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Review: “And I and Silence” beautiful and tragic

Prisons come in many guises. And while you are inside, there is no escape.

KU University Theatre’s production of Naomi Wallace’s “And I and Silence” explores several such confinements through the lives of its two characters, Jamie and Dee. Told cunningly by alternating between the past and the present, the play opens with Jamie (Timaira Smith) and Dee (Laurie C. Winkel) having just been released from prison after completing nine-year sentences. The two women seek jobs as servants, and they are preparing for interviews and getting set up in the small apartment they share. From the outset, we can tell something is wrong. Despite their hope and optimism, there is a specter of failure stalking them.

Dee is quite obviously not very bright. She bubbles over with enthusiasm, but one gets the sense she doesn’t have the smarts to be successful. Jamie tries to teach her, to encourage her, but Jamie is black, and it’s 1959. Whatever talent she has is going to have to cut through the racial prejudice of the time period.

As the story moves forward, we shift back and forth in time. We see the two when they are girls in prison – where Young Dee (Jaclyn Amber Nischbach) is desperate for a friend and trying as hard as she can to make one with Young Jamie (Diadra Smith), despite the latter’s disinterest. We see them as they make their plans for life after jail, and we see them as their plans come wretchedly to nothing. The women endure abuse – in prison and in the workforce. Both struggle to hold jobs. Both are forced to make degrading choices that carve away, a little at a time, their dignity.

Indeed, their whole plan is to become servants – a type of imprisonment itself – after getting out of jail. Moreover, Dee is pretty clearly a lesbian in love with Jamie, who resists her advances, but possibly only because she doesn’t want to be isolated from society any more than she already is as an African-American ex-con. They can’t hold jobs, because the men they work for sexually abuse them, forcing them to quit. Thus, despite no longer being confined, society still imprisons them. The color of Jamie’s skin, Dee’s low intelligence, the work they choose, and their sexuality all keep them locked away from society and themselves.

The tragic reality of the older women is juxtaposed by the hope and ebullience of their younger selves. Young Jamie and Young Dee know they are in Hell, but they don’t know a worse one is waiting for them outside. They believe the future holds promise.

All of this is delivered strongly by the four actors. Smith and Smith infuse their Jamies with a worldliness necessary to survive and a motherly affection for Dee. Nischbach and Winkel make Dee endearing. She is so hopelessly clueless, so utterly talentless, but so sincere in her love and admiration for Jamie, one can’t help but like her and root for her. One wants to see them succeed despite Dee’s stupidity and despite Jamie’s rough treatment of her. These are likeable characters, and all four actors give deeply touching performances.

The set, designed by Cynthia Evans, acts as a fifth character in the play. Stage left is the ratty apartment the older women share. Stage right is the cell block where their younger selves meet. In the middle is a single, utilitarian bed and a barred window, both of which are part of the two locations and times. The set itself helps communicate there is no escape for these two unfortunates. They are in prison, and they will never get out.

Despite the bleak circumstances, Wallace weaves a beautiful love story, and director Lynn Deboeck brings it out expertly. We can see Dee's affection for Jamie early on, but Deboeck is careful to allow its true nature to develop slowly. We're well into the play before Dee's real feelings are known, and even further along before there is any hint of whether Jamie returns them. It's a nice touch that keeps us guessing as to the play's ultimate conclusion.

"And I and Silence" is a well crafted, well acted and well directed play that says a lot about how we treat others and ourselves. Tragic and beautiful, it is a moving experience that identifies and examines the damage prisons – both real and societal – do to the mind and the soul.