

SCENE

Reinventing 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'

Oregon Daily Emerald
University of Oregon News

VOL. 113, Issue 153
Thursday, May 24, 2012



TESS FREEMAN PHOTOGRAPHER

Hershell Norwood plays the character of Tom in the comedy 'I Ain't Yo' Uncle', performed by the University of Oregon theater department. 'I Ain't Yo' Uncle' will premiere on Thursday, May 24, and run until June 2.

Despite its touchy subject matter — racism in modern society — ‘I Ain’t Yo’ Uncle’ challenges stereotypes with humor

BEN KENDALL
SCENE REPORTER

“I Ain’t Yo’ Uncle” is a play designed to challenge racial perceptions to confront and dispel stereotypes. It was written amid the tumultuous period of civil unrest in the Los Angeles area during the early ‘90s. A heavy subject to be sure, but this play approaches the concept at an oblique angle with humor and intentionally over-the-top melodramatic acting.

“I chose to direct ‘I Ain’t Yo’ Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ for many reasons,” play director LaDonna L. Forsgren said. “The show utilizes a multicultural cast, facilitates experimentation with several performance genres, incorporates 1990s hip hop and is just plain funny! I love to laugh and have a healthy respect for the absurd.”

New Jack Revisionist Robert Alexander wrote the play. New Jack is a fusion genre, an amalgamation of old sensibilities and new, and was spearheaded by the hip-hop artists of the late ‘80s to early ‘90s. This artistic paradigm is evident in the styles of music used in the play and the frequent breaking of the fourth wall, a method used most notably in postmodern theater.

Alexander will also be available for a Q-and-A with the audience following the performance May 31.

The real “New Jack” of the play (aside from just its title) is the subject matter, taking characters from the novel “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and rewriting it with modern sensibilities and frequent points of view from secondary characters, many of which had little or no dialogue in the play.

“When I first read the script it seemed

really serious,” said Jade Edmondson, who plays Cassie. “But after a few rehearsals, I was like ‘wait ... this is a comedy.’ Which makes it easier to watch, makes it enjoyable. You’re not going to leave feeling bad. It’s not a guilt trip at all.”

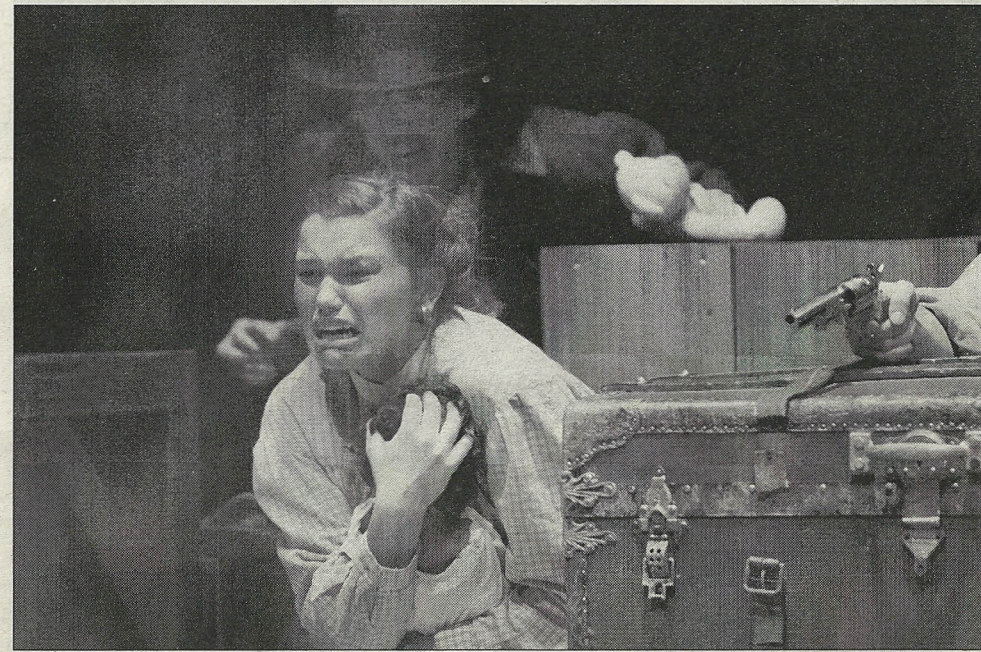
The play’s mix of comedy and serious topics has made it comparable to a popular sketch show.

“Now we’re at the point where someone compared us to an hour-and-a-half ‘SNL’ skit,” said Brittany Dorris, who plays Miss Ophelia. “I mean, ‘SNL’ tackles some heavy stuff! But you laugh at it, it’s funny, it’s humor, it’s satire. We take a light approach to it. It’s the best bad acting you’ve ever seen on purpose.”

“It’s really, really, really funny. I know that it’s a big theme of racism and how terrible the world is, but it’s really funny,” costume designer Annie Smith said. This will be her last play, as she is graduating this year. “I really like this play and LaDonna did a really good job directing this, and it’s a good way to go out.

“I went with an insane amount of bright color and patterns that crisscross in somewhat garish ways that reflect the acting,” Smith said. “I also blended period clothing with modern clothing to reflect to the audience that racism did not end with slavery. This is a problem we still face and people need to be aware that this isn’t just something that our grandparents said.”

Footage of the LA riots of the early ‘90s are projected on the front doors of a mock-up cabin, amid handmade set pieces in the Hope Theatre in the Miller Theatre Complex on campus. The cabin itself is a small frame, with canvas stretched thin to



TESS FREEMAN PHOTOGRAPHER

Naomi Wright, playing Eliza Harris, clutches her baby in a dramatic scene during ‘I Ain’t Yo’ Uncle.’ The play, originally written by Robert Alexander, was created in order to challenge racial perceptions and stereotypes

allow projection onto it, as well as to allow silhouettes to be cast onto its other side. The floor of the theater was hand-painted to look like the slat board floor expected in a rustic period dwelling.

University alumnus Steen V. Mitchell designed the set.

“We wanted it to feel as though you were in an older theater space,” Mitchell said. “A lot of the work you’re seeing in the set pieces was all built by students. It was a challenge to design the cabin, which can be projected on from the front and allow silhouettes from the rear.”

“I Ain’t Yo’ Uncle” premieres May 24 and runs until June 2.

BKENDALL@DAILYEMERALD.COM

‘I AIN’T YO’ UNCLE: THE NEW JACK REVISIONIST UNCLE TOM’S CABIN’

Where: Hope Theatre on campus

When: May 24, 25, 26, 31 and
June 1 and 2 at 8 p.m.

May 27 at 2 p.m.

Cost: Free with University I.D.,
\$12 for seniors, faculty, staff and
non-University students or \$14
general admission