NOTES AND COMMENTS

Court Theatre Debuts *Native Son*

Chicago's Court Theatre debuted Nambi E. Kelley's adaptation of Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* last fall, a production directed by Seret Scott. Kelley is an actor and playwright; her work has been produced by Steppenwolf and Lincoln Center as well as Court. In adapting *Native Son*, she has taken up a novel that Wright wrote as a response to two events. First, having taken a job at the South Side Boys' Club in 1934, Wright became disenchanted with the flimsy attempt at racial betterment advanced by this institution. Using the protagonist of *Native Son* as a metonym for Chicago's black male youth, he noted, "Here I felt for the first time that the rich folk who were paying my wages did not really give a good goddamn about Bigger, that their kindness was prompted at bottom by a selfish motive." Second, Wright was disillusioned by the reception of his previous work, a collection of short stories called *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). Upon reading the reviews, he explained, "I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears." It was in this mode that Wright wrote *Native Son*, working against acceptance, against sympathy, and toward a "hardness" that would demand that his white readers in particular confront the inevitable effects of the structural racism that their actions—and cash—were supporting.

Kelley's adaptation retains the novel's high degree of psychological and political tension as well as the anguish of its central character. The energy of its staging maintains and reinforces the energy of Wright's anti-fascist and anti-racist critical animus. However, in eliding the novel's discursive third part in favor of the action of the first two, the play misses an opportunity to dramatize the complexity and nuance of Wright's critique of racist institutions, the prison system in particular. This critique, while historically grounded in its Jim Crow context, seems nonetheless one that might persist into our own context. Kelley attempts to recuperate the primary "flaw" of Wright's novel—the diminution of character study in favor of structural/institutional critique—but this recuperative emphasis on individual characterization flattens the narrative richness of the third-person voice and its bitter irony.

Court Theatre's realization of the play preserves the temporal and spatial locations of Wright's book, which is set in the South Side during 1939. Here is how the theatre's "Study Guide to *Native Son*" summarizes the plot:

> Bigger Thomas has dreams. Dreams of being a pilot and of being something more than what his circumstances as a young, Black man living on the South Side of Chicago in the late 1930s would allow. In order to help his struggling mother and siblings, he accepts a chauffer job in the home of a wealthy, White family in the Hyde Park area of Chicago. Bigger's dreams are suddenly cut short when he accidentally kills the daughter of the family and must go on the run from the police. This adaptation…tracks the societal circumstances that led to Bigger's fateful killing of Mary Dalton and his attempts to evade capture by the police.

Kelley's adaptation opens with this climactic scene, in which Bigger kills—accidentally—Mary Dalton. Mary Dalton is the rash only child of the Dalton family, which owns a great deal of property on the South Side of Chicago; she's also a communist sympathizer. The production maintains the discomfort that characterizes the relationship between her and Bigger; her persistent familiarity, her rich-girl hypocrisy, and her amplified sexual energy push him ever closer to his limits. After Mary spends the night drinking heavily, Bigger helps her into bed and then smothers her with a pillow while trying to quiet her. By presenting this scene at the very beginning of the play, the Court production amps up the dramatic tension from the outset. From this point forward, the production tends to favor short scenes, which accelerate the pacing of events and heighten the intensity of emotional expression but don't allow the dramatic tension to develop the complex web of causation that it might. From the outset the audience is attenuated to Bigger's guilt while simultaneously gaining only diminished access to the forces that lead to this initial climactic event. As a result of this dynamic, the staging necessarily emphasizes character, interiority, individual action—and the scene, which in the novel seems inexorable, determined entirely by Bigger's "fate"—loses its political bite.

This action sets off the inevitable-seeming rest of the novel and play, a fatalism operating through an interplay of voices, controlled ultimately by the third-person narrator. The complexity here poses challenges for the dramatist. Bigger, forced to burn Mary's body in the household furnace, makes up a narrative about her being kidnapped by Communists (the ransom note he contrives is signed, "Red") before the police discover evidence of her death in the form of an earring in the furnace. Scott stages the brutal action of Bigger's disposing of the body by building the furnace into the stage floor; it's a critically important moment for the audience to witness, and keeping the action on-stage is crucial. Bigger is accompanied in this scene, and for most of the play, by a figure called The Black Rat, a mirror-self of Bigger that personifies his interior monologue. The novel's polyphonics are necessarily difficult to duplicate on stage: Bigger's interior monologue intrudes on the dialogue, explaining his

actions and responses, in short ejaculations: "Should he try to get money from them now? Hell, yes! He would show that Britten bastard!" The Black Rat, the representation not of Bigger's Id but of the institutions that make his fate inevitable, redoubles this inevitability by serving as the voice of the novel's many rhetorical questions. Yet the novel also has a third-person narrator that answers the ambiguity and uncertainty of these questions by providing a very particular kind of existentialist commentary. In a scene in Book III of the novel, called "Fate," this narrator articulates Bigger's sense of fatedness: "An organic wish to cease to be, to stop living, seized him. Either he was too weak, or the world was too strong; he did not know which. Over and over he had tried to create a world to live in, and over and over he had failed." It is this voice, the closest one in the novel to Wright's own, that takes control in "Fate."

Kelley's adaptation pays conscientious attention to the novel's interplay of voices and tones, which it renders skillfully in the play's many dramatic tensions. But the play's staging neglects the voice of philosophical reflection and critical commentary that comes to the fore in "Fate," and it depicts the centerpiece of this section of the novel, Bigger's murder trial, only briefly. This scene is certainly difficult to stage, full of droning monologues on the part of Bigger's lawyer Max, a Communist working *pro bono*. But the trial is the scene of inevitability, where the reader comprehends the extent to which Bigger is less an agent than he is a "problem," in W. E. B. Du Bois's sense. The trial amplifies the political questions that the novel asks, particularly concerning Bigger's "guilt." The crimes for which Bigger is tried are the rape and murder of Mary Dalton. The crucial fact is that while Bigger may be guilty of manslaughter he is notably innocent of the first charge, the rape of Mary Dalton. The thrust of Wright's political critique hinges on the relevance of this charge despite its misapplication. Bigger is a murderer; he has killed both Mary Dalton as well as his girlfriend Bessie Mears. He is also a rapist, having brutalized Bessie in the novel's second book, "Flight." Bigger is, in fact, all of the things that the prison system calls him; he's just not guilty of the rape or premeditated murder of Mary, the *particular* crimes for which he is on trial. How can bankers' daughters weep for this profoundly guilty man, made into a political question? This is a question that Kelley's adaptation of the novel, because of the scenes it chooses not to stage, cannot adequately address. The viewer of the staging feels the injustice of Bigger's ultimate death by hanging, but the injustice is particularized, focusing on a flawed individual instead of a flawed institution. It seems that, for all the play's investment in the tensions and characterization that Wright articulates, it fails to follow through on the substance of its politics.

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