

Stage Directions
Odyssey Theatre
 reviewed by

Travis Michael Holder

As the curtain opens on L. Trey Wilson's *Stage Directions*, transferred to the Odyssey after a six-week, critically-acclaimed run at [Inside] the Ford, two young African-American men (played by Marc Ewing and the playwright) slouch on a Manhattan park bench discussing what appears to be a troubled relationship. It is at first hard to understand what the problem is, but when one makes it clear he doesn't have space in his life for the other's attentions, the guy takes the hint and starts to split. Called back with "Yo, don't leave me hangin' like that," the two embrace fraternally, only to soon find themselves in the hot beginnings of a decidedly less-than-brotherly kiss.

Suddenly from somewhere in the back of the audience comes the voice of Jay, the director (William Christian), asking the pair to "take it again." We soon realize we are seated watching a rehearsal of a play-within-a-play and Rod (Ewing), though aware of the climactic smooch when he was hired for this role, is having trouble making out with another man now that opening night looms. As Jay calls a break to make a pot of coffee and defuse the tension between his actors, Gary (Wilson) grabs his cell phone to see if the guy he's expecting to call for a date has left a message, leaving the two remaining "hetero" allies to discuss how to deal with the situation. "He gets to say and do whatever he wants," Rod says about his openly-out costar, "and I've got to watch what I say." He's worked himself up into quite a lather and, when accused of homophobia, reveals he looked that up in his pocket-sized dictionary when first cast and the phrase "just doesn't cover it and I'm not afraid of it."

I didn't see *Stage Directions* in its original venue because my appearance in *Play Strindberg* running on the identical performance schedule, but wherever I went, everyone was totally in agreement that this was a major, major new play. Especially for my L.A. Drama Critics Circle colleagues to be completely in sync with their opinions is a remarkable achievement in itself; some hate edgy theater, some hate sappy American musicals (count me in on that one), but all raved on and on about this piece. Thank-

fully, the transfer made it accessible to me and, sitting in the Odyssey's first night audience, I observed another remarkable thing: a completely untypical L.A. stage audience, peppered liberally with young black couples and presumably straight men, all equally mesmerized by Wilson's brave and amazingly clever examination of homophobia in the African-American community.

The fact that a play can last over two hours and revolve around one single situation, that difficult stage kiss, is a testament to brilliant and totally absorbing writing, tense and sharply focused direction (by Dan Bonnell), and an absolutely knockout ensemble cast. Ewing and Wilson have immediate sparks that ignite slowly into a final intense explosion of feelings and Kareem Ferguson as Terry, the "gay ambassador to the straight world" author of the work they're rehearsing, is equally as impressive, particularly in one fascinating aspect: all three actors play literate, thoughtful, educated artists trying to create a work-in-progress, then instantly morph into the urban hip-hop talkin' and walkin' characters portrayed in Terry's script.

At the end of *Stage Directions*, which above all else heralds the advent of a world-class new playwright, the entire audience rose to its feet — including those many young guys who seemed more likely to watch football than go see a play, especially one which spends 70-plus minutes talking about one of their homeboys swapping spit with another dude. To make this a universal theme, exploring prejudice, social stereotyping, and ultimately how our lives are transformed by our art—and to deal with such subjects with wit and ingenuity—is an unprecedented accomplishment. Do not miss this play; it is surely the production of the year in Los Angeles and a major feather in the cap of the Ensemble Studio Theatre L.A. Project for finding it and nurturing it to such polished fruition. For tickets, call (310) 477-2055.



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