

Lookingglass Theatre's *Thaddeus and Slocum* is more vaudeville, less adventure

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Lookingglass Theatre's *Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure* certainly gets the vaudeville aspects right. When Lawrence E. Distasi—in a handlebar mustache and some turn-of-the-century spandex—did a handstand on the railing of the balcony, the audience let out a gasp, then cheered and applauded madly. Our collective amazement made it feel like we were all back in 1908, easily dazzled and filled with hope that the defending champion Chicago Cubs would win the World Series.

As *Thaddeus and Slocum*, Travis Turner and Samuel Taylor have the old song and dance down to a T, from the witty patter to the soft shoe to the (particularly impressive) acrobatics. The pair tumble across a raised platform, then flip each other into the air, always landing with their feet on the ground, bowler hats in hand. The play, written by Lookingglass ensemble member Kevin Douglas, focuses on the duo as they go from busking on the streets of Chicago to playing the largest vaudeville theater in town. But it's harder for *Thaddeus and Slocum* than most, because *Thaddeus* is black.

In 1908 there are few spots for performers of color, yet blackface is very much in fashion (Al Jolson would get his big break with a minstrel show the following year). Cut to *Slocum's* scheme: the pair will pass as white by performing in blackface, never allowing anyone to see them without their makeup. And at first, it works like a charm. They work their way up from a seedy nightclub to a burlesque to the biggest show in town, all without blowing their cover. It's an examination of race, identity, and discrimination sprinkled with high-energy song-and-dance performances.

But the story is slow to start, and the ending abrupt and unsatisfying, an unfortunate pair of bookends for a work otherwise filled with delightful showmanship. *Thaddeus* has trouble coming to terms with hiding his race, while *Isabella* (Monica Raymund), a light-skinned black woman, gladly passes as white to perform on white stages. And black duo *Zeke and Nellie* (Tosin Morohunfola and Sharriese Hamilton, two of the liveliest and most entertaining performers of the night) fully embrace their identity. The different characters' varied means of pursuing fame despite racial barriers is interesting and well worth exploring further—but in this instance every scene and conversation stops just short of being revelatory. I would have much preferred a two-hour variety show followed by a discussion about showbiz and race to a muddled story line interwoven throughout.

All the same, the evening made me excited about the old days of theater, and Lookingglass's cabaret setup transformed the space into something out of the past. It's immensely satisfying to see a glamorous chanteuse go onstage in a gorgeous gown simply to deliver a song free of gimmicks. And there's an important story at the heart of *Thaddeus and Slocum*—it just can't stick the landing. v