

the part expected of her, while the unpaired male characters—the tutor and Liseo—hinted at a union between them, in a fittingly metatheatrical ending to a refreshingly metatheatrical production.

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HOW TO CATCH CREATION. By Christina Anderson. Directed by Niegel Smith. Goodman Theatre Company, Chicago. Streamed, March 18, 2021.

In addition to forcing most performing arts institutions around the globe to go dark for an interval previously unimaginable, the COVID crisis also challenged many of them to think expansively about ways to keep audiences engaged. Chicago's Goodman Theatre responded to the predicament of mandated social and physical distancing by launching a streaming series called "Encore," which aimed to grant audiences opportunities to experience several of the company's recent productions from the comfort of their homes. Free and available on-demand, the series presented a diverse range of projects, including Goodman artistic director Robert Falls's 2013 staging of *Measure for Measure* and the company's 2014 production of Noah Haidle's *Smokefall*, directed by Anne Kauffman. Perhaps most excitingly, it also featured the 2019 production of Christina Anderson's *How to Catch Creation*, a sweeping contemporary drama that offers rich meditations on the complexities of life, art, creativity, inspiration, and legacy. While such themes would no doubt captivate audiences during ordinary times, they took on even greater urgency during our long season of sequestering, inviting viewers to wrestle and reckon with the conversations the play activates about the inconstancy of the spark of creation.

Filmed to approximate the live theatregoing experience as best as possible, the Encore presentation provided a closer look at some of the ways the Goodman's production brought necessary coherence to the many temporal and tonal shifts that animate Anderson's dramaturgy. Anderson's script toggles between the Obama years and the 1960s (with brief stops in the 1980s) to weave together the storylines of six Black artists and thinkers living in and around a place reminiscent of San Francisco. Griffin and Tami are forty-something urbanites whose friendship has endured his wrongful conviction and twenty-five-year stint in prison, as well as her periodic bouts of insecurity about her artistic and pedagogical work. Their worlds interestingly



Maya Vinice Prentiss (Riley) and Karen Aldridge (Tami) in *How to Catch Creation*. (Photo: Liz Lauren.)

and unexpectedly collide with a young couple in their late twenties, Stokes and Riley, who count painting, writing, graphic design, and computer programming as passions between them. A shared love for the work of Black feminist, lesbian writer G. K. Marche is what initially connects Griffin and Stokes and, later, Tami and Riley. While the fictional Marche was purportedly prolific and beloved during the height of civil rights and Black Power activism, her work has mostly fallen out of favor by the time Stokes happens upon a collection of it at a street sale. Notably sustaining Marche during her peak in the 1960s was an intense romance with a seamstress named Natalie who, it turns out, is Griffin's late mother. Although such confluences might read too dramaturgically convenient, Anderson finds clever and compelling ways to avoid trafficking in clichés. Indeed, when Tami and Riley begin having an affair, their feelings for each other seem as much of a surprise to them as they are to us. Anderson's poetic dialogue and measured plotting invite her characters and audiences to remain present to all the discoveries she threads throughout her script.

Anderson was powerfully aided in this effort at the Goodman by the skillful direction of Niegel Smith and a dynamic cast that included both company veterans—Karen Aldridge (Tami), Jasmine Bracey (Natalie), Bernard Gilbert (Stokes), and Keith Randolph Smith (Griffin)—and newcomers to its stages—Ayanna Bria Bakari (Natalie) and Maya Vinice Prentiss (Riley). Aldridge and Smith's chemistry was especially palpable onscreen. The tender relationship they crafted for Griffin and Tami provided a vital anchor throughout the show, bringing necessary seriousness and levity to the play's many twists and turns. An expert interpreter of August Wilson's plays, Smith proved particularly adept at finding and mining the grace notes in Anderson's evocative language. He brought a contemplativeness



Bernard Gilbert (Stokes) and Keith Randolph Smith (Griffin) in *How to Catch Creation*.
(Photo: Liz Lauren.)

and optimism to Griffin that belied the bitterness one might expect the character to feel given the many years of dehumanization he suffered while in prison. Smith's Griffin managed to find ways to delight in the small things—a smiling baby and the gift of a new book, among them. While Aldridge's Tami often matched her friend's humor and goodwill, she also had a much more unpredictable streak. This was evidenced best by her decision to pursue a tryst with Riley (despite knowing about her commitment to Stokes) and her subsequent suggestion that the pregnant younger woman leave her partner. The source of Tami's impulsiveness is presumably the tremendous anguish she feels about the evasiveness of her creative inspiration. Watching her introduce additional chaos into Riley and Stokes's relationship, which Gilbert and Prentiss endowed with both affection and tension, made her troubles to create somewhat difficult to empathize with fully.

Much like the uniformly stellar performances, the design elements also proved camera-ready. Todd Rosenthal's Jeff Award-nominated set design was particularly effective, shuttling the action between past and present seamlessly. No detail was spared in realizing the multiple interior spaces in which the characters traffic. The red brick lining the walls

of Griffin's apartment, the graphic artwork placed around Stokes and Riley's place, and the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that dominated G. K. and Natalie's 1960s abode served to enhance the atmosphere of the production. Jenny Mannis's fashionable costumes and Allen Lee Hughes's vivid lighting likewise charmed in close-up.

So much of the friction that the characters in *How to Catch Creation* experience stems from a recognition of their limitations in anticipating what might come next for them both personally and creatively. Streaming the production a year into the pandemic, amid all the grief and existential angst it wrought, served to underscore just how unpredictable life can be. Powerfully, in including *How to Catch Creation* in its Encore lineup, the Goodman Theatre created important space for viewers near and far to reflect on the significance and worldmaking possibilities of art and creativity.

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