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House Party

The Good Book: Rashan (Joe Wilson, Jr., above) gets religion through sexual tolerance in *Homos in the House*

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Homos in the House

Intermedia Arts and Walker Art Center



Ruthless!

Ordway Theatre

BY ALL RIGHTS, Djola Branner's *Homos in the House* should have been terrible. Consider the premise: It's an exploration of the silence that surrounds homosexuality within much of the African American community. An unquestionably important social issue, and also the kind of thematically prepackaged production that, as often as not, feels like an exercise in good intentions.

But Branner and director Carlos Murillo play it smart. Instead of (over)reaching for the didactic play-writer's handbook, they tell the story primarily through humor, music, and impressionistic, personal vignettes (perhaps familiar to fans of Branner's previous work with the Pomo Afro Homos troupe); character development, surprisingly enough, comes first.

That's not to say there isn't an institutional backdrop for the action. In this case, it's a black Southern university, where honors student Rashan (played by Joe Wilson, Jr.) organizes forums on HIV prevention and homophobia, and, as a result, finds himself before a disciplinary board with his religious-studies degree in jeopardy. And the script is not without its shortcomings; the main offender is an absurdly convenient plot twist near the end that wraps up Rashan's public dilemma too nicely, too neatly. (Though the play is based on a true story, drama sometimes must meet higher standards than the off-stage life.)

The best stories from Cullen House College take place some distance from the Big Issues of the plot, and these Branner and the cast handle astutely: Rashan becomes involved with Lemy (Marc R. Payne), a man terrified of his sexuality; their friend Michele (Daniel Alexander Jones) commemorates the one-year anniversary of his lover's death from AIDS; and all of them, in divergent ways, attempt to reconcile their orientation with their religious backgrounds and an environment that equates homosexual activity with mortal sin.

That latter theme generates some of the show's best moments. Michele, cruising for a piece of irony, gets all dolled up for a Sunday visit to the First Baptist Church, where the more conflicted (and closeted) Lemy is a regular. Enter the Rev. Reeves (Branner) to exhort the congregation, as the cast

joyfully re-creates the theatricality of a black Southern Baptist service. To their credit, though, the actors don't just engage in winking mimicry; they're also careful to reproduce the profound appeal of such rituals: the artistry, the solidarity, the structure, the comfort of knowing exactly who the "other" is--even if that other might very well be you.

This end to Act 1, with its subtle incorporation of all these contradictory tensions, outshines what follows. *Homos in the House's* charmless *deus ex machina* precludes Rashan from needing to make his case before the disciplinary board, cheating the viewers of the cataclysmic courtroom showdown we've been expecting. Nevertheless, there's enough lively writing, acting, and dancing to maintain interest throughout, not to mention some of the sweetest gospel harmonizing this side of the Mason-Dixon Line (under the guidance of musical director Robert "Eddie" Robinson). Ultimately, Rashan and his friends can look themselves in the mirror, which constitutes the most significant outcome here, and Branner and company detail those more private victories with disarming efficiency.

RUTHLESS! IS OFF-Broadway's child-star chronicle, and it has its young charge using homicide as a career-advancement tool while belting out lines such as "Asshole!" and "Bullshit!" But Tina Denmark (Britta Lee Nordahl), the adorably murderous 8-year-old ingénue, isn't the only Bad Seed at work in this musical commentary on show-biz ambition and family dynamics. Her split-personality mommy (Kelly Bertenshaw), theater-critic grandma (Nancy Marvy), and Machiavellian agent (director Lisa McMillan) all crave their own star turns, and the bodies inevitably pile up.

As Tina, Twin Cities fifth-grader Nordahl can't help looking more cute than bad-to-the-bone, but she sings just fine, as do adult co-stars Bertenshaw and Angela Timberman, who plays Tina's school teacher. And you have to respect a musical that showcases a number called "I Hate Musicals"; it's an example of the reflexivity and refreshing perverseness that make *Ruthless!* a tough show to dislike.

Admittedly, the production's basic gag engine--the antics of three generations' worth of mommy's-little-monsters--loses steam in Act 2, when the action shifts from Tina's picket-fence home to New York City. But one of the final songs, "Parents and Children," best captures this comedy's dark, dark core. "If you take a moment to reflect, you'll see/We're no different from any family," Tina and her mother sing in heartfelt tones. After that proclamation, any audience laughter sounds decidedly nervous.

Homos in the House runs through March 1 at Intermedia Arts; call 375-7622. *Ruthless!* runs through May 10 at the Ordway Theatre; call 224-4222.