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Hittin' Home

By Caroline C. Haynes

The first time I came into contact with AIDS was in 1985. I was working in the intensive care unit of one of the few public hospitals in Boston. Halfway down the hallway was a door marked "Extremely contagious—do not enter." Three days a week for two months I watched as a petrified nurse kicked open the door and shoved in a tray of food which often landed in a cluttered mess beneath the bed. The man inside had no contact with anyone aside from the few daily visits from his doctor. He died alone as many had before him and hundreds still do. It was not the fact that he was dying from AIDS that upset his family. It was that he was gay.

Seven years later, one would hope that AIDS would be more accepted than it was during the dark ages of the mid-1980s. However it still seems that the secrets a positive HIV test unveils often traumatize a family more than the test result itself.

"Before it Hits Home" powerfully addresses this issue. The play revolves around a black family blessed with Cain and Abel sons. Junior, the stereotypical good son, played by Monti Sharp, is successfully climbing his way up the army ladder. His homophobic and stoical nature demonstrates his strength as a "man." Wendal (James McDaniel) is a jazz musician who discovers he has AIDS. After spending several lonely weeks in the hospital he decides to return to his parent's home. He believes their strength and love will make him better. However, he encounters a mother who can't decide

which is worse, that her son has AIDS or that he's bisexual. Whichever it is, she believes in a sense that he is to blame for his tragic fate.

While the characters may seem stereotypical and the story line melodramatic, this is not the case. The playwright, Cheryl L. West, has achieved a remarkable balance. There are no tirades about the unfairness of the disease, nor are there spurts of shocking statistics, nor endless lists of dying friends. West attempts to convey her message by portraying a typical American family facing every day problems. And she does just that. For example, she integrates an annoying next-door neighbor who seems to live with the family into the script. She brightens their days with endless one-liners like "Every time a fat woman shakes, a skinny woman loses her house." (Unsurprisingly, this neighbor is fat.)

The set is sparse. During the first scene, the stage is adorned with nothing more than a saxophone and

a small light flickering across the stage, reminiscent of Tinkerbell. I must admit I didn't understand the symbolism of the light, but after the first scenes I didn't notice it. The performances are so convincing and enthralling that everyone in the theater loses themselves for two short hours to these 11 actors.

One of the most unique parts of this play is a scene during which two scenes are acted out simultaneously. Wendal attempts to tell his fiance and his male lover of seven years that he has AIDS. The dynamics between Wendal and Simone (Sharon Washington) and Wendal and Douglas (Randolph Smith) are dangerously different. Wendal declares his love for Douglas and tells him he has AIDS. However he does not tell Simone he is sick and the scene ends with the two of them having sex. Interpret as you may; the intensity of this scene is unmatched by anything I have seen on stage in a very long time.

"Before It Hits Home" should not only be seen by anyone who appreciates theater—it is also important because it delves one step deeper than other current plays which address such themes as relationship maintenance (i.e. "The Normal Heart") and the development of AIDS-centered support communities ("The Way We Live Now"). "Before It Hits Home" painfully demonstrates how AIDS can destroy what should be an unconditional relationship—that between mother and child. This is probably the disease's greatest evil. ❀

