

Stage

Stage Struck: ...And a River Runs Through It

A new play flows around an age-old story.

By Chris Rohmann

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An epigraph in the script of *...And Jesus Moonwalks on the Mississippi* is a quote from the poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca: "A play is a poem standing up." Marcus Gardley's play is indeed a poem—much of its dialogue is in sinewy verse—and it doesn't just stand up. It dances, hollers, stomps and sings.

Gardley, who teaches playwriting in the UMass Department of Theater, puts big themes on his stage: slavery and freedom, loss and searching, identity and belonging. The play begins with a lynching and ends with tentative agreement that we are all one blood. The production is thrillingly imagined, both visually and aurally, by director Gilbert McCauley and an inspired team including set designer Garland Farwell, costumer Sarah Patterson Nelson, lighting designer Laura Schoch and music director Heather A. Lord.

The action unfolds on two days during the Civil War—at the siege of Vicksburg, Mississippi, in May 1863, and two years later, on a seedy plantation in the Louisiana bayou. But this isn't a history lesson, or a first-act/second-act chronological narrative. The two days are seen as a single dawn-to-dusk span, played in alternating scenes that sometimes almost overlap.

Between the two southern states runs the Mississippi River, which—or rather, who—is a character in the play, its timeless storyteller. In Gardley's imagining, the river, "thick as God's thigh," is a plump, strutting black woman, Miss Ssippi (Dawn Monique Williams), gowned in a long multicolored quilt whose threads spin into lives and stories. At the play's beginning, each character pulls a thread from her stage-wide skirt. Everyone in the audience gets one, too, a colored length of yarn tucked into our programs.

Gardley considers theater a form of storytelling, in the age-old sense: an oral tradition in which each teller successively adds, shapes, embellishes the tale from her or his imagination, adding new "threads" to the story as it passes down generations. Here, the storyteller says, "There's more story to this quilt, chill'ren. So hear it, add your thread to it, then pass it 'long."

This patchwork of Deep South history, African-American folklore, biblical allusion and magic realism has its roots in, of all things, the Greek myth of Demeter, the harvest goddess who searched for her daughter Persephone, who was stolen by the god of the underworld. In *Jesus Moonwalks*, Demeter (Djola Branner) is the revived spirit of a murdered black man, seeking his/her lost daughter Po'em. (Almost all the character names here are metaphorical or symbolic, with poetry and music playing major roles.)

The human threads that weave together in the narrative are part of, or connected to, a Louisiana family named Verse. (See what I mean?) There are two little girls, sisters, one white, one black (Mary Fegreus and Frances Domond), though the darker one is absurdly disguised in a powdered face and told she's white. Their mother, Cadence (Kylie Martin), is a faded Southern belle "with blush on the cheeks, rouge on the lips and gin on the tongue." Her "house Negro," Brer Bit (Draper Harris), is a trickster who shucks and grins to the white folks while secretly plotting to kill them all and "paint this white house black."

They are waiting, in the final days of the war, for the return of their father/husband/master, Jean (Matthew James Perry). But he's back in 1863, separated from his Confederate Army unit at Vicksburg, and coming upon a Union bugler (Luke Reed) whom he captures and leads on a rope till that slave, too, revolts. And then there's Jesus (Rondale Harris), the final, whimsical thread in the quilt, a sweet, sandaled vagrant, clearly out of place and time, with a neon halo and a boombox, ineptly attempting the title's dance step.

The dialogue is rich and spicy as gumbo, flavored with Creole French and laced with spirituals and gospel hymns that underscore the themes: "Wade in the Water," "Travelin' Shoes," "Down by the Riverside," along with the black child's stubborn repetition of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Director McCauley's cast of UMass students and guest actors is uniformly strong, molded into an organic ensemble that embodies all the heart, soul and overflowing spirit of Gardley's sprawling tale.

The brilliant multimedia set design by guest artist Garland Farwell deploys almost every surface in the small arena theater to create a visual expression of the play's tone and texture. He has covered the walls with original wood-panel paintings in colorful folk-art style—simple, arresting images of everyday objects, figures and down-home foodstuffs—interwoven with hand-written snatches from the text. There's also a talking tree (one of the best uses of live video I've seen), shadow puppets and a sky showing tracteries of feathers and lace.

...And Jesus Moonwalks on the Mississippi: *Curtain Theater, Fine Arts Center, UMass-Amherst, through May 9, (413) 545-2511.*



Photo Courtesy of Garland Farwell

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