

The Old Settler: Theater Review

The Bottom Line

Sturdily-fashioned May-December romance set in wartime Harlem provides entertaining insights into an important and oft-overlooked corner of African-American social history.



Venue

Pico Playhouse, Rancho Park (through Oct. 27)

Cast

Ruby Hinds, Jolie Oliver, John R. Davidson, Crystal Garrett

The Los Angeles revival of the play by the late John Henry Redwood, centered on a May-December romance, showcases its continuing relevance and vitality.

The late **John Henry Redwood** came to play-writing late in life (his acting career included one-man shows portraying **Paul Robeson** and **Alonzo Fields**, the real-life inspiration for the current film *Lee Daniels' The Butler*), but he enjoyed substantial success with *The Old Settler* (1996), winning many honors, including the American Theatre Critics Award, becoming one of the most-produced new plays in the U.S. over the next few years and filmed for broadcast in 2001 on PBS starring **Phyllica Rashad** and **Debbie Allen**, who also directed. Set pertinently in the year the author was born (1943), this new revival in West Los Angeles showcases its continuing relevance and vitality.

“Old settler” was a denigrating descriptor for what white folk at the time would have called a spinster, a unmarried woman past 40 without prospects. Long-arrived from North Carolina and working as domestics, Elizabeth Borny (**Ruby Hinds**), past 50 yet still handsome, and her sister, a recently-separated Quilly McGrath (**Jolie Oliver**), must take in a boarder to keep up the rent on their well-appointed Harlem apartment (a portrait of then-young **Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.**, and copies of Utrillos adorn the walls).

The new tenant, vetted by the churchy sisters' minister, is an ambitious and callow country boy from South Carolina, Husband Witherspoon (**John R. Davidson**) who has come north to search for the object of his affections, Lou Bessie Preston (**Crystal Garrett**), who had left him behind when he insisted on remaining to care for his ailing mother, now deceased. But Lou Bessie has remade herself in New York, now calling herself “Charmaine” and intending to redub Husband as “Andre”, seeing the opportunity to use his inheritance to open her own business while leading the high local night life from the Savoy Ballroom to Small's.

Husband may appear the classic bumpkin, but he turns out to be more psychologically complex than he seems, and he finds himself to drawn to Elizabeth, notwithstanding and in some measure because she is more than twice his age. (That the names “Elizabeth” and “Bessie” are variants of one another can surely be no coincidence.) Heartbroken for life in her youth, Elizabeth resists and then grasps the chance to find the love for which she had given up all hope.

Redwood's play flirts with relatively conventional premises and dramaturgy yet consistently redeems his own material with its piquant specificity of time, place, class and race. These are all ordinary, yet intensely valiant, individuals, holding onto their hard-won dignity with tenacity, with much at risk. Shunning melodramatics, the text also finds considerable humor, appropriately of both urban and rural origin, and, to paraphrase Jelly Roll Morton, what might be called "the Chekavian tinge," as everyday life unfolds with an underlying personal dissatisfaction that must confront unlikely prospects for change.

Director **William Stanford Davis** (an Emmy-winning actor currently appearing in the Showtime series *Ray Donovan*) may block rudimentally but his attention to the nuances of the performances ensures that everyone onstage shines. Operatic star Hinds finds many original notes that give Elizabeth a truly individual dimension, and her singing voice uncannily echoes that of contralto **Marian Anderson**, a hero of the era. (Hinds performs a solo show about Anderson.) Oliver, who also executive produces, often seems to conjure up a distaff variant of the comedy stylings of another Anderson of the time, Eddie, whose talents extended beyond being **Jack Benny's** sidekick. Davidson and Garrett face the challenge of roles that skirt types, though each work earnestly from a deep enough wellspring that their portrayals are instead fresh and vital. For a small stage, production values impress beyond reasonable expectation.

Venue: Pico Playhouse, Rancho Park (through Oct. 27)

Cast: Ruby Hinds, Jolie Oliver, John R. Davidson, Crystal Garrett

Writer: John Henry Redwood

Set Design: Thomas Brown

Lighting Design: Carol Doehring

Costume Design: Grace Goodson-Witcher

Sound Design: Rob Corn

Producer: Alan Naggar of InterACT Theatre Company