

‘Crumbs From the Table of Joy’ hits the stage at the Vineyard Playhouse - The Martha's Vineyard Times

-- MJ Brudder

The best plays are about families falling apart. One could call it dysfunction, but that sounds a tad dry. “Crumbs From the Table of Joy,” by Pulitzer prizewinning playwright Lynn Nottage, which premiered in 1995, and is set in 1950, reveals a family so fraught and fragmented that an audience member might muse that had any of the characters possessed any amount of disposable income whatsoever, she or he would have moved happily away. Far away.

There is only one “he” in this family, with the improbable surname of Crump. Godfrey Crump (Lawrence Evans), paterfamilias of this Southern African American family, has recently moved his two sad daughters from a Jim Crow Florida to Brooklyn. He might have thought of better ways to save them from grief over their recently deceased mama had he come from a generation of parents who entertained even a moment of self-reflection and remorse, and known what to do about it. But patriarchs have been the same millennia over, from the literal god father of Zeus who devoured all his children pre-Zeus, to Taliban dads who keep their daughters home from school, and just about everything else.

Godfrey Crump is hardly a bad man, just a narcissistic one. A terrible depression settled over him following the death of his wife, but religion lifted him up again religion in the fundamentalist stripe, as transmitted by a certain Father Divine. Divine’s portrait, with a passing resemblance to Martin Luther King, hangs on the wall of the Crumps’ shabby basement apartment. This offstage messiah seems to be a combination of Dale Carnegie, St. Paul, and the Wizard of Oz. He may be no more than a well manipulated correspondence, but Papa Godfrey writes compulsive questions to him with the promise of a yearly and, frankly, boilerplate response. It’s by Father Divine’s guidance that Godfrey tries to steer 17-year-old Ernestine (Dria Brown) and 13-year-old Ermina (Danielle Hopkins) towards the three Vs: Virtue, Victory, and Virginity. Into their midst, astride four-inch heels, topples Aunt Lily (Nikki E. Walker), sister of the late Mrs. Crump, and onetime lover of the pre-evangelized Godfrey. Regarding that, Mr. Evans and Ms. Walker shoot each other looks under heavy lids that positively heat the theater by palpable degrees. Papa Godfrey fights the temptation. Lily, not so much. She long ago escaped the painful judgments of her Southern neighbors to win a college degree up North. Yet she finds no prospects for a smart black woman in post-WWII Brooklyn. Thus she camps with her reluctant brother-in-law and needy nieces until she can figure out a Plan B, or even C or D — anything but taking a job as a maid. That she will not do, which explains her affiliation with a chapter of the Communist Party in Harlem.

Into this morose family, Aunt Lily falls like a wilted orange blossom. Plunked down on the couch, she wonders who'll be rustling up lunch: "If that ain't my stomach saying 'HELLO!'" Unfortunately there is no window of opportunity for the family to help Lily or for her to help them, although we intuit that her spunk and sympathy will have a positive effect on her nieces in the long run. An early feminist, she maintains she has never desired marriage, and she's sexy and beautiful enough for us to guess that it's not from a lack of proposals. Her first burning desire is to find a job worthy of her training and intellect, but that's not about to happen. Her second burning desires, perhaps due to the lack of the first, are booze, sex, and freedom. In pursuit of all three, she's often out all night, and back home in the morning in one unholy package.

Meanwhile, Ernestine is the black ideation of the white protagonist of "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," a comparison that is perhaps intended, as Ms. Nottage strews metaphors of trees throughout the drama. Too smart and too country to form friendships among her Brooklyn classmates, she keeps her dreams private, her shoulders hunched against the minefields in her family's basement, and patiently awaits a better future. In the minutes leading up to the intermission, there arrives a new character who, were this reviewer to describe her, would constitute a spoiler of unforgivable proportions. Let us just say that Abigail Rose Solomon plays this role with a quiet dignity that spares the character what would otherwise be the role of complete nemesis.

"Crumbs From the Table of Joy," directed with unflagging grace and realism by Adrienne Williams, is about life itself — engrossing, confounding, messy — and many members of the audience may come away with a sensation that they've participated, in real time, in another family's life. That's how authentic and odd and tender the moments are. The production is mounted by all the usual, talented Playhouse suspects: artistic director MJ Bruder Munafo; casting director Michele Ortlip; stage manager Garrett Kerr; set design Lisa Pegnato; lighting, Jeffrey E. Salzberg; costumes, Cynthia Bermudes; sound and projection, Carl Gosselin; assistant sound, Michelle Vivian; choreography Toni Cohen; tech production Ernest W. Iannaccone; props, Barbara Bodin; assistant stage manager Ariana Seymourian; master carpenter Paul Munafo; light board Brendan Rome; spotlight Charles Begie; box office, Geneva M. Corwin; poster art Tara Kenny. "Crumbs From the Table of Joy" will run through July 30. For tickets and more information, visit mvplayhouse.org.