



StarTribune **'Queen Nanny' is rich in beauty but lacks detail.(NEWS)**

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Special to the Star Tribune

In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre's latest offering, "Queen Nanny, Queen Nanny!" is a tale full of wonder and magic. Pots boil without fire, ancestors speak across generations, and seeds watered with tears grow into pumpkins overnight.

The play paints a heroic portrait of a woman's struggle for her people's freedom with bold strokes and evocative beauty, but also with a sparseness that cries out for more detail.

Conceived by Elisha Whittington, "Queen Nanny" revolves around the legendary leader of the Windward Maroons of Jamaica in the 1700s. The term Maroon stems from the Spanish word "cimarron," meaning wild or fugitive; the original Maroons were runaway slaves who formed bands and communities in isolated places. Because they stood as a symbol of freedom for slaves, the Maroons were feared and despised by plantation owners and colonial governments.

The play introduces Nanny (performed by Patricia Brown) as a young woman in Ghana, a member of an Ashanti royal family. Spurred by a mystical vision from her ancestors, she sets sail for Jamaica to bring hope and help to Jamaica's Maroons. She is identified as a renegade upon arrival and sent to work on a sugar plantation. She escapes and makes her way to the Windward Maroon community, which welcomes her as its queen.

Nanny leads the Maroons in a war with the British that spans decades. She employs magic and guerrilla tactics to ultimately force the governor to offer a truce. She is later assassinated, but lives on in memory as a symbol of the Maroons' ongoing fight for freedom from oppression.

Whittington and Djola Branner, his codirector and choreographer, present this tale as a tapestry of movement and music that is, at times, compelling. The depiction of Nanny's journey from Ghana to Jamaica as a fluid dance is one of the most riveting moments of the evening. Similarly, a stylized battle between Nanny and a British soldier, played by Masanari Kawahara, speaks volumes about the violent clash of cultures and values embodied in their conflict.

Unfortunately, at just over an hour, this tantalizingly brief play can only scratch the surface of its complex subject matter. Whittington gives audiences a good sense of Queen Nanny's personal doubts and obstacles as she risks everything to wage war against the British, but he does a less thorough job of presenting the Maroons' history and culture within a larger context.

"Queen Nanny, Queen Nanny!" should be commended for shining light on a long-neglected subject. It's too bad that it doesn't take a longer look.

- Lisa Brock is a Minneapolis writer.

Queen Nanny, Queen Nanny!

What: Conceived by Elisha Whittington. Codirected by Whittington and Djola Branner.

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday, 2 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday. Through Feb. 9.

Where: In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre, 1500 E. Lake St., Minneapolis.

Review: A colorful look at this Jamaican heroine. At just over an hour, though, it feels too brief.

Tickets: \$13-\$18. 612-721-2535.

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