

A Remarkable History Brought to Life

Michelle Hurst in *In This Place...* at the Kitchen Theatre

By Ross Haarstad

A monumental hunger drives Ain Gordon's *In This Place...*, now at the Kitchen Theatre in an absorbing production directed by the playwright. The hunger lives in the ellipsis in his title — in the forgotten, neglected, abandoned and intentionally suppressed gaps of history.

The phrase “in this place,” comes from the historic plaques Gordon found all over Lexington, Ky., where a local arts organization had commissioned him to create a piece out of some facet of local history. Gordon stumbled upon an ancient house with no plaque, but one compelling fact: it was the 1st house built and owned by a freed black man in that city. His name was Samuel Oldman. Even less was known about his wife, Daphney, whom Samuel had bought out of slavery, along with her two children.

It's Daphney who haunts the play, literally. She is a ghost, circling the remnants of a past, of a lost connection to Sam, forgetting more than she can ever remember. Michelle Hurst plays her in an unforgettable performance that mixes the largeness of Greek tragedy with the smallness of everyday life, such as fixing a meal on a stove (a pivotal memory in the play.)

Daphney enters and is immediately dismayed to find an audience. “They didn't tell me this was a formal affair,” she mutters as she begins an exit, explaining she is no good talking to crowds. Words keep failing her, so she refers to the two stage managers on stage, who send words to two big monitors. One crucial word is “scale,” something the story about her and Sam “lacks.” Now and then, a Lexington historian, also a black woman, appears on the screen to talk about the house. Another time, the screen takes us on a silent tour of the relics of the present-day house.

Themes of scale, remembering, documentation, the bits and pieces of social history are the fabric of this play and of Daphney's anxious quest. Most of the memories she has to relate are extraordinarily commonplace: “In this place... Sam first talked to Daphney.” But they are the moments of big change in her life; a life lived in the space between the dots.

What haunts her most is a gap in her memories. There is one time she is sure she was happy, the four years they actually lived in the house. The pain of that missing fragment is the heart of the second act. In this act, one screen shows Hurst in live close-up, sometimes freezing a moment in time, while the other continues with shards of text. The most fraught image is Hurst onstage facing us, while on the monitor her anguished face faces the date 1839, when Sam abruptly sells the house and happiness ends.

By turns obstreperous, warm, cajoling, funny, pissed off and above all ferociously determined, Hurst creates a fully dimensional woman, her bristling energy and scathing honesty

creating a tight bond with the audience. In the way of storytellers, she also imitates Sam, a stone of a man, so precisely that often two ghosts appear to be on stage.

The mediating layers that Gordon employs, not only live electronic/ visuals, but also moments of referring to the script, moments when Daphney literally retraces her steps in search of a lost phrase, keep alive a certain tension, while stripping away any cloying sentiment. It's the tension of the gap... we desperately want Daphey to remember, to complete her story, yet we are constantly reminded that the "real" story is lost, a few fragments upon which actress and playwright unloose their imagination. In the final, glorious moments, Hurst as Daphney calls out to the audience for their help. Our own stories interweave with hers. This lovely moment brings up even more questions about what lasts, what is memorialized, what gets a historical marker. For, of course, there is something monumental in this women's life: a man in pre-Civil War Kentucky buys himself out of slavery, then frees his wife and builds and owns a house. The enormous distance Daphney travels from enslavement to freedom, from solitariness to a family, and back into a strange oblivion is a national story. But one which must continually be re-excavated and reimagined.