

Simple Thoughts

Reviewed by Jeanette Toomer

Presented by Twilight Repertory Company as part of the New York International Fringe Festival at the Connelly Theatre, 220 E. Fourth St., NYC, Aug. 15-22.

James Vesce's "Simple Thoughts" breathes fresh air into Langston Hughes' well-known satirical narratives about Jesse B. Semple, a street-wise observer of black life in the 1940s. This hour-long drama is a solid first step in further dramatic exploration of this literary figure, and whets the appetite for more.

The bluesy mood of the Harlem bar and Semple's bold pronouncements crystallize the double-sided consciousness of blacks struggling to live in a white world.

Semple (**Calvin Thompson**) sits at the bar as the audience fills the theatre. His offstage voice narrates even before the play begins with a blues riff and accompanying tap dance by a faceless dancer. A suited friend, Ananias Boyd (**Lamont Bryant**), asks him a few questions, which lead into the first of Semple's surprisingly relevant treatises: "I like Harlem because it belongs to me. It would take an atom bomb to take me out." He follows with, "Here I ain't scared to vote."

When his cousin Minnie (**Jennifer Roberts**) arrives from the South seeking his help, he promises little, saying, "Up North we are swimming against the current trying to get to dry land. I'm still in the water, if you know what I mean."

Minnie is taken with the Harlem nightlife. In general, the women are thinly drawn characters who serve as sounding boards for Semple's growing philosophy on relationships. Bryant doubled gamely as the sexy Zarita, a stereotypical wanton Jezebel. Semple's sweetheart, Joyce (**RoShanda Atkins**), catches him flirting with her.

Roberts deftly portrayed Minnie as an eyes-wide-shut dreamer and lush. She doubled as a dynamic tap dancer providing segues between the short scenes. Atkins was perfectly endearing as the forgiving girlfriend. **Aaron Hodges** and **J. Morong** rounded out the cast.

Vesce's direction proved effective, with one exception. It was an unnecessary distraction to have Semple move from place to place between scenes. Lesser characters should move around him.