



Glenda Frank

“Day of Absence” by Douglas Turner Ward.

Directed by Arthur French at St. Marks Playhouse, 80 St. Marks Place, NYC.

Dec. 4-11, 2016. Mon., Tues., Thurs., Fri., Sat. at 7 PM. Sun. at 3 and 7 PM. Tickets \$18 at 212-868-444 or www.necinc.org.

Group and student discounts.

Reviewed by Glenda Frank December 4, 2016

To celebrate its 50th anniversary the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) is staging “Day of Absence,” a satire by Douglas Turner Ward. The play won the 1965 Drama Desk award for playwriting and made history. Backed by a grant from the Ford Foundation, playwright Ward, actor Robert Hooks and manager Gerald S. Krone launched the NEC, a home for black talent and a must-see for anyone interested in American theatre for over 20 years.



The town marches to get its Negroes back.



Michael O'Day as News Announcer, Kim Weston Moran as the town's Social Worker.

Staged primarily by black actors in white-face, “Day of Absence” explores one day in a town in the deep South when all African Americans have vanished. Two laconic Southern men (Jimmy Gary, Jr. and Albert Eggleston) slowly come to the realization that something is wrong, but they can't put their finger on it. In another part of town, the husband (Daniel Carlton) of a Southern Belle (China L. Colston) insists that she care for her crying child. But she doesn't know how. The absent nanny did everything for her. She and I are a pair, she informs her husband. You got both of us when you married me.

Slowly Ward's gentle touch grows harsher and the dismay deeper as the white townspeople realize they will have to care for themselves: empty their own trash, sweep and mop, polish their shoes, drive their own cars. Panic sweeps the town. Search parties find no one at home and there is some talk of burning down black neighborhoods to find the missing workers. A few African Americans are located in the Confederate Memorial Hospital, but they are all in a coma. Sheriff Bull uses dogs and power hoses trying to flush convicts out of their cells, but the jail remains in a curious lock-down.

And then there are the disappearances of prominent whites, including the man courting the mayor's sister. “Infiltrators,” someone declares, “secret Negroes.” A Klan big shot (William Jay Marshall) and the Reverend Pious (Count Stovall), both inarticulate men with a few push-button phrases, pontificate to a reporter. The mayor (Charles Weldon, NEC Artistic Director) makes a televised appeal, even getting down on his knees and promising to kiss the shoe of the first black to appear. When that fails, the mob attacks him. And then, the next morning, everyone is mysterious back at work without explanation.

The format is funny, clever, and inventive but the play does not wear its age well. Much of that has to do with the curious direction by Arthur French. The whole seemed rushed to production; some of the actors had not learned their lines. The costumes by Katherine Roberson were mostly tongue-in-cheek Americana: stars and strips, red, white and blue. The women were dolls, in white face with round red cheeks, red, red lips, and bold wigs in a variety of styles and colors. The make-up was attractive and droll. Many in the cast, especially those with only a few lines, chose postures, expressions, and attitudes to distinguish the characters and create a panorama of the town.



Bill Jay as the Klan bigshot.

For all its faults, it was good to see this play on stage again, good to hear some of the sharp lines, like the Klansman saying yes, he wanted separation, but only when he says so. The bible-toting Reverend's explanation for the disappearance was “voodoo.” And someone remarked: “Return your buckets to where they lay and all will be forgiven,” a paraphrase of Booker T. Washington's 1895 speech of accommodation to racism. The mayor's speech, although laced with bigotry, was also moving. “We need you. You're part of us,” he confesses. And then he adds, “You belong to us.”