

Lookingglass' Unbalanced Thaddeus and Slocum Ultimately Unsatisfying

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Samuel Taylor (left) plays Slocum and Travis Turner plays Thaddeus. Photo by Liz Lauren.

Lookingglass Theatre's world premiere of *Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure* chronicles the (vaudevillian) adventures of best friends and partners Thaddeus (Travis Turner) and Slocum (Samuel Taylor) as they vie to perform on the stage of Chicago's famed Majestic Theatre. The play, written by ensemble member Kevin Douglas and co-directed by J. Nicole Brooks and Krissy Vanderwarker, explores a myriad of topics across two acts, ranging from issues of appropriation and racism, to inequality and blackface.

It all begins when Slocum has an idea that just might let the duo circumnavigate the Majestic Theatre's policy to only program one "negro act" per performance. That slot has already been taken, and despite their act's success performing on street corners across Chicago, Thaddeus' race keeps them out of the running. If both performers "cork up" and don blackface, they will both be perceived as white, thus mitigating the entire issue. In addition to tracing their journey to secure stage time at the Majestic, *Thaddeus and Slocum* also follows Thaddeus' involvement with singer and frequent Majestic headliner, Isabella (Monica Raymund). Their romance is slow to blossom; however, Isabella's own secrets smartly cement her importance in the narrative beyond that of the traditional ingénue.

Set in 1908, the play is quite timely, as the complicated intersection of race and success (or lack thereof) has clear parallels to performers in contemporary entertainment. Even amidst what is ostensibly a comedy—combining song,

dance, burlesque and acrobatics for a true vaudeville experience—this subject matter is handled with the proper weight. Audience members realize the danger of Slocum’s plan—and his racial impunity within it—immediately; however, Brooks and Vanderwarker aren’t afraid of mining even the more dramatic scenes for a few laughs along the way.

Thaddeus and Slocum’s cast and design are uniformly excellent. Turner has a natural chemistry with each of his scene partners, and, when opposite Taylor’s Slocum or Raymund’s Isabella, even the exposition-laden scenes in the first act ring true. Katie Spelman’s choreography and Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi’s work as circus choreographer are equally impressive. Thaddeus and Slocum’s comedy act is as acrobatic as it is funny and the show’s opening musical number is winsome. Christine A. Binder’s lighting design is exceptional, as is the work of costumer Samantha Jones and sound designer Josh Horvath. Their work coalesces perfectly to create a vaudeville vibe that is immediately recognizable, and some clever scenic design by Collette Pollard ensures that locations are delineated in a seamless manner. Unfortunately, these praise-worthy moments are inconsistently plotted throughout the production’s two acts.

If one third of *Thaddeus and Slocum* is focused on the pair’s scheme to achieve fame, another third is focused on Thaddeus’ growing relationship with Isabella, and the final piece is composed of an assortment of vaudeville and burlesque acts. The first act has a lot of backstory to set up, and many of these scenes pale in comparison to the fun and excitement of the vaudeville performances that pepper and occasionally complement the otherwise linear narrative. While act one’s pace could be quickened, it does clearly establish Thaddeus’ relationship with both Slocum and Isabella, signifying their importance in his overall narrative.

By intermission, the pace has picked up slightly, as Douglas begins complicating the story, while act two thrusts Thaddeus, Slocum and the audience headlong into the many dangerous repercussions of Slocum’s proposal. With every scene, the stakes get higher and higher, and I found myself wondering if it was possible for Thaddeus to fully extricate himself from his perilous entanglements, and, if so, how these multiple conflicts would be resolved.

Sadly, they aren’t resolved. By curtain call, the relationships that we have watched develop over the past two hours are largely forgotten or left up in the air. Even a beautifully choreographed moment, lit hauntingly by multiple “ghost lights” throughout the audience, can’t do much to wash the taste out of your mouth. While it is possible to infer how Thaddeus and Slocum’s friendship panned out, the lack of closure stings, considering that we’ve witnessed their kinship border on brotherly love as they desperately attempt to break into the vaudeville circuit. Thaddeus and Isabella’s storyline is also unresolved, bringing the considerable focus spent on it into question. The ending, ultimately, is rushed and unsatisfying, undermining an otherwise enjoyable piece of theater with something important to say.

The cast of *Thaddeus and Slocum* also features ensemble members Lawrence E. DiStasi and Raymond Fox, with Molly Brennan (*Lookingglass Alice*), Adam Brown (*ONCE* on Broadway), Sharriese Hamilton, Tosin Morohunfola, Christina Nieves. Other creative team members are Rick Sims (composer), Ryan Bourque (fight choreographer) and Sarah Burnham (properties design).

Thaddeus and Slocum runs June 12 through August 14 at Lookingglass Theatre Company, located inside Chicago’s historic Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave at Pearson. Performances are Wednesday-Sunday at 7:30pm, with some 2pm performances on Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays. Tickets can be purchased [online](#) or by phone at 312-337-0665 and range from \$40-\$75 with Cabaret Pit Seats for \$20 to patrons under 35 years old.

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