

Theater

A Play Set When Interracial Marriage Was Illegal (GO!)

By Jenny Lower

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Categories: Theater



Daniel G. Lam

Karole Foreman, left, and Sandra McClain in *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black & White*

Some plays simmer, and others scorch.

Originally penned by Alice Childress in 1966 but unproduced until 1972, *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black & White* is decidedly the latter. This rarely produced revival delivers a blistering indictment of the South's anti-miscegenation laws against the backdrop of a deeply moving portrait of urban black life in the early 20th century. Directed by Gregg T. Daniel, the double-cast production now playing at the Antaeus Company offers some of the finest ensemble acting currently onstage (the "Sweet Potatoes" team of actors performed at the show reviewed).

Set in Charleston, South Carolina in 1918, the play follows Julia Augustine (Karole Foreman, sharing the role with Veralyn Jones), the only paying boarder in a black-owned boarding house in a poor black neighborhood. She's a respectable woman who keeps to herself and gracefully resists male attention until neighbors' prying finally reveals the truth: She's had a beau for 10 years, and he's a white man.

Julia struggles to explain that their discreet relationship isn't like that — which is to say, she's not being coerced or trading favors for money. Rather, she and Herman (Leo Marks, with John Prosky) are as close to man and wife as they can be in a state where miscegenation laws weren't overturned until 1967 and a prohibitive clause remained on the books until 1998. Francois-Pierre Couture's elegant set design places the bed in question front and center, shielded by transparent walls that let us literally peer into bedrooms.

Though contemporary parallels certainly exist with the gay rights movement, *Wedding Band* is primarily a race play; it would be unfair to minimize the play's striking insights about the situation of blacks in America. The neighborhood tapestry provides a glimpse into their varied, tenuous realities, which sound all too familiar, from an illiterate business woman (Cheryl Francis Harrington, with Nadège August) raising a daughter alone in her husband's absence, to a mother (Sandra McClain, double cast with Peggy Ann Blow) frantic to get her strapping son packed off to war, where he'll be safer than on city streets, where he might provoke a white man.

Julia's growing dissatisfaction with her completely unacceptable state of affairs and the unexpected exposure of her and Herman's carefully constructed world soon accelerate the action, and Karianne Flaathen (double cast with Belen Greene) and Anne Gee Byrd (splitting the role with Lynn Milgrim) offer devastating turns as Herman's sister and mother, respectively. For audiences accustomed to the restraint many contemporary blacks are forced to practice in the face of modern, often coded, displays of racism — lest they be deemed Angry Black Men (or Women) — the first act's fireworks finale proves a satisfying catharsis. Childress is canny enough to understand that even the most well meaning of us are guilty. Antaeus' nuanced production cuts to the bruised heart of race relations in America.

Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black & White, *The Antaeus Company*, 5114 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd.; through Dec. 7. (818) 506-5436; www.antaeus.org.