

LEGIT REVIEW

Stage Directions

([Inside] the Ford; 99 seats; \$20 top)

An Ensemble Studio Theater and the L.A. Project presentation of a play in two acts by L. Trey Wilson. Directed by Dan Bonnell. Sets, John H. Binkley; lights, Jeremy Pivnick; sound, Jacob M. Davis; original music, Chyll. Opened, reviewed Jan. 24, 2004; runs through Feb. 29. Running time: **1 HOUR, 50 MIN.**

Gary	L. Trey Wilson
Rod	Marc Ewing
Jay	William Christian
Terry	Kareem Ferguson
Ben	Chuma Hunter Gault

By **JULIO MARTINEZ**

Seeing two male actors kissing onstage is not all that common, despite the social/sexual liberation that has given rise to such legit works as “Angels in America” and “Six Degrees of Separation.” Scripter-thesp L. Trey Wilson offers a highly entertaining look at the tensions, both comical and serious, that erupt between two African-American actors when one balks at the idea of kissing the other during the course of a scene. Presented in conjunction with the L.A. County-sponsored Hot Properties series at [Inside] the Ford, Wilson’s finely crafted work impressively addresses such issues as homophobia in the black

community, racial and social stereotypes, artistic hypocrisy and the need to find acceptance.

With an excellent five-member ensemble, helmer Dan Bonnell moves the action along at a swift pace, never allowing the tension to dissipate in this laudable excursion in self-discovery.

The park-bench scene being played out by actors Gary (Wilson) and Rod (Mark Ewing) is evocative of the wary, two-person gamesmanship of Edward Albee’s “Zoo Story.” Smitten Gary is trying to push for a more open relationship, whereas the obviously ill-at-ease Rod does not want their in-the-closet pairing made public.

When Gary, in character, attempts to offer a goodbye kiss, Rod the actor breaks off the scene, exhibiting just how deep his personal discomfort is at the reality of kissing another man.

What ensues is a cathartic battle of personal agendas that involves not only the two actors but director Jay (William Christian), who is straight, and playwright Terry (Kareem Ferguson), who is gay.

Wilson offers a bravura performance as the comical but pugnacious, openly gay Gary, who attacks Rod and Jay for their homophobia and Terry for his hypocrisy. When a con-

fused Terry challenges the actor to tell him what’s wrong with the play, Gary’s “What I need to see” speech is a powerful indictment of the artistic and social compromises that continue to inhibit the quest for self-worth and self-acceptance among gay black men in our society.

Ewing’s moody, macho turn as Rod offers a perfect counterpoint to Gary’s natural effervescence. It is their combativeness that drives the work. Their mutual disdain is so tangible, Rod becomes quite sympathetic when he declares he doesn’t object to the kiss; “I just don’t want to kiss Gary.”

As the director caught in the middle of all this thespian warfare, Christian achieves the correct balance of facilitator and compromiser who is desperately trying to make everybody happy.

Ferguson is deceptively understated as the playwright who seems willing to make any compromise in order to see his work produced. His reserved demeanor in dealing with Gary only serves to set up his final-scene emotional explosion as he takes to the stage himself, performing a revamped version for the scene with another actor (Chuma Hunter Gault).

“Stage Directions” admirably achieves all its goals, both as a stagework and as a social statement. With Wilson acting his own work, it definitely has legs for an Off Broadway run.