

PERFORMANCE DETAILS

Performance fee: \$600 - \$1,000

Name of piece: RENT PARTY

Producing Company: Drama of Works

Playwright: Amina Henry

Director/Designer: Gretchen Van Lente

Assistant Designer/Costume Designer: Taylor Harrison

Music Director/Saxophone Player: Jessica Lurie

Lighting Designer: Jeanette Yew

CAST: AnJu Hyppolite, Maya Posey, Christian Roberson, Ashley Winkfield

DESCRIPTION

In the early 1900s African-Americans began to migrate north in large numbers. Harlem was where their community was, so many moved there, despite the high rents. Rent parties became a popular way for families to raise the rent money they needed. They would hire a musician or band, get cheap refreshments and charge a small entry fee.

An innovative toy theater fills the stage, a replica of a Harlem block from the 1920s. Lights flicker on as people awake. We see toy theater puppets, shadows come to life in windows, and at a certain point the whole set transforms. All the while actors frolic in 20s costumes, original saxophone music plays through the speakers and a cat does back alley poetry. We're transported in time to an era poignant and pivotal to the African-American experience in this country and people of all ages should know these stories, hear these words and listen to this music. Come follow Rose, Jenny and Ricky as they help their mammas throw a *RENT PARTY* to save their home. All they need to do is get the ice, hand out some cards, oh - and get a real live musician to play. Shouldn't be too hard...

Length of performance: 50 minutes, plus show & tell/questions post-show

Size of audience: best for around 25 - 150 people (puppets are small, some is dependent on configuration of playing space)

Age of audience: all ages, best suited for children 8 and up and adults

Size of stage required: 12 feet wide by 12 feet deep (approximate)

AWARDS: The Jim Henson Foundation Family Grant, the ART/NY Creative Space Grant

NYC CURRICULUM TIE-INS

- Celebrate Black History Month (February)

- NYC Social Studies Scope & Sequence

FIRST GRADE: My Family and Other Families, Now and Long Ago

Unit 2: Families, Now and Long Ago. 1.8 Historical sources reveal information about how life in the past differs from the present. (Standards 1, 2)

SECOND GRADE: My Community and Other Communities

Unit 2: New York City over time. 2.6 Identifying continuities and changes over time can help understand historical developments. (Standard 1)

Unit 3: Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities. 2.2 People share similarities and differences with others in their own community and with other communities. 2.2a, 2.2b (Standards 1, 2, 3) New York City is made up of neighborhoods that reflect diversity (Flushing's Chinatown, Harlem, Brownsville, Woodlawn, El Barrio, Bronx's Little Italy, etc.)

FOURTH GRADE: New York State and Local History

Unit 5: Making the Empire State: immigration, Industrialization and Westward Movement. 4.7
IMMIGRATION AND MIGRATION FROM THE EARLY 1800'S TO THE PRESENT: Many people have immigrated and migrated to New York State contributing to its cultural growth and development. (Standards 1, 3, 4, 5)

EIGHTH GRADE: United States and New York History

Unit 4: WWI and The United States Between Wars. 8.4 WORLD WAR I AND THE ROARING TWENTIES: Various diplomatic, economic, and ideological factors contributed to the United States decision to enter World War I. Involvement in the war significantly altered the lives of Americans. Postwar America was characterized by economic prosperity, technological innovations, and changes in the workplace. (Standards 1, 2, 4)

For global studies (third grade, sixth grade, ninth grade) please consider WATER about the water shortage in Ethiopia. For very young students (kindergarten - second grade) please consider Four Seasons about simple science and relationships between brothers/friends/self. For other fourth and seventh grade New York State work there is our version of Irving's Sleepy Hollow. There are many other shows listed on www.dramaofworks.com and curriculum tie-ins for all.

- Blueprints for the Arts, Theater

Theater Benchmarks

THEATER MAKING: PLAYWRITING. Imagination, Analysis and Process. Students will be able to: respond to a guided discussion about the elements of a story, using plot, character, action and setting.

DEVELOPING THEATER LITERACY. Understanding Dramatic Texts.

Responding to Theater Performance.

MAKING CONNECTIONS THROUGH THEATER. Connecting Theater to the Arts and Other Disciplines.

Connecting Theater to Personal Experience, Community and Society Through an Exploration of Themes, Culture and History.

WORKING WITH COMMUNITY & CULTURAL RESOURCES. Working with Theater Professionals in the School. Students will be able to: Participate in short-term artist residencies that are integrated into the school theater program.

Visual Arts benchmarks can be applied if an art-making activity/workshop is tied to the viewing of the performance.

