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STAGE

Julius X

By Al Letson Jr.

by Wendy Ward

Julius X | By Al Letson Jr. | At Theatre Project through Feb. 19

IN TRUE MIX-'EM-UP FASHION, Al Letson Jr. has taken the violence, politics, and otherworldliness of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and smashed it into the history and mythology of Malcolm X, creating a spoken-word tale of Harlem in the 1960s. Theatre Project commissioned Letson after his 2005 collaboration with Larry Knight and David Pugh, *Griot: He Who Speaks the Sweet Word*, and this new piece, *Julius X*, had its visibly moved opening-night audience grooving and ahhing.

Julius X traces the leadership of minister Julius X, who, after a trip to Mecca, no longer totally agrees with the Black Resistance. He intends to separate from it, feeling that not all whites are the devil, and that only through working with them will blacks gain strength and equality. Cassius (the boisterous yet concentrated André Strong) and Brutus (the excellent, elegant Robert Lee Hardy) think his holier-than-thou shtick angers the larger black party and endangers Harlem; they break off from Julius X and plot to kill him. Harlem burns, sides divide further, and loyal Mark Anthony (the slow-burn-to-blazing William J. Miller) stands alone in the end.

Bashi Rose *is* Julius X. Tall, lean, and graceful, with a 1950s-cut suit and a Nation of Islam bow tie, Rose handles Julius X's soft moments with his wife, Calpurnia (Tavon Sanders), and forceful declarative speeches with equal intensity. This story is set in the realm of men, but it's the women that add a needed dimension of loose emotion with a different voice. Sanders' Calpurnia has a calm but fearful femininity, while Dana Bowles' Portia (Brutus' wife) is wild in her premonitions, grief, and song: Her voice is a wonder. Strong-voiced and 'fro-rocked, Tracie Jiggetts wears many hats in the play and grooves better than the rest, but it's her narrator with a fist in the air and Harlem life-on-the-street updates that balance the action scenes.

And though not the titular character, Harlem itself, with its people and music and street life, has the will and vitality to bring together these two stories from very different eras and make time stand still for two hours onstage. If it feels all too perfect, it's not. Theatre Project is a great space, but a buzzing from the right rafters makes subtleties tough to catch; perhaps those actors with softer lines might lift their voices. But in the end, the spoken-word numbers and that smoky smell when Harlem burns make up for the noise in the house.