

NEW YORK LOOKS AT BIRMINGHAM'S PAST WITH 'AIN'T NEVER BEEN EASY'

November 1, 2016

By Rick Johnson, a Tuscaloosa resident

Most of the world knows that Alabama has a storied past in dealing with segregation and the legacy of racism. Stories of Bull Connor and the deaths of the young girls in the bombing of the Birmingham church are infamous. The world has seen how it took incidents like these to initiate real shifts in the laws and the way people looked at and interacted with each other. What is less discussed, let alone highlighted in historical texts, are the organizing efforts that were a reaction to such violence and incitement of violence from the power structure.

Drawing upon the historical accounts outlined in such books as the "Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression" by Robin D. G. Kelley, Dan Friedman set out to tell a story set during the Great Depression. Friedman is a playwright whose own family has had a history of organizing. The resulting play, "**Ain't Never Been Easy**," follows the organizing efforts of white communists as they present the radical ideas of employee ownership and equal pay to the disenfranchised blacks and poor whites, working in the oppressive conditions of the Birmingham steel mills.

The play is presented by the New York City off-Broadway performance house **The Castillo Theatre**, which focuses on multicultural political theater, amongst other works. The theater's approachable venue makes effective use of the space available. The set design evokes the rough-hewn world of the emerging industrial economy of Birmingham. It inventively uses the space available to portray multiple locations, including the simple home of the main characters of Walter and Laverne Bibb, played effectively by Cassagnol Leonidas Jr. and Kendra Holloway. The story progresses as the Bibbs are contacted by an organizer from the North, Harry Stein, played by the affable Zac Pierce-Messico. Stein is seeking to organize the poor in to labor unions, and has identified Walter as a potential leader. From there, the play unfolds as the Bibbs grapple between the meager existence they have and the potential dangers and potential rewards of uniting against the steel mill power structure.

Each character is given a glimpse of their many facets as they focus their energies in a specific pursuit: equality in pay and safe working conditions for both black and white steel workers. Hosea, the lay preacher, is played by Justin Thomas, whose presence and voice can be felt whenever on stage. He struggles with a marriage that is falling apart. Bella, the lone but steadfast black female organizer, is played with subtlety by Michele Q. Williams. She displays lesbian tendencies that may undermine her recruiting efforts. Willie Green, played by the jubilant Jamar Brathwaite, has abandoned his guitar in order to provide for his wife Addie. Addie is played with aplomb by



Patron of the arts Stevan Talevski, "Ain't Never Been Easy" playwright Tom Friedman and Rick Johnson. (Photo courtesy of Rick Johnson)

Ashleigh Awusie, and makes one realize how easily innocence and a desire for happiness can give way to a fight for survival. Rounding out the cast is Lisa Campbell, whose defiant yet flirty portrayal of Jane Rush gives insight into why someone who is born into privilege would work so hard to help organize those who are born without such benefit.

The singing talent of the characters is showcased more than once, giving the talents of Leonidas, Thomas and Brathwaite an additional platform to shine. Unfortunately, some scenes alluded to by the characters beg to be seen, such as the gritty scene of the white steel workers and the black steel workers coming together for a meeting. That would have been difficult to portray but a riveting scene to watch. Or perhaps the development of Willie Green as an organizer to both the black and white workers and the tightrope he walked enticing either group to join in the political effort.

Just as the play begins to connect the audience to these characters through the scenes in the play, we find tragedy, as retribution falls upon those attempting to organize. And just as the audience's empathy begins to develop, the characters are quickly parceled out to their fates. I do not envy the playwright Friedman, nor Allie Woods, the director, who have taken upon themselves to transport an audience to a historical time and place. It's one that is still a painful memory for many. They were left to parse through these events, to give to us yet additional layers of lessons to be learned both politically and socially. "Ain't Never Been Easy" seeks to dig deep into the not so distant American history and expose social and political treasures we can learn from today. Learning lessons, then or now, ain't never been easy, but this play, at least, keeps that conversation going.

"Ain't Never Been Easy" runs through Nov. 20 at the Castillo Theatre at 543 West 42nd St., New York, New York 10036.