PRESS REVIEW

Big Issues, Tiny Set in Amina Henry's "Rent Party"

By Joseph Donica, *Thinking Theater NYC*: July 19th, 2019

"Ain't no party without darkness and song." –The Cat

People associate New York with many things. High rents top anyone's list. Exorbitantly high rents in the city are a relatively new thing, though. One could find an apartment in many neighborhoods for just a few hundred, or even double digits, a month for most of the twentieth century. However, tenants' relationships with landlords have always been sticky in the city—especially in Harlem. African Americans have faced more challenges regarding rent in NYC given that they were allowed (socially and for a time legally) to live only in a few areas of the city, and landlords took advantage of that. Enter the rent party. The burst of artistic activity in Harlem in the 1920s including poetry, fiction, music, drama, and visual art has given rise to all sorts of theories of origins. One origin story is directly linked to rent parties. Sometimes called "boogies," these parties originated in Harlem and served both to help the host make rent with a hat passed around for partiers to contribute and to act as a platform for budding jazz and blues musicians. Set within the context of the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the industrial cities of the North, Amina Henry's *Rent Party* is a commentary on the tension between hope and facing reality when one's prospects for the future are clearly limited. It is a coming-of-age story of three kids who are too young to come of age but must do so to survive the challenges of being Black in New York in the 1920s.

Rent Party follows one day in the life of three kids, ages 7 to 11, and their attempt to throw a party to make next month's rent to avoid eviction. Jenny (AnJu Hyppolite), Rose (Maya Posey), and Ricky (Christian Roberson) are on a mission, and the play follows their attempts to find ice, find a performer, and set up for the party. What they do along the way is discover their dreams for their futures might have limits. As they go from place to place with their to-do list they talk about what they want to be when they grow up—a nurse, a teacher, even president. Ricky gets scolded when he announces, "When I grow up, I'm gonna punch white folks in the nose." This received a round of laughter from the audience. The play opens with an actual "cool cat" in puppet form who serves as the narrator/emcee/poet. He delivers short, aphoristic interludes between the kids' scenes that serve as thematic structuring mechanisms for the action that follows: "I love me some Harlem"; "Where do black folks live outside of Harlem?"; "When times are tough, it's party time." The puppet, controlled by Roberson, is able to jump all over the set because the stage is tiny. It is a toy set of a Harlem block. The actors use small, paper dolls (cutout pictures of themselves in the spot-on period costumes the actors also wear) and walk them around the set. The metaphor is clear from the start. These are kids trying to figure out heavy issues with toys.

PRESS & RESOURCE KIT - **RENT PARTY**

Other characters, such as Mama Tulip, Mr. Lowe, and Mamma Q (all Ashley Winkfield), appear as paper figures in the windows and doors of the toy set, summoning the classic image of the NYC window conversation. The set is quite versatile, as parts open to reveal the inside of apartments and it is even transformed in one scene into the Regency Hotel—a symbol for privilege and the good life. Seeing the set as I walked in, I thought this could go two ways. However, suspension of disbelief happened almost immediately, and I was sold. The stage is more than a gimmick or inventive adaptation to a small space (the stage is quite small). Using a toy set with paper figures and a puppet allows the audience a way into the mind of a child grappling with heavy issues. Throughout their day, the three kids discuss what they want to be in the future. They also discuss the concept of job “benefits” when they go to Carter Jenkins’s hotel where he works as a doorman. They are trying to get Jenkins to play his horn at their party, but he has to work that night at his “benefitted job.” Jenkins tries to explain to them that benefits is an adult topic they shouldn’t worry about. But the kids school him by asking how they are benefits when his job takes money out of his check to pay for them. They are also lectured to about the limits on Black kids by Mamma Q, although sympathetically. The most unsettling moments, delivered with some humor, are when the kids hear police sirens and immediately duck and pretend to be doing something else. The instinctive reaction to the police and the potential for something bad happening as a consequence is the dark shadow over this play.

The cast is superb. All but one of them play two characters, and Winkfield plays 5! The range of convincing voices that she is able to switch between in a moment is impressive. They are all impressive. Moving from playing with dolls on the toy set to playing themselves to an audience nearly two feet away, they make the jump from pretend life to real life all the more potent. Using Harlem as a symbol for contemporary problems gets complicated when you try to use it as a stand-in for any random problem facing historically marginalized communities. The heavy issues the kids confront would seem to be Henry’s commentary on contemporary issues for African Americans. And, yes, one of those issues is STILL housing discrimination in NYC. The reality is, though, that so much of what these three kids face throughout their day remains the reality for Black kids today. Call it structural racism or progress and retrenchment. At the end of the day, it is the result of cities’ populations being far too comfortable with second-class citizenship for many of their residents. A play like this could easily slip into mere poverty porn or simply use 1920s Harlem as a stand-in for the contemporary challenges of African Americans. Even worse, it could romanticize Harlem of the 20s. It avoids all of these by rooting itself in a truly fascinating origin story for jazz and blues and using period costumes and language. If this play served simply as insight into those origins, and it does, it would be worth the watch. It does something else too, though. It reminds us that the hope upon which any social progress is based originates in that childhood hope which ignores obstacles and believes that anything is possible.

