

CULTURE GULCH

'The playwright made us care about people. That's the art of this piece'

The talkback at PlayFest's staging of "Hop Tha A" on Wednesday night explored difficult questions.



JUDITH REYNOLDS/Special to the Herald



Judith Reynolds

The first question in the first talkback on the first night of PlayFest was a bruiser.

Wednesday night, the playwright, James Anthony Tyler, and the cast of his new play, "Hop Tha A" assembled on stage at the Durango Arts Center. The company had just finished a staged reading of Tyler's work and gathered for an open discussion with the audience. Moderator Richard Dresser asked a simple question: "What jumped out at you? What will you think

about tomorrow?"

A man in the front row immediately raised his hand and gave a mixed answer. He began with compliments: The play was well written and the actors were excellent. But then he delivered his bruising comment. "All the chances, all the hope, all the joy arose, and you dashed it all, you broke all hope."

Here's where I put in a spoiler alert, because Tyler's protagonist, Tyrone (engagingly played by Ronald Emile) is a young man full of life and promise. We first meet him when he reveals a deeply affectionate attachment to his mother (the fiercely funny

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Portia) and later cajoles and connects with a co-worker, Niesha (convincingly portrayed by Sydney Presendieu). Quickly and skillfully, the actors endeared themselves to the audience, outlining their need for meaning and connection. Here's the spoiler: Late in the play, we learn that Tyrone has given up, and that revelation is shocking. It is the stuff of great tragedy and essential to the works of Shakespeare or Arthur Miller or August Wilson.

The man in the audience seemed to be reacting to the

shock of tragedy, and in his awkward, difficult way, his response suggested just that. Clearly angry about the fate of the engaging protagonist, the man was offended by the playwright's choices. Unfortunately, the man tossed in a reckless piece of advice.

A stunned silence followed. Moderator Dresser adroitly acknowledged the man's remarks and passed the microphone to the director, known as Portia, who also played the mother in Tyler's work.

"Everyone is entitled to their opinion, even that cruel remark," she said. She went on to support writing about human pain and the need for connection. "The theme is a difficult one."

Dresser added: "The playwright made us care about people. That's the art of this piece."

At that point, audience members seemed to feel freer to offer their reactions to the play. Several were grateful to the playwright for taking on a difficult subject and mentioned that their families were marked by suicide.

One woman noted her father's suicide and said how the play transformed a tragic event into a work of art. "Art is supposed to evoke emotion," she said and expressed gratitude for transforming a tragedy into a play an audience could share.

A few questions focused on the apparent discrepancy of a

play set in Harlem with a Black cast playing to a white audience in Colorado. Responses from the audience and the cast reinforced the universality of themes of loneliness and despair wherever the play is set.

After the reading, I approached the man with the opening question. He restated his mixed response, saying he wanted to say clearly that the play was well written and well acted, but why destroy all hope for the future. I asked if he had a similar reaction to other tragedies, because that's a core theme in tragedy. He seemed stalled in his own devastating experience of Tyler's play. He liked the main character and wanted Tyrone to succeed. And it devastated him that the play

ended as it did.

Kudos to PlayFest for having the courage to select Tyler's play and to Dresser for asking substantive questions. His last one was: "What will you tell your friends tomorrow about the play you have seen tonight?"

For this columnist, I'm on record to say that PlayFest is coming of age as a serious venue for developing new plays. Tyler's "Hop The A" is a telling new work about old themes, and we had the great good luck to share that experience opening night at PlayFest.

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