



'King Hedley II' draws stunning cast

The ninth play in August Wilson's 10-play Pittsburgh series, "King Hedley II," provides full, rich, well-developed characters for some of Kansas City's best actors to master and craft into their own interpretation at The Just Off Broadway Theatre.

Melting Pot Theatre/Just Off Broadway



Kansas City Melting Pot Theatre, opens this season with works from well-known black authors. The season opener, "King Hedley II" shows the daily strife of a family straining against society for their piece of the dream. They struggle. They survive, but they pay a huge price as the play unfolds. Life in the mid-1980s in the slums of Pittsburgh provides no yellow brick road to fame, fortune, or dreams.. The play gives voice to people in cities where advancement means starting over nearly every day.

The story centers on King Hedley, his wife Tonya, and his mother Ruby. King has returned from a prison term for killing his cousin for disrespecting him. To raise money, King and his

friend Mister sell stolen refrigerators, ferreting away money to purchase a video store (if they can save \$10,000).

King's first concern, getting over \$200 to get the telephone connected, presents yet another obstacle. Add to that, Tonya wants to abort their newly conceived baby. She's concerned that King will return to prison and leave her alone, again, to raise a child on her own with no paternal assistance.

The concerns are real, and the dialogue is powerful. The gritty play makes the audience identify with the problems at hand. As the play opens, King sows flower seeds in a patch of dirt, symbolizing his need for something good to grow, prosper, and flower. Ruby and others tell him bad dirt will not grow flowers. Actually, King represents the bad dirt and King's need to produce, grow, prosper, and bloom. The scenes when King tends to his flowers reflects King's past, his parentage, his temper, his problems, his future, and his destiny.

The cast is led by Lewis J. Morrow as King Hedley. King was born in the previous play, "Seven Guitars," but "King Hedley II" stands alone as a literary piece. Even though there are mentions of characters from the previous play, they are not important to this piece. Ruby is the other main carry-over character.



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Morrow gives one of his strongest performances in "King Hedley II" as a man straining against society wanting to find a bit

of happiness. For him, opening a video store, means success. The goal of saving \$10,000 appears just beyond his grasp, but he works toward his reward. Morrow builds the character from a humble, broken man planting flower seeds to a strong character ready to face destiny and claim his manhood. Morrow's character shows a wide range of feelings and layers of his character. His performance is multi-dimensional from gentle calf to raging bull.

As Ruby, Sherri Roulette-Mosley becomes the rock that the foundation stands. She raised King. She listens and counsels King's wife Tonya. Her character contains some heart-warming scenes and some bitter memories of her life struggle. Roulette-Mosley again gives a powerful stage presence to her character.

Dennis Jackson produces one of the more unique characters in the play as the neighbor called Stool Pigeon. He knows the Bible and quotes huge pieces of scripture, and undoubtedly shocks the audience with his evaluation of God. Jackson has created this character as a man teetering between righteous and marginally touched. The portrayal makes for an interesting character.

For some comic relief, Jerron O'Neal makes an Everyman character that helps connect the audience to the characters. O'Neal delivers his lines with just the right emotional attitude to make the characters and audience laugh. His lines seem to always bring smiles and laughs.

Several scenes include Tonya, King's wife, as played by Lanette King. Her scenes always elicit strong characterization and provide emotional depth to each scene. Lanette's character forces the audience to train their eyes on her as she grabs control of the scene, the stage, and the audience's senses. One extremely long monologue takes patrons through the range of feelings of a woman in crisis. Her laments scream to the problems of the world and the society she lives. Brilliant

performance from an actor who proves to Kansas City that she can carry any role with conviction.

In spite of starring Brian Stokes Mitchell as King, Leslie Uggams as Ruby, and Viola Davis as Tonya, The Broadway run of "King Hedley II" only amassed 72 performances

The cast is: Dennis Jackson as Stool Pigeon, Lewis J. Morrow as King, Sherri Roulette-Mosley as Ruby, Jerron O'Neal as Mister, Lanette King as Tonya, Theodore (Priest) Hughes as Elmore.

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The Production Team is Harvey Williams, director; Melonnie Walker, assistant director/dramaturg; Emily Kenneback, stage manager; Robert Coppage III, assistant stage manager; Charles Moore, set designer/builder; Dennis Jackson, sound designer; Warren Deckers, lighting designer; Robert Crone, costumer.

"King Hedley II" continues through Oct. 5 at the Just Off Broadway Theatre. For tickets, prices, dates, times, go to the KC Melting Pot Theatre website. www.kcmeltingpot.com. Thursday nights are designated as Community Nights and feature discount tickets.

Tags: "King Hedley II" review, KC Melting Pot Theatre, Just

Off Broadway Theatre, Kansas City Theatre, Kansas City
Performing Arts, Kansas City Arts & Entertainment