

CITY NEWSPAPER

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Theater review: 'Revival: The Resurrection of Son House'

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- PHOTO BY GOAT FACTORY MEDIA ENTERTAINMENT
- Antoine L. Smith, Alexis Sims, Cleavant Derricks, Tyrone L. Robinson, and Badia Farha in Geva's world premiere of "Revival: The Resurrection of Son House."

"Revival: The Resurrection of Son House"

Reviewed Saturday, May 4

Continues through June 2

Wilson Stage at Geva Theatre Center, 75 Woodbury Boulevard

Tickets start at \$25 | 232-4382; gevatheatre.org

Blues artist, son of a preacher, steel worker, farmer, husband, alcoholic -- and one of the first black musicians to make a record in the United States. While these words all apply to Eddie "Son" House, they don't begin to tell his story the way Geva's latest world premiere, "Revival: The Resurrection of Son House," does.

The last time Rochester encountered a theatrical take on the blues artist was August 2015, when Geva produced the four-day festival "Journey to the Son: A Celebration of Son House." During the festival -- which included theater, film, audio recordings, lectures and more -- commissioned playwright Keith Glover presented a reading of "Revival." Now, four years later, it's the concluding production in Geva's 2018-19 season, running through June 2.

House was born in 1902, the son of a Mississippi preacher. His religious upbringing taught him that secular music -- and especially the blues -- was of the devil. "Revival" tells the story of House's journey to the blues and back, but it begins with the afterlife. In a style reminiscent of "It's a Wonderful Life" or "A Christmas Carol," Glover has written in an ensemble of angelic judges who are tasked with deciding whether or not House should be permitted to enter heaven. They decide to travel back through his life, beginning with his early adult years.

The script moves mostly chronologically, with pit stops in the beyond where the angels comment on and argue about House's life (the only part of the show that feels a bit heavy-handed at times). And while House's story doesn't start in Rochester, it was here that his career was reborn. After more than 20 years away from making music, House was found by a group of beatnik college students in 1964, an encounter that re-launched his career with world tours and several more records until his death in 1988.

"Revival" is not a musical, but it's music-heavy. For two-and-a-half hours, audience members are treated to an expert blues performance, as House's music is woven throughout the narrative. And each actor is also a gifted singer. Acclaimed guitarist Billy Thompson not only serves as the musical director of the show, but also leads the accompanying blues quartet in the pit.

"Revival" features a cast of seven equity actors and four "roustabouts" (local actors who serve as stage crew and supporting bodies when needed). At the helm of the cast as Son House is Tony Award-winner Cleavant Derricks, whose Broadway credits include creating the role of James Thunder Early for "Dream Girls" and starring in Bob Fosse's "Big Deal." Derricks is a marvel as House, completely immersing himself in the character's inner turmoil during a show that spans more than 40 years of one life. Derricks gives himself to the role, sweating and belting through blues songs, delivering heartbreaking emotional scenes about love and faith, and exposing the darkest moments of House's existence.

The remaining six cast members play angels and also take on the roles of important people in House's life. There's an incredible amount of talent onstage at any given time, as everyone in the show is a true triple threat: singing, dancing, and acting. (And singing the blues while dancing is really a feat.) The cast of "Revival," without a doubt, brings Broadway-level performances to the local stage.

Perhaps one of the most stunning parts of the production is the collaboration of scenic design by David Gallo and Viveca Gardiner, lighting design by Thomas C. Hase and Joe Beumer, and sound design by Andrew Mark Wilhelm. These sometimes lesser-appreciated aspects create the world of Son House, from the Mississippi Delta to a railroad outside Rochester. A particularly magical touch is the Edison bulbs strung around the entire space, casting a warm glow on the audience as well as the stage.

This is Geva's second world premiere focused on important figures from Rochester. (Last year's "The Agitators: The Story of Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass" ran at four other theaters around the nation, with more in the works.) And while Son House may not have been a Rochester native, the city played an important role in his life. Now, his life is playing an important role in local theater. World premieres featuring award-winning cast members and crew contribute to a stronger overall theater scene, and Geva's commitment to new work is to be applauded.

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