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## Constant Star (review)

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while reciting her speech about how Willy had been put on straight commission and her sons had turned into bums. The movement delicately communicated her desperate need to hold her family together. At other moments the chorus and Uncle Ben took positions on catwalks around and above the audience, as though looking into a cell from which the Loman family could never escape. The presence of the chorus—at times seated beside and above the audience—provided a palpable sense of the public witness that so haunted Willy. Their number and their anonymity, coupled with their changing positions in and around the stage, were constant reminders that the Loman tragedy was not secret and familial, but communal and even generic.

**ANDREW KIMBROUGH**

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**CONSTANT STAR.** By Tazewell Thompson. City Theatre, Pittsburgh. 29 June 2002.

*Constant Star*, a “New Play with Music” written and directed by Tazewell Thompson, tells the life of Ida B. Wells, a dynamic activist for women and African Americans at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The story is told by five actresses who all play Wells and numerous other characters as the play continually shifts in time and location.

Wells’s activism and journalism provide *Constant Star*’s a spine, and the show generously quotes from her writings. While a speech denouncing President McKinley as a dimwitted imposter received numerous laughs (possibly from the audience’s assumptions about its correlation with current politicians), Wells’s political convictions are not portrayed as a diversion but as the passionate foundation for the production. Faced with constant racism and sexism, Wells refused to capitulate, and *Constant Star* vividly demonstrates her resistance: from her condemnation of Booker T. Washington as an obsequious sycophant, all too willing to put on a glove before he shook a white donor’s hand, to her criticism of Susan B. Anthony’s demand that women must come first and African Americans should be content to bring up the rear, to her dismissal of nearly everyone else for not living up to her standards.

The five actresses—Maria Becoates-Bey, Etta Cox, Nadiyah S. Dorsey, Wabei Siyolwe, and Brenda Thomas—worked as a tight ensemble, with each

performer playing Wells throughout her life as well as a variety of other characters and the chorus. The strength and camaraderie of the actresses developed a strong underlying emotional net for the conceptually abstract show; I really cared about the character(s) even though the show did not separate the different actresses. Five opaque panels above the thrust stage, a tiled floor, and four hanging industrial lights defined the theatre space. Particularly evocative lighting included a swinging lamp and punctuating flashes of industrial lights. The costumes were simple. Each woman wore one graceful dress from a different time period of Wells’s life. The exception was a single spectacular red dress referred to in the text as a sign of liberation. The sound design was superb. While the layout of the space indicated a demand for amplification, it was not clear that the actresses were amplified until Wells had a stroke while making a speech, at which point her voice reverberated and then became distorted.

Wells’s charming courtship with Ferdinand L. Barnett highlights the personal and playful elements of the play. Wells falls in love as she addresses an all-white audience for the first time. Barnett stands out “like a fly in milk,” and the actress deftly flipped between her sweet and vulnerable crush and her forceful, intelligent, and impassioned political appeal. When Barnett proposes, Wells demands that he never ask her to choose between her family and her political commitment. Reversing traditional gender assumptions, Wells claims an equitable split for family responsibilities: she promises to raise any children until they are two at which point Barnett should plan on having primary responsibility. The final judgment of the play is given by a god-like voice, who views Wells’s imperfect duality—while she was arrogant, greedy, and contemptuous of others, she passionately, generously, and untiringly became one of the most important influences to impede the widespread growth of lynching and segregation.

In several ways this is an important new musical. Like the political satires of the 1930s that used music to dramatize insidious calls to war, Tazewell includes traditional spirituals to strengthen the play. Structured like a “concept musical” with unnoted transitions between time, the scenes are connected by a theme and characters rather than a linear plot. The songs provide respites from and transitions between unconnected scenes; they also build community among characters and they connect Wells to the long history of Civil Rights activism, including modern advocacy. The music interweaves the intellectual vigor of political appeals with an emotional presence. Gospel songs



The cast of *Constant Star* in City Theatre's production (L to R): Brenda Thomas, Maria Becoates-Bey, Nadiyah S. Dorsey, Wabei Siyolwe, Etta Cox. Photo: Ric Evans.

comment on the action, demarcate and link the disparate sections, and give a unity to the non-linear plot. Singing also facilitates bonding and helps create community between the five actresses playing Ida B. Wells.

The one scene that disappointed me was the disagreement between Wells and Susan B. Anthony. While the underlying conflict between racial and gender issues is an important one, the play and production emphasized a stereotypical catfight, with the women finally fighting over marital status. Wells taunts Anthony with her being sterile and solitary while Anthony mocks Wells's hyphenated married name. The trivial approach to such a serious concern did a disservice to this play and the issues it raises. Surely these two intelligent women would avoid the caricatured disagreement that women are so often portrayed as having over men.

Despite this scene, *Constant Star* would be a strong play for a diverse college program, Off-Broadway, or regional houses. The music includes intricate melodies, which trained voices can handle. However, a traditional college program might have difficulty casting five dynamic African American actresses/singers. Because the show makes no pretense at realism, the songs could be separated from the scenes, with a small choir singing. The songs are performed a cappella so only a rehearsal accompanist would be needed. Furthermore, this play could be cast with a white woman and an African American man supplementing the lead actors or with a mixture of actors playing different parts. It is a moving play that can sustain a range of production options.

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