddenly the entire cast is dancing and moving together to make real the unity they will embody despite playing so many people from so many different cultures. This intro climaxes with all of them focused a terrific moment in that soccer match and boom, the show has begun.

Stories and ideas bounce all over the place as easily as the show shifts from one barber shop to the next. Some customers are new, eager to get a haircut before the store is even open, while others are old friends. Employees fester over old slights and try to win new clients. And everyone has something to say about politics, language, the lineup of their favorite team competing that day, women, white people, black people, how to raise a kid, reparations and so on. Casual references are rarely casual: if a person in one shop in Zimbabwe mentions someone



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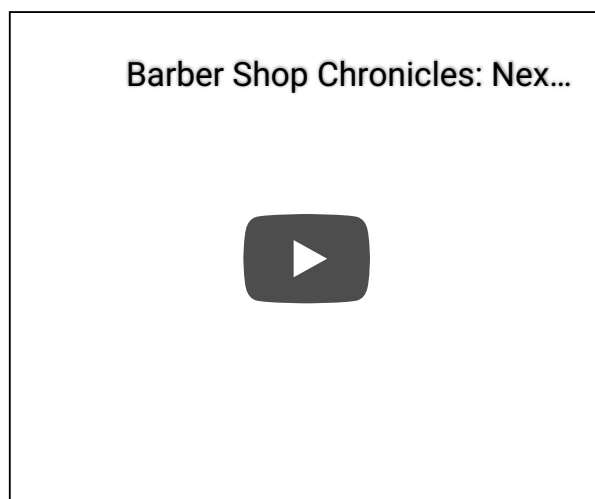
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they know is in London, you can be certain that person will show up at the barber in that capitol to get a fade. Soon, it's not just the ideas that crisscross the globe as those interconnections grow in significance.

Ellams easily juggles a dozen modest storylines here, ably assisted by director Bijan Sheibani. Each scene change happens smoothly, with the cast gleefully dancing and moving around props while singing a song or chant or cheer, usually one connected in some way to the site of the next barber shop's location. The movement direction by Aline David is crucial here and deserves special mention as David and the director Sheibani manage to make all these transitions a treat while moving the story forward -- key players from the previous scene remain in character just long enough to add substance to the controlled chaos.

The design by Rae Smith is easily adaptable to the space the play is performed in, simple and effective, from the signs of barber shops that adorn the walls to the globe that hangs from the ceiling and shows us what city we're traveling to next. Ditto the lighting by Jack Knowles and crucial music direction of Michael Henry. But again it's the movement you remember best, like the way the cast uses the barber's cloth draped over customers as a cape to vibrantly assist in so many dances.

In all, it's an accomplished and often pointed work. The positive vibe and effective humor also allow the piece to give voice to men with bloody anger over colonialism and brutality, resentment towards their fathers, praise for Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and other uncomfortable opinions. Audiences are always ready to embrace a shared humanity, but they'll also hear the hard truth that centuries of oppression just might bear bitter fruit. The ensemble of a dozen actors bring to life some thirty complex characters. No wonder *Barber Shop Chronicles* has played around the world.



But it could be better. The actors juggle accents for six distinct parts of the world. While I can't speak to their effectiveness in making each dialect accurate, I can say it was a struggle at times to understand them, especially in the first 20 or so minutes. Onstage, suggesting an accent is often enough; clarity for the audience is far more important

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than approval from say, someone in Nigeria commenting they "got it right." The challenge for the actors was immense but director Sheibani and dialect coach Hazel Holder should have erred on the side of making the text clear and understandable.

Worse, the show's most conventional element is also its least effective. *Barber Shop Chronicles* has a compelling structure. Seeing how the lives of these different people are literally connected to one another or just hearing the same joke told and retold again in shop after shop provides all the plot we need. However, I fear either Ellams or some dramaturg urged a noisier engine to drive the story. Thus we're given a big mystery and a little one. The big mystery revolves around Samuel, a resentful young man in the London barber shop. His dad is in prison and Samuel blames his father's partner in the shop for that and continually disrespects Emmanuel because of it.

Needless to say, there's more to the story than Samuel realizes and the facts are hinted at until they come tumbling out at the climax of the show. A smaller mystery involves Emmanuel's never-seen wife. From his expression, it's obvious to the audience she has left him or perhaps is seriously ill or at least something is up. We just don't know what. That too is revealed right towards the end.

Making this conflict a mystery is far more pedestrian than the clever web Ellams weaves throughout the rest of the play. We should have been told the facts much earlier, or this story could be removed entirely and the show would be stronger for it. Worse, while Mohammed Mansaray is fine as the peeved Samuel, actor Anthony Ofoegbu is the show's weakest link as Emmanuel. It's a pity these two are surrounded by much stronger actors and yet are the focus of the biggest storyline.

Those other actors do wow, with many tackling three or four roles with aplomb, making each one so distinct you never confuse them for a moment. (Presumably the effective costuming falls under the zone of Rae Smith's design.) Adé Dee Haastrup was especially compelling in multiple roles while Emmanuel Ighodaro limned a broken down alcoholic with heartfelt specificity.

Fresh-faced Elmi Rashid Elmi gave the show the perfect grace note at the end, one which would have been all the more effective if it weren't for the heavy plotting that got in the way. But his scene begs for one obvious touch. Elmi's character says he doesn't know what it means to be a strong man (a preoccupation of most of the men in the show) because he's had no male role models in his life. The strongest person he knows is his mom. You just wait for the barber to say, "Well, if you want to know what a strong person is like, think of your mom!" Sadly, the possibility is left hanging.

Finally, Demmy Ladipo stole the show with his hilarious turn as a loud-mouthed braggart retelling his encounters with white women and black women, all of whom call him a "lover lover." In a play filled with good laughs, he got the biggest. If there's a sequel -- and why shouldn't

Ellams deliver *Beauty Parlor*? -- let's hope that character can barge his way in for a scene or two.

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