AUDIENCE TESTIMONIALS

“Went to see this beautiful bittersweet show that Taylor Harrison did costumes and sets for! I learned about NYC history and Black history through a day in the life of 3 kids preparing for their family’s rent party. What a little gem of a play!”

“On July 13, 2019 I attended Drama of Works' production of *Rent Party* at The Tank. Spectacular set and puppets designed by Director Gretchen Van Lente. The 1920s story shares challenges faced by Harlem residents and how the gifts of a female saxophone player and other musicians saved the day.”

“Before the blackout I was delighted to experience the stunning toy theater and shadow puppet play *Rent Party* by Amina Henry, presented by Drama of Works, directed & designed by Gretchen Van Lente, costumes by Taylor Harrison. In 1920’s Harlem folks held rent parties to help with rising costs of rent. Toy theatre, shadow puppets and human actors -- magical and informative and charming and beautiful.”

“Made it out of the theater in Manhattan this afternoon just before NYC's power outage. I went to a puppet show at THE TANK on West 36th & Eighth. '*Rent Party*' was exquisitely written by Amina Henry and phenomenally directed by Gretchen Van Lente, who also designed the set and puppets. The puppeteers/actors were spot on -- AnJu Hyppolite, Maya Posey, Christian Roberson, and Ashley Winkfield. '*Rent Party*' is an African-American historical story-within-a-story that utilizes humor and pathos.”

“This is such a sweet show! Take kids, if you've got them; go by yourself if you don't. The latest from Drama of Works: *Rent Party*, world premiere at The Tank on W. 36th St. Highly recommended!”

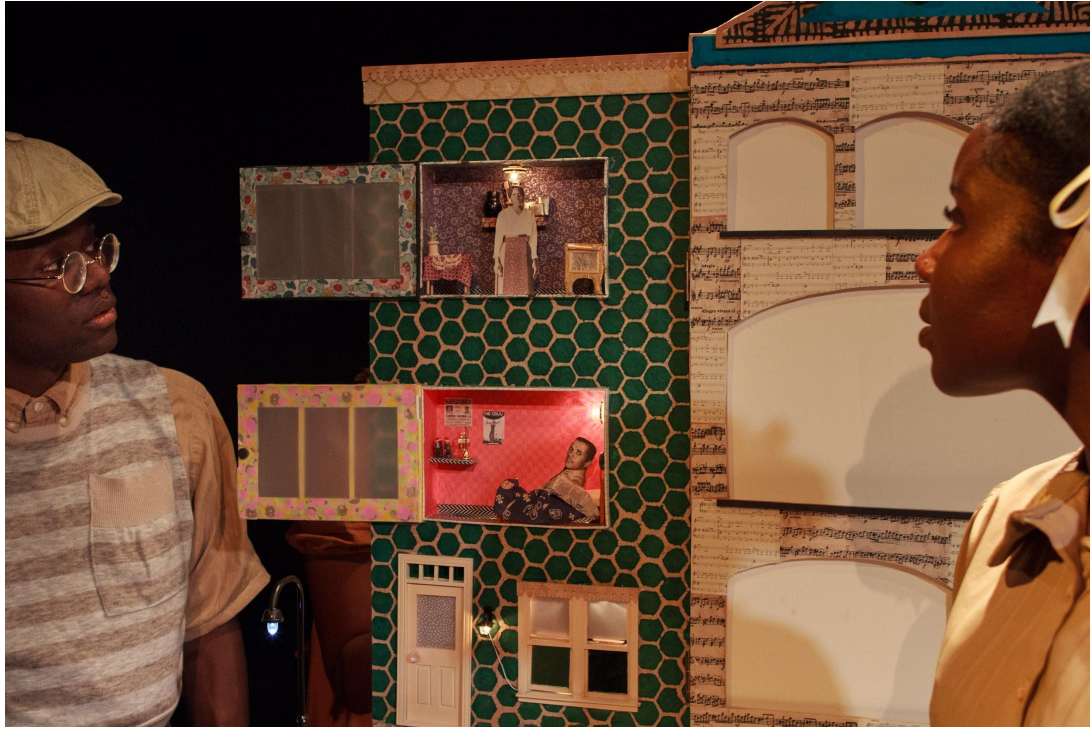
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PRODUCTION PHOTOS

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TRAILER: <https://youtu.be/8TCgG34cZTM>

FULL SHOW: https://youtu.be/Ej1uygnCf_w