

'Wig Out!' brims with attitude and extravagance



By MICHAEL KUCHWARA, AP Drama Critic
Tue Sep 30, 4:24 pm ET

NEW YORK – The story may at times slip into soap opera, but "Wig Out!" by Tarell Alvin McCraney brims with attitude and extravagance.

And attitude and extravagance, the fiercer the better, is what you want in a tale of competing drag houses and the rivalry that exists between the female impersonators in each camp.

The play, which had its world premiere Tuesday at off-Broadway's Vineyard Theatre, chronicles the competition, not to mention the lives and loves of one such house. It's called the House of Light, an establishment referred to by one of the performers as "a House that was never quite a home" — even though its leaders are called father and mother and its members children.

McCraney's play deals with several strands of this family, most prominently the relationship between Ms. Nina (a feline, sensuous Clifton Oliver) and a young outsider named Eric (Andre Holland). Eric is a bit of a cipher, not particularly memorable despite Holland's engaging personality. But then how could he not fade into the background when surrounded by so many larger-than-life characters?

These oversized characters occupy center stage in director Tina Landau's highly kinetic production. Landau slices the center of the Vineyard auditorium with a runway that serves as the focal point of the action, most effectively in the fashion-packed second act.

The House of Light is run by a macho, muscle-bound father portrayed with swaggering confidence by Erik King. Mother is an older drag queen (Nathan Lee Graham) whose age weighs heavily on her — with predictably melodramatic results.

Then there is the volatile relationship between two other members of the house (Joshua Cruz and Glenn Davis) that also tends to trip over itself as it wanders from constant bickering to a happy ending.

The real theatrical fireworks in "Wig Out!" don't start until Act 2 when the House of Light squares off against the House of Di'Abolique, represented by Serena, played by the expansive Daniel T. Booth. A downtown New York performance artist, Booth knows how to take the stage and hold it against all comers. Also on tap is Loki, an alarmingly razor-thin Sean Patrick Doyle, whose dance number includes moves that go beyond human.

Watching over the proceedings is a girl-group Greek chorus, ominously called The Fates 3. Played by Rebecca Naomi Jones, Angela Grovey and McKenzie Frye, they belt their way through the show as sort of a raunchy version of the Supremes.

Special mention should also be made of the costumes of designer Toni-Leslie James and the hair, wig and makeup designs of Wendy Parson. They enhance the characters immeasurably.

McCraney made a splash last season off-Broadway with "The Brothers Size," a story of sibling rivalry set in the Louisiana bayou. "Wig Out!" should cement his reputation, particularly as a writer who refuses to be pigeonholed by subject matter. Yet the new work still feels unfinished. Another look by the playwright at its shaky dramatic structure might work wonders.

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