

July 17, 2008

Expatriate

(Culture Project; 138 seats; \$41 top)

A Culture Project presentation of a play with music in two acts by Lenelle Moise. Directed by Tamilla Woodard. Sets and costumes, Deb O.; lighting and projections, Stephen Arnold; sound, Nick Moore; choreography, Nicco Annan; production stage manager, Molly Minor Eustis. Opened July 16, 2008. Reviewed July 14. Running time: 2 HOURS.

Claudie Lenelle Moise
Alphine Karla Mosley

By MARK BLANKENSHIP

Things change in “Expatriate,” but they don’t resolve. That’s true of the plot in this two-person play with music, about the rise and fall of an American singing duo in France, and it’s true of the songs, whose infectious jazz-pop hooks rarely reach tidy conclusions. By refusing to land somewhere safe, the show makes fresh statements on common themes like celebrity, excess and art.

On paper, the story might sound trite: Bookish Claudie (Lenelle Moise) and outlandish Alphine (Karla Mosley) are childhood friends in the black housing projects of Boston, but their musical gifts send them first to New York and then to Paris, where they find fame as a duo called Black Venus. One of them can’t handle fame, however, and a “Behind the Music”-style tragedy ensues.

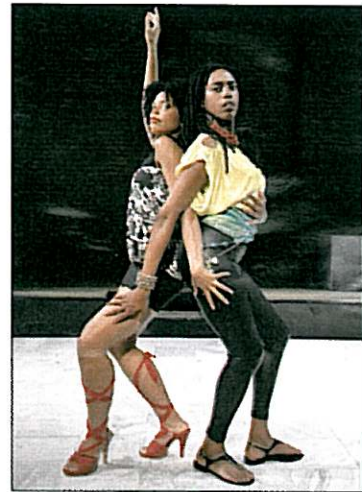
But the familiar structure doesn’t account for Moise, the writer-

composer-star. Jumping back and forth in time, she shows how the women’s bruised childhoods led to their adult problems, such as Claudie’s obsessive-compulsive disorder and Alphine’s escalating need to be loved. Her writing is so specific that the story stays engaging.

Moise also shows the women relying on each other, but she complicates their relationship through the final scene. Claudie, for instance, is a lesbian with a confused attraction to her friend, and narcissistic Alphine subtly manipulates those feelings.

The messy emotions keep the show honest. Both women grow, but new problems replace the old ones, just like in real life. This makes it

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Karla Mosley and Lenelle Moise are a singing group in Culture Project’s “Expatriate.”

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easier to accept the show’s final statements about artistic rebellion and the legacy of abuse. They’re presented not as universal morals but as the specific wisdom gained by women who are still evolving.

Granted, the journey could be about 20 minutes shorter — Moise overindulges her taste for flowery language, and one character’s breakdown drags over several repetitive scenes — but the endpoint makes it worthwhile.

Plus, both thespians are sensational. Moise’s calm soulfulness is an excellent counterpoint to Mosley’s raw-nerve energy.

Both thespians are good singers, but Mosley’s voice is a serious discovery, with remarkable phrasing and range. In a torchy number called “The Makings,” about how Alphine’s life has given her the makings of a jazz legend, her pure high notes descend to earthy growls in a flash, and you’ve got to believe her when she sings, “Anything I wails/hits ears like honey.”

Music is almost as surprising. Songs — which are performed concert-style, as though they’re the duo’s biggest hits — are created from nothing but voices. Using an on-stage device called a JamMan loop machine, thespians can record snatches of their own voices, then play them back at varying volumes. They end up singing complex harmonies with themselves, and each number sounds different than the last.

Director Tamilla Woodard and choreographer Nicco Annan match the material with a striking physical language. Scenes are peppered with suggestive movement, so that certain words provoke a stylized sweep of the arm or slow drop to the ground. These gestures are used sparingly enough to be evocative, giving the production an elegant, mysterious tone.

Set designer Deb O. distorts reality by hanging everyday objects on the walls, then painting them completely white. When thespians sit on ghostly chairs elevated several feet above the floor — or pull regular-looking props out of hidden white drawers — they seem stranded between an actual experience and a symbolic one. It’s the ideal environment for such a compelling piece of work.