

FringeNYC, a Grab Bag That Calls for Intuition, Not to Mention Dumb Luck

By ELISABETH VINCENTELLI AUG. 19, 2016



From left, Kineh N'gaojia, Khalid Hill and Codara Bracy in "In the Master's House There Are Many Mansions." Credit Dixie Sheridan

If you learn one thing at the [New York International Fringe Festival](#), it's not to trust the program's blurbs. And yet what else is there to help make a decision?

Celebrating its 20th anniversary, the two-week FringeNYC, which runs through Aug. 28, remains simultaneously part of New York's cultural scene and outside it. Obviously, a festival featuring nearly 200 shows makes a mark — especially south of 14th Street, where the 16 venues are, and people perusing the ubiquitous Fringe postcards are a common sight.

Yet a human theater wiki would be hard pressed to recognize any of the Fringe participants. There are few, if any, recognizable actors or creative teams, so picking shows requires a bit of sleuthing, a dash of intuition and a lot of luck.

In the case of the drama "[Liars and Lovers](#)," all of those failed me. Yes, I went by the blurb, which announced a cross between "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and "The Big Bang Theory." As it turned out, Thomas Tafero's heavy-handed, poorly acted tale of college frenemies (through Friday at 64E4 Underground) bears as much resemblance to those two shows as a radish does to a bicycle.

With bullying as its theme, the play did reflect FringeNYC's enduring concern with social problems. And unsurprisingly, many shows this year touch upon race. Most memorable among those I caught was Cherry Jackson's 1978 one-act, "In the Master's House There Are Many Mansions." This was an outlier: an ambitious revival in a festival dominated by new pieces.

We are in 1976, and childhood friends (Kineh N'gaojia and Codara Bracy) are catching up after a few years apart. The twist is that they are at a funeral home, where one has come to pay his respects to the other, who was gunned down by the police.

In a poetic, surreal manner, the play looks at how black men are raised and, too often, die. Despite the challenging acoustics of the Teatro Latea at the Clemente, the bassist Tim Singh and the keyboardist Noel Freidline successfully created a somber mood with jazz and blues instrumentals, and the tap performer Khalid Hill contributed percussive grace notes. Too bad the acting in this production, directed by [James Vesce](#), was not always up to the task.