

STAGE REVIEW

‘The River Was Whiskey’

Scores to settle across decades in Fancher’s ‘River’

By [Don Aucoin](#) | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 03, 2011



BOSTON PLAYWRIGHTS' THEATRE

Kenard Jackson and Jim Loutzenhiser in a scene from Will Fancher’s “The River Was Whiskey” at Boston Playwrights’ Theatre.

A hard rain, of both the literal and figurative kind, falls throughout “The River Was Whiskey,” a drama about race and long-delayed justice by local playwright Will Fancher.

Now at Boston Playwrights’ Theatre under the direction of Jim Petosa, “River” is a decidedly mixed bag: compelling and freshly imagined at times, overly murky and

portentous at others.

The dialogue is clipped, elliptical, and barbed with vague menace in the Sam Shepard manner, but instead of Shepard's West, "River" primarily unfolds in 1946 in a Mississippi Delta town called Moonlight. However, there are flashbacks to the events of 1927 - specifically, what happened at a levee during the great flood that year - that prove central to the play.

"River" begins with the sight of 10 fingers clasp a windowsill. They belong to an African-American youth identified only as Boy (Kenard Jackson), who is crawling into a house filled with shadows (ably rendered by set designer Rob Eastman-Mullins and lighting designer Mary Ellen Stebbins).

Barefoot and bedraggled, clad in blue denim overalls and a sleeveless T-shirt, Boy looks as if he hasn't eaten in a week. From this opening scene all the way to the violent finale of "River," Jackson delivers a performance of riveting emotional intensity while also demonstrating a near-balletic fluidity in handling the considerable physical demands of the role.

Soon Boy is confronted by the white owner of the house, Everett Evans (Jim Loutzenhiser), a tall, rangy ex-preacher who carries a large knife (which he will have either in his hands or in his belt throughout "River").

What ensues is an exchange that suggests some unfinished business between them, though Evans will not learn Boy's identity until much later in the play. When the mysterious intruder repeatedly insists on addressing Evans as "Pastor," he responds angrily: "I said I don't preach no more!" Tauntingly, Boy asks him: "Never did, or no more?" Says Evans: "What's the difference when it's in the past?" Replies Boy: "When



THE RIVER WAS WHISKEY

Boston 866-811-4111.

<http://www.bostonplaywrights.org>

Writers: Will Fancher

Director: Jim Petosa

Other Credits: Sets, Rob Eastman-Mullins., Lights, Mary Ellen Stebbins., Sound, David Wilson., Costumes, Rachel Padula-Shufelt

Date closing: Through Nov. 20

Ticket price: \$30

it's in the past . . . what's the difference? Ha! You a funny man, Everett.”

Evans is embroiled in an affair with Nettie (Sarah Newhouse), who is married to the preacher who displaced Evans from the pulpit years earlier. Trailing along with her, and clearly in love with her, is a nebbishy young fellow named Joe Lily (Alex Pollock), who aspires to be a preacher himself.

Religion is clearly the path to power in Moonlight. Even Evans, who wears the toll of his drinking problem on his craggy features, is intent on becoming the head of a church again. Having landed a job on the local ferry and even sold his war medal for \$13, he's saving up his money. “This town needs a new church, and I'm gonna build it,” he tells Nettie.

But a more pressing need confronts the town of Moonlight: namely, who is responsible for the gruesome killings of dozens of local dogs? And why does Boy seem to know so much about Evans, Nettie, and even Joe Lily?

Newhouse is solid in a somewhat one-dimensional role. Pollock, who won an Elliot Norton Award for his remarkable performance last fall as a soulful slacker in Company One's production of Annie Baker's “The Aliens,” invests Joe Lily with a simmering resentment that lends plausibility to his later transformation into a figure who is far from nebbishy.

Fancher, a native of Tennessee, has a weakness for lines like this one, from Boy: “I can tangle better than any man ever lived and a few who never did.” The first half of “The River Was Whiskey” is too often mired in circular exchanges that slow down the pulse of the play and particularly hamstring Loutzenhiser's performance as Evans.

But Fancher's talent is evident, and it blazes forth in the final showdown, where “The River Was Whiskey” attains a visceral power. That is when the bill comes due for residents of Moonlight, seen and unseen, and that is when we learn the truth of an observation Boy made much earlier in the play: “This town got a way of bringing out some dark doings in people.”

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