

contemporary chord. Notably, when *Brewsie and Willie* was originally released in 1946, J. Radcliffe Squires of the *Chicago Review* criticized the book for its allegedly unrealistic presentation of despairing young people, pointing especially to the characters' pervasive concerns with the impending collapse of industrialism and with economic depression. Indeed, Stein's characters voice profound worries that industrial capitalism cannot be sustained, that upon their return from the war there will be only soul-crushing, meaningless jobs—or no jobs at all. Underlying their worries is the sense that the United States is nearing the end of its dominance: "Why doesn't anyone pioneer anymore?" asks Brewsie, and the question of a lost sense of US competence and possibility, delivered with deep concern by Ahmanson throughout the production, was a major through-line in this adaptation.

The play's closing speech underscored the particular relevance of these questions within the current economic climate. In Stein's original, this passage, titled "To Americans," reads as a rousing call to patriotism. As spoken by an army nurse named Jane (Caitlyn Conlin) in Poor Dog Group's production, the tone of the speech was more ambiguous, balancing precariously between hope and empty cliché. *Brewsie and Willie* thus forced its audience to ask what it might mean to be an American from the vantage point of a loft overlooking Los Angeles in a time when once again there are no jobs and the global dominance of America seems, perhaps more than ever before, to be slipping. As I walked out of the theatre I overheard a fellow audience member ask her companion: "How did [Stein] know? It's like it was written about today"—and undoubtedly many people left the performance with a similar sense of disquieting recognition. But while the comment pointed to Stein as a visionary or prophet and impossibly prescient, ultimately it was CalArts Center for New Performance and Poor Dog Group's innovative presentation of Stein's words that made this *Brewsie and Willie* above all a production about the uneasy way that forgotten concerns of the past echo loudly in the present.

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BOOTYCANDY. By Robert O'Hara. Directed by Robert O'Hara. Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Washington, DC. 1 July 2011.

The synergy between playwright Robert O'Hara and Washington, DC's Woolly Mammoth Theatre

Company has been rather extraordinary in recent years. In 2009, Woolly produced the world premiere of O'Hara's *Antebellum*, a play that crossed race, place, and time—hallmarks of O'Hara's dramaturgy first evidenced in *Insurrection: Holding History* (1996)—to fashion a tale of impossible desire. Under the steady hand of director-playwright Chay Yew, *Antebellum* was perhaps the most provocative drama to appear on a Washington stage that season and, fittingly, garnered the Charles McArthur Award for Best New Play at the 2010 Helen Hayes Awards. O'Hara's return to Woolly in 2011 with a considerably revised version of his play *Bootycandy* proved an equally significant and thrilling event. In addition to extending the collaboration between the daring playwright and the irreverent theatre, *Bootycandy* powerfully reaffirmed the commitment of both O'Hara and Woolly to creating and producing theatre that challenges conventions and defies expectations. At its core, *Bootycandy* stakes a claim for the potency of desire's transgressing logic: that is, the ways that desire often frustrates the stability of discourses delimiting notions of race and sexuality (as well as other vectors of identity). Desire's resistance to tidy narratives and categorizations, ac-



Phillip James Brannon (Sutter) and Jessica Frances Dukes (Young Black Mom) in *Bootycandy*. (Photo: Stan Barouh.)



Phillip James Brannon (Teenage Sutter), Lance Coadie Williams (Step-Father), Laiona Michelle (Middle-Aged Mother), and Jessica Frances Dukes (Young Sibling) in *Bootycandy*. (Photo: Stan Barouh.)

cordingly, is a recurring theme throughout the play. The Woolly production, which displayed *Bootycandy* at its sharpest and sassiest, winningly exploited these resistances for their comedic potential and liberatory value.

Composed of eleven vignettes tied loosely together by a central character named Sutter—a black, gay playwright who seemingly substitutes for O’Hara—*Bootycandy* echoes George C. Wolfe’s *The Colored Museum* both structurally and dramaturgically. Like *The Colored Museum*, *Bootycandy* takes as its object of satirization certain tropes within African American culture. And like Wolfe’s before him, O’Hara’s incisive, insightful critiques are decidedly queer. Indeed, with *Bootycandy*, O’Hara opens critical space to consider and address the excesses and surpluses of meaning that inevitably erupt in our quotidian lives. In the Woolly production, which O’Hara also directed, this was especially salient in the second vignette, “Dreamin in Church.” The scene featured a pitch-perfect Lance Coadie Williams as Reverend Benson, a minister with a passion for the Scriptures, sequins, stilettos, and RuPaul’s “sashays.” The call-and-response between the audience—perhaps the most diverse I have encountered in theatre—and Reverend Benson was so lively that much of the scene, which offered a scathing critique of contin-

ued investments in a politics of black respectability and sexual normativity, felt improvised. Between the laughter and applause, O’Hara brought into relief, albeit subtly, the ways that desire often flouts those conceptions of the normative embedded in and proliferated by theological discourses. In the end, Reverend Benson’s desire for gold pumps refused to be contained by or hidden underneath his church robe.

