

Dynamic leads propel Lookingglass' 'Thaddeus and Slocum'

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- Romance flourishes between performers Thaddeus (Travis Taylor) and Isabella (Monica Raymund) in Kevin Douglas' "Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure," in its world premiere at Lookingglass Theatre in Chicago.

Courtesy of Liz Lauren



- The dynamic Travis Turner, left, and Samuel Taylor play the titular characters in Lookingglass Theatre Company's world premiere of "Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure."
Courtesy of Liz Lauren



- Monica Raymund, of NBC's "Chicago Fire," co-stars as a Chicago chanteuse in Kevin Douglas' play with music "Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure." It runs through Aug. 14 at Lookingglass Theatre Company.
Courtesy of Liz Lauren



- Lookingglass Theatre Company presents the world premiere of the Chicago-inspired "Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure" by ensemble member Kevin Douglas.
Courtesy of Liz Lauren
- Molly Brennan plays a burlesque house owner in Lookingglass Theatre Company's world premiere of "Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure."
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Two recent events reveal how far theater has come in the pursuit of diversity and inclusion.

ADVERTISING

The same weekend the Tony Awards made history by conferring musical theater's top acting honors on four African-Americans, Lookingglass Theatre premiered "Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure," an examination of race and identity chronicling the challenges artists of color overcame to secure their place on stage.

Written by Kevin Douglas, with ragtime-inspired tunes by composer Rick Sims, "Thaddeus and Slocum" tells the story of a song-and-dance duo struggling to make it in 1908 Chicago. Thaddeus (the endlessly charming Travis Turner), an African-American, is the duo's creative force. Promoting the act falls to the impetuous Slocum (Samuel Taylor, discreet and complex), the duo's Caucasian half.

While the childhood pals manage to eke out a living busking, they are eager to take their act from the street to the stage of the Majestic Theatre, the city's pre-eminent vaudeville house. (It still stands on Monroe Street but is now known as PrivateBank Theatre.)

The problem is, Majestic owner Gerry (Raymond Fox) allows only one "Negro act" on the bill. Slocum suggests they sidestep the policy by wearing blackface and calling themselves a minstrel act. Reluctant to surrender his dignity by "corking up," Travis resists. But Slocum prevails, convincing his friend that the discomfort is worth it, if it guarantees them a shot at the big time.

Or is it? That's one of several questions "Thaddeus and Slocum" poses. What price will people pay for success and what principles will they compromise to achieve their goals?

Those questions weigh more heavily on Thaddeus who, as a black man, will suffer more serious repercussions than his partner if they're caught breaking the rules. Thaddeus soon discovers they're not the only ones. The Majestic's Isabella (the lovely Monica Raymond, who plays the role through July 17), is an African-American chanteuse passing for white, and she convinces Thaddeus to keep her secret.

She introduces him to fellow hooper Zeke (Tosin Morohunfola) and his girlfriend, Nellie (the personable Sharriese Hamilton), a song-and-dance duo who headline The Pekin, Chicago's black-owned vaudeville theater. It's there, during an impromptu performance, that Thaddeus experiences for the first time the solo success that threatens his partnership with Slocum.

Rounding out the charismatic cast are Lawrence DiStasi as a talent booker whose job is in jeopardy, Adam Wesley Brown as an unscrupulous theater owner and the delightfully audacious Molly Brennan as a stripper with a heart of gold.

Lookingglass' space is almost unrecognizable thanks to Collette Pollard, who has transformed the giant black box into an early 20th-century music hall, complete with footlights and curtains. Samantha Jones' period costumes are tasteful yet unfussy, with a touch of whimsy evident in Isabella's lovely, butterfly-inspired gown.

But "Thaddeus and Slocum" falls a little short of its potential with an ending that -- while poignantly staged by co-directors J. Nicole Books and Krissy Vanderwarker -- felt abrupt and unsatisfying. As entertaining as Hamilton and Morohunfola are, their story felt superfluous.

Still, "Thaddeus and Slocum" is a canny show with a pair of crowd-pleasers in the well-matched Turner and Taylor. Adroit physical performers, they perform choreographer Katie Spelman's cheery soft shoe and tap routines as gracefully as they execute Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi's playful circus choreography.

While it's unsettling to witness such offensive racial stereotypes portrayed on stage, watching Turner and Taylor is a real treat.

