

MARCH 3, 2000

fab!

THEATER

JITNEY

Tough and tender, the play brims with stories, funny, touching and uplifting



LANE GANDHARA

August Wilson is something of a legend in American theater.

A college dropout who gained his education as much through reading as through observing life, Wilson created a body of work in the 70's and 80's that clearly established him as the pre-eminent playwright of black America. His sequence of deep, engaging plays about the African-American experience in the 20th century stand true to both the art of theater and the street. The first one in this series, "Jitney" was also Wilson's first professional play, written and produced in 1978 at a small theater in Pittsburgh.

A black market cab company – a jitney station – is about to be evicted to make way for a new, and as yet unplanned, city project. This coming eviction will kill a thriving business, change lives of six cab drivers and one woman and probably leave nothing but a vacant lot in its wake. Zeroing in

on a small space in the heart of a boarded-up 'hood, Wilson finds drama and conflicts of Shakespearian dimensions.

Towering above all characters is Becker, portrayed superbly by Paul Butler. His pride and stature, both as a father and the jitneys' boss, are confronted by his son (Carl Lumbly) just released after 20 years in jail.

Meanwhile, Youngblood (Russell Hornsby), a hunky young driver with a good heart, has to find a way to save a marriage which his macho posing brought to the edge of falling apart.

Told in tough and tender poetics of the black vernacular, the play brims with stories, funny, touching and uplifting. Stephen McKinley Henderson as Turnbo, a fat, middle-age gossip, is particularly good at keeping the audience amused. Tattling all and any neighborhood news, he's an expert in everybody's business, Youngblood's in particular.

Marion McClinton's direction helps move the action along with ease and special kudos go to David Gallo, whose single-location stage set functions perfectly for all occasions.

Through March 26 at the Mark Taper Forum of the Performing Arts Center of Los Angeles County, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, (213) 628-2772. Tickets: \$29-42.

fab!

ARTS

FEBRUARY 18, 2000

THEATER

THE (BAD) BOY NEXT DOOR

Tony Valenzuela brings the safe sex debate to its down and dirty

LANE GANDHARA

Boy meets boy. (Or, in fact, many boys). Boy tests HIV-positive. Boy becomes a hustler and a porn star. Boy likes bareback sex no matter what.

That's, in a nutshell, the life and times of Tony Valenzuela, as brilliantly portrayed by himself. For \$200 you used to be able to have him, for \$25 you can now see him.

Valenzuela's show brings the safe sex debate to its down and dirty—the condom. The Condom lurks in the play as yet another character along with Tony's colorful parents and his fag-hag-social-work girlfriend. To Valenzuela, the Condom is real whereas HIV is an ephemeral threat. Liberated and horny, Valenzuela, like many of the 'post-AIDS' gay generation, disconnects pleasure from death and reduces AIDS to a controllable hassle that is certainly not worth little compromises like a rubber barrier. When he finally tests positive, which to him is "not a question of if but when," he has a revelation. He is set free to do whatever and whoever he wants, the danger is now gone. Of course,

other STDs and the danger he potentially brings his partners never cross his mind. He goes further to create a fantasy world where everyone is HIV-positive, perfectly healthy (thanks to a regular regimen of drugs) and can now enter the bareback bliss.

No one should mandate an individual's sexual behavior. Valenzuela's sexuality is his own and it's up to him to choose his way of exploring it, even if it appears reckless and somewhat shallow. For Valenzuela, the pleasure of unprotected sex outweighs the danger, for many others it doesn't.

As a work of theater, the play offers few thrills. You can put anybody onstage, say, Linda Tripp or Geri Haliwell, and have them reenact their lives in front of the public. With proper lights and professional directing, this may look like theater, but, in essence, it is hardly different from an Oprah special. Valenzuela's one-man show is a case in point — he is no Anna Deavere Smith, his



Tony Valenzuela

acting doesn't rise above storytelling. But his story is interesting enough, and I would recommend it.

"The Bad Boy Next Door" is playing at The Coast Playhouse in West Hollywood. For showtimes and tickets call 323-655-8587.