Stage Review

‘Lost Tempo’ hits the right notes

Evelyn Howe and Omar Robinson in “Lost Tempo” at Boston Playwrights’ Theatre. Photo: Kalman Zabarsky

By Don Aucoin Globe Staff  October 13, 2017

The tale of the self-destructive artist is as old as, well, art. And jazz has certainly contributed its own chapters to that grim story, from Bix Beiderbecke to Charlie Parker to Billie Holiday.

It can’t be said that playwright Cliff Odle adds anything especially new or novel to that saga in “Lost Tempo,” now at Boston Playwrights’ Theatre through Oct. 22. But that doesn’t make “Lost Tempo” any less compelling as Odle’s drama traces the struggles of Willie “Cool” Jones, a gifted saxophonist who is trying to make the most of a golden opportunity while battling the temptation of drugs.
In a high-voltage production directed by Diego Arciniegas, “Lost Tempo’’ brings to life the world of jazz at the cultural moment (the 1950s) when it had been displaced by rock 'n' roll.

So the stakes are high and room for error is slim for Cool, who’s got a reputation to overcome. Played with fiery intensity by Omar Robinson, Cool gets his shot courtesy of his former lover, Barbara “Babs’’ Rosenbaum, portrayed with just the right combination of playfulness and steel by the always-luminous Evelyn Howe. Babs persuades Cool to return from Paris in 1959 with the promise of a regular gig in a Harlem club called Mitzi’s Jazz Kitchen, plus an ownership stake. But she wants to make sure Cool can stay clean. “Cards on the table: Can you handle this bag?’’ Babs asks him.

Maybe he can, and maybe he can’t. Record label reps are attending on opening night, but Cool hasn’t performed live in five years. More broadly, Cool — who coughs often and doubles over in pain — didn’t leave his personal demons behind in Paris by any means. At times he is in denial (“I’m not a junkie!’’); at other times he’s ruthlessly self-aware (“My music has left me’’). His outward expressions of inner tumult greatly complicate matters for Babs and for Cool’s fellow musicians, who include the jovial young drummer Sporty (Arthur Gomez); the fatherly, phlegmatic bassist Mack (Mishell Lilly); and the sharply dressed, volatile trumpeter Lane McDaniel (Kinson Theodoris, excellent).

Lane aspires to much more than mere survival. Like Levee in August Wilson’s “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,’’ his ambitions and talents far outstrip his sidekick status; he wants equal billing or more with Cool, and he sees his chance as the saxophonist begins to unravel. Their relationship is further complicated by the fact that Lane was formerly involved with Cool’s sister, Sheila (Miranda ADEkoje) — a love affair that ended very badly.

As the action shuttles back and forth from 1959 to 1954 and ahead to 1964, when Cool is trying to get through a recording session led by an increasingly agitated producer (Charles Linshaw), director Arciniegas delivers the theatrical equivalent of chord changes throughout the show’s 100 minutes, keeping his cast in constant motion, flowing through and about the stage, free-form-jazz style. Scenic designer Jeffrey Petersen employs a red-and-black palette, both on the hexagonal stage and in a large painting filled with geometric shapes, topped by a broken frame, that looms over one side of the stage. Some spectators sit at small tables surrounding the performance space, creating a club vibe further enhanced by Evey Connerty-Marin’s shadowed lighting design and by a three-piece jazz combo that performs just offstage. As Cool’s life spirals out of control, the stellar sound design by J Jumbelic is essential to conveying the fragmentation of Cool’s psyche.

“Lost Tempo’’ periodically drops, or alludes to, a big name: Miles, Mingus, Eartha Kitt. One of the musicians talks about a young performer named Ray Charles who is tearing it up at the Apollo; in a scene set in 1964, Babs tells Cool that “We’re bringing in some Jewish kid from Minnesota who’s supposed to be all the rage.’’

Parts of Odle’s dialogue verge on the overripe, and the ’50s jargon (“Daddy-o,’’ the aforementioned “bag’’) sometimes seems dropped in just for period flavor. But more often the writing is pungently expressive, as when, during a heated mano-a-mano showdown, Cool tells Lane: “You blow your horn and nothing comes out but fear.’’ At bottom, Cool seems to know those words apply equally to himself.

LOST TEMPO
Play by Cliff Odle
Directed by Diego Arciniegas

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