

# Uneven script, worthy story on the bill at ‘Thaddeus and Slocum’

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Lookingglass Theatre’s world premiere production, “Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure,” explores a fascinating period in Chicago theater history that is largely forgotten, even though it vividly embodies the dynamics of race and show business in this city as they existed more than a century ago.

Writer-actor and Lookingglass ensemble member Kevin Douglas has set his story in 1908, and evokes three principal locations: The then grand new Majestic Theatre (now the Private Bank Theatre) on Randolph Street, a popular vaudeville theater where the operative rule was that just one “colored act” could appear on any given program; the Pekin Theatre, a black-owned and -operated stage at the corner of 27th and State Street that opened in 1906 and featured “a stock company of colored artists, original musical comedies, farces, and plays written and composed by colored men,” and the Levee, Chicago’s “red light district,” located near the intersection of Cermak Road and Michigan Avenue on the near South Side.

At the center of Douglas’ tale are Thaddeus (Travis Turner, recently seen in Steppenwolf’s “The Flick”) and Slocum (Samuel Taylor), two struggling song-and-dance men and skilled acrobats. Thaddeus is black and Slocum is white, and they have been almost like brothers since childhood, when Slocum’s Irish-American father, a successful vaudevillian, mentored them.



## ‘THADDEUS AND SLOCUM:

### A VAUDEVILLE ADVENTURE’

#### **Somewhat recommended**

**When:** Through Aug. 14

**Where:** Lookingglass Theatre at  
Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan

**Tickets:** \$40 – \$75

**Info:** (312) [337-0665](tel:3123370665)

<http://www.lookingglasstheatre.org>

**Run time:** 2 hours and

**15 minutes with one intermission**



Travis Turner (as Thaddeus, left) and Samuel Taylor as Slocum in "Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure" at Lookingglass Theatre. (Photo: Liz Lauren)

When we first meet the pair they are impoverished street performers, with Thaddeus the more disciplined of the two, and Slocum prone to drinking. They often ply their trade in front of the Majestic, hoping that its impresario, Gerry (Raymond Fox), might catch a glimpse of their act and hire them. But Gerry already has a popular "colored act" on his lineup, so Slocum devised this idea: Instead of a biracial act, with Thaddeus as the commercial liability, they can *both* put on blackface makeup and sell themselves as a (white) minstrel act. The deception briefly works in their favor, but it puts Thaddeus in great peril, and also makes him ache for his true identity.

As it happens, another "colored" performer also is wrestling with her identity. Isabella (the beautiful, charismatic Monica Raymund, who plays Gabriella Dawson on NBC's "Chicago Fire") is a semi-classical singer — the daughter of a black mother and Italian father who has been "passing" as white for most of her life. Always terrified that her secret will be uncovered and her career destroyed, she is initially pursued by Slocum, but immediately feels a bond of recognition and attraction with Thaddeus.

Meanwhile, the playfully sniping and competitive black vaudeville couple of Nellie (a spicy Sharriese Hamilton) and Zeke (Tosin Morohunfola) perform at the Pekin and socialize with Isabella and Thaddeus, who is just beginning to discover his power as a solo performer. Molly Brennan brings panache to the role of Abby, the stylish stripper (deftly doubling as Sarah, Gerry's precocious young daughter). Lawrence DiStasi plays Frank, Gerry's hapless talent agent, who fears losing his job to the bookers for the powerful Orpheum circuit (and also adds zest with a balcony balancing act as a fabled circus performer). Adam Wesley Brown not only portrays a devious theater manager but supplies the fine piano and banjo accompaniment throughout, with period music composed by Rick Sims.

If you detect some hesitation about the overall production, you are correct. Turner and Taylor have a solid rapport, with the highlight of the show their superb performance of a tabletop acrobatic act that is immense fun to watch, and

possesses Lookingglass' trademark physical theater prowess. But Douglas' script is uneven, as is the show's co-direction by J. Nicole Brooks and Krissy Vanderwarker. And the piece never quite matches the emotional heat of say, the Ruffians' "Burning Bluebeard," another Chicago theater history drama, which conjured the 1903 Iroquois Theatre fire so brilliantly.

Katie Spelman's vaudeville-stye choreography is complemented by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi's circus choreography and Ryan Bourque's fight choreography. And the ever-ingenious set designer Collette Pollard (backed by lighting designer Christine A. Binder) has transformed the Lookingglass space into a cabaret, with Samantha Jones' period costumes adding beauty, color and character.

Overall the show needs a stronger focus on the storytelling, for despite the "vaudeville adventure" of its subtitle, this is a tale that demands more than sketch comedy concision.





Molly Brennan plays Abby in "Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure," at Lookingglass Theatre. (Photo: Liz Lauren)