

NASHVILLE SCENE

Theater
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Nice Threads

Tennessee Rep's *Intimate Apparel* is a visual feast

by Martin Brady

There are good reasons why Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel* has become a popular item in regional theaters throughout the country. To begin with, it's an extraordinarily well-crafted play. Also, it mines the mother lode of drama inherent in the immigrant—and especially the African American—experience. Of course, its superficial theme concerns romantic love, which at some level qualifies it as the stage equivalent of a chick flick. Yet it's ultimately a story about friendship and trust, and in Tennessee Repertory Theatre's current staging it's a beautiful thing to behold.

Director Rene Copeland has assembled a strong cast to tell the story of North Carolina-born Esther Mills, a 35-year-old seamstress working in 1905's Lower Manhattan. Esther's clientele includes everyone from society ladies to hookers, for whom she crafts fine garments and underwear. Esther desires love and harbors a dream to open her own beauty salon catering to African American women. Meanwhile, the passionate yet still virginal Esther embarks on a long-distance correspondence with a laborer in Panama, who eventually arrives in New York looking for marriage. She learns some bitter life lessons from that experience while also struggling with her feelings for a Jewish merchant.

Nottage's tale, which focuses closely on the lives of six characters, also covers a wide range of cultural issues: turn-of-the-20th-century manners and mores, class distinction, women's suffrage, ragtime music, slavery and the northward migration of blacks. Yet the author's integration of time and place never overwhelms the story's particulars, which probe poignantly into female bonding, male strengths and failings, and, in its frankest moments, lesbianism and prostitution.

Stella Reed is Esther, and like others in this cast she inhabits her character with a verisimilitude that transports her audience. John Brooks is also riveting as Esther's irresponsible husband, George. Ross Brooks, as the fabric dealer Mr. Marks, turns in a marvelously understated and sensitive performance, as do Jenny Littleton as one of Esther's upper-crust customers and Lisa Kimmey as a likable but jaded lady of the evening. Tamira Henry completes the cast as Esther's dotting landlady.