A later vignette, “Ceremony,” which staged the return of a lesbian couple—a flawless Jessica Frances Dukes and Laiona Michelle as Genitalia and her partner Intifada—to the site of their destination wedding to undo their vows, was infused with a similar vibrancy and spirit of critique. Dukes and Michelle’s energy and precision in delivering the bitter exchanges between the couple, which brought to mind a particularly brutal game of the “dirty dozens,” were undoubtedly a highlight of *Bootycandy*. In scripting the couple’s unrestrained dissatisfaction, O’Hara once again created space to think through a queer (of color) critique of those political agendas organized around and overdetermined by issues of marriage equality. Surely, the aim here was to introduce additional questions to the conversation.

Of course, it was those vignettes featuring Phillip James Brannon’s subdued Sutter struggling at

various life stages with questions of race, sex, and desire that best showcased O'Hara's gifts as a playwright and director. With "Happy Meal" and "The Last Gay Play," two arresting scenes that see Sutter negotiating feelings of shame, guilt, disquiet, and, indeed, pleasure around those questions, O'Hara asked us to grapple with what might be gleaned from vigorously attending to such feelings. This dramaturgical move gave *Bootycandy* its particular affective charge.

Happily, O'Hara's penetrating wit permeated every aspect of the Woolly production, including the show's playbill. Upon entering the theatre, audience members received a program titled "The New Revised Abridged Oxford English Dictionary of *Bootycandy*," the pages of which included quotes from scholar-artists like E. Patrick Johnson and Richard Schechner and definitions of words like "audience," "gender," and "identity." One of the more significant inclusions was an explanation of the play's title: "bootycandy," the playbill read, is a "childhood term for the male genitalia, used by the mother and grandmother of the gay playwright of this play you are about to watch." The play's opening vignette offered additional details on the etymology of the word. In it, what started out as a mundane conversation between a very young Sutter and his mother (Dukes) quickly crescendoed into a scene of interpellation. The mother's lecturing of Sutter about the importance of washing his bootycandy compelled him to ask questions about sex and sexuality. Their discussion, in addition to exasperating his mother, ultimately revealed for Sutter the glaring inadequacies in his trusty dictionary: not only were words wholly absent from it, but it, like his mother, could not satisfactorily answer many of the questions he had about the body, sex, and desire.

As one of several heavy-handed moments in O'Hara's generally nuanced production, this scene, coupled with the playbill, nevertheless accented an important theme in *Bootycandy*: namely, the troubling of definitions. Some definitions, Sutter learns again and again in the play, are not trustworthy; sometimes, in fact, words fail, especially in relation to matters of desire. In Woolly's production, *Bootycandy*'s cheeky lessons on growing up black and gay in America activated and engaged vital debate about how we might begin to attend to those elements in our lives that cannot be made to signify monolithically. Woolly's recent announcement that O'Hara is now a member of its company signals that, going forward, similar debates will likely vibrate anew on its stages.

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CLYBOURNE PARK. By Bruce Norris. Directed by Amy Morton. Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago. 1 November 2011.

Given the already formidable production history of the play, the geographic location of the performance, and a dynamic artistic team, Steppenwolf Theatre's production of *Clybourne Park* had the potential to elicit a very meaningful reaction from its audience. Written as a response to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), which was set in Chicago, Bruce Norris's play received both the Olivier Award for Best New Play and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2011. If the fictitious neighborhood of Clybourne Park existed, it would be very close to Steppenwolf's main stage space on Halsted Street, in the affluent and predominantly white Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago. (The real Clybourn Avenue runs nearby, in proximity to the controversial housing development replacing the low-income housing projects at Cabrini Green.) The production was directed by acting and directing powerhouse Amy Morton, a Steppenwolf ensemble member known for her gritty treatments of realistic domestic dramas at Steppenwolf and elsewhere (*August: Osage County; Awake and Sing*). However, despite a combination of strengths, the promise of the production was not fully realized. Although well-cast and well-designed, the unfocused content of the play's many subjects, articulated within an underdeveloped conceptual frame and ill-considered performance style, and particularly as presented in such proximity to the story's actual setting, combined for an uneasy, at times confusing experience in the theatre.

Clybourne Park is set in two different time periods: September 1959 in the home of the white family moving out and selling to the Youngers (Hansberry's black family in *Raisin*), and in September 2009 as the same house is about to be bought and demolished by a young, white, upwardly mobile couple moving into the neighborhood. Todd Rosenthal's set, a faithful cut-away of a Chicago two-flat, transformed during the act-break to show the ravages of neglect and neighborhood violence in the intervening years. While this premise seems poised to respond to the issues of housing discrimination and racial tensions raised in Hansberry's original, Norris instead loads the plate with so many other subjects and themes that the importance of the race and housing issues are obscured, even diminished. Norris focuses not only on the prejudices between blacks and whites in America, but also on prejudice toward homosexuals, various ethnic groups and nationalities, war veterans, the deaf and other physically impaired groups, women, and the mentally ill. As the play introduces one underrepresented group after another