

Appropriate

By Branden Jacobs-Jenkins
Directed by Lila Neugebauer
Helen Hayes Theatre
New York, NY
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Reviewed by Alex Ferrone

A prolonged blackout opens Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’s *Appropriate*, so it is through sound—the tremulous hum of “*a billion cicadas*”—that the audience first encounters the yet unseen world on stage. In Lila Neugebauer’s production at the Hayes Theatre, the play’s first time on Broadway, ten years after regional co-premieres in Louisville and Chicago, sound designers Bray Poor and Will Pickens immersed the audience in a surround-sound cicada song that seemed almost to overwhelm the senses. I say *senses* (plural) because the soundscape’s penetrative quality was intended to exceed audition: as Jacobs-Jenkins explains in the stage directions of the play’s prologue, the sound “*sweeps the theater [...] over and beyond the stage – washing itself over the walls and the floors, baptizing the aisles and the seats, forcing itself into every inch of every space, every nook, every pocket, hiding place and pore until this incessant chatter is touching you. It is touching you.*” We were thus meant to *feel* the sound on our bodies, on our skin.

When the lights finally came up on the meticulously cluttered interior of an old two-story Arkansas plantation house, designed by the collective Dots, the play’s premise was deceptively familiar: the semi-estranged family of a dead white patriarch reunites to auction off the property and divide the assets, but their long festering resentments soon dominate the proceedings and cause irreparable fissures. *Appropriate* knowingly riffs on the American tradition of the family reunion play, inviting easy comparisons to plays like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Buried Child*, and *August: Osage County*—a tradition Jacobs-Jenkins admires and also problematizes for its racial

exclusivity. “No one ever talks about *Raisin in the Sun* as a family drama,” he told Diep Tran in the December 2023 issue of *Playbill*: “It’s always ‘a social allegory about race and class.’” Jacobs-Jenkins expressed a similar misgiving in *American Theatre* nine years earlier, the first time *Appropriate* was mounted in New York in an off-Broadway production at the Signature Center: “there were a lot of triggers for me in hearing people list and describe the ‘great American family dramas.’ I’d look around and be like, ‘There’s no people of color on these lists.’ [...] Who has access to this idea of ‘family’ as a universal theme?”

Of course, the Lafayette family drama was front and center at the Hayes Theatre for *Appropriate*’s almost three-hour runtime. The cast, led by an indomitable Sarah Paulson, traded endless verbal (and eventually physical) assaults as they aired their grievances and exposed each other’s indiscretions. Supporting performances were uniformly excellent: Corey Stoll, as the absent, entitled son for whom care entails merely signing checks, and Nathalie Gold, as his apprehensive wife who struggles as an outsider in the family, were standouts; so was Michael Esper, as the prodigal son whose serial transgressions alienate those close to him; Elle Fanning was especially memorable as his suspiciously young girlfriend, whose new-age spiritualist word salad was a consistent source of humor. But the evening belonged to Paulson: she gave an astonishing performance as the eldest daughter Toni, at times beset with exhaustion, at others ferociously stalking the stage, her fierce commitment to her family barely concealing both vulnerability and venom.

If there is familiarity here, soon comes the curveball, a series of disturbing discoveries as the family sorts through Daddy’s things: first, an album of lynching photos; then, jars of “weird stuff” that resembles human remains; finally, a Klan hood over the head of the youngest grandchild, which, when I saw the show, drew the night’s loudest combination of belly laughs

and horrified gasps. It is a rupture the family is determined to avoid, as they downplay and outright deny Daddy's obvious involvement in anti-Black violence. But their insistence on centering themselves, on claiming victimhood at each other's hands, wilfully sidelines the Black victims of racist violence whose traces continue to crop up on the family estate. And so the photo album shifts signification, no longer a physical record of heinous racist violence but a commodity worth "hundreds of thousands of dollars" whose sale would enact yet another indignity on the murdered Black people among its pages.

While the family cannot fathom calling Daddy an outright racist (gasp!), daughter-in-law Rachael points out that the Antebellum South is "the soil upon which his worldview was fashioned." This mention of soil is no coincidence, for the vast property includes two burial grounds: one, a cemetery for generations of the Lafayette family; the other, the unmarked graves of generations of enslaved people who worked on the plantation. Even unseen, they are nevertheless there. And so we return to the cicadas, whose characteristic life cycle confines them to the soil for thirteen years at a time. In *Appropriate*, the cicadas never left, their low thrum pulsating through the theatre for the full length of the show. (In the text, Jacobs-Jenkins specifies that they "*fade to a place just beyond us but never disappear*," and, sure enough, the stage directions that end each scene reinvolve their continuous presence.) It is an unnerving element of the sound design, something the audience acclimates to, often drowned out by the onstage histrionics, but never absent—an ongoingness that recalls Christina Sharpe's figuration of "antiblackness as total climate" in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*.

Ultimately, little is resolved by the end of the play. Instead, Jacobs-Jenkins pulls another narrative trick (and maybe exacts some revenge) by absencing the Lafayette family altogether: generations whoosh by ("*it is some day – any day – tomorrow – thirteen years from now –*

twenty-six years from now. It is the future. It is the present. It is any present. Is the past – any past – now”), and, in a stunning *coup de théâtre*, the house falls apart before our eyes. Jane Cox’s dazzling lighting produced a cinematic timelapse as shelves collapsed and windows shattered and a chandelier swung from a rope. Finally, a colossal tree grew from the ground, its wide trunk and full branches stretching out of view, high up into the fly space—radical growth after so much decay. Neugebauer’s final image departed from the text, but it was perhaps in direct conversation with the titles of the play’s three acts, not reproduced in the Playbill. Where Act II, “Walpurgisnacht,” gestures to paganism and witchcraft (and surely to *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, another “family drama” in its own way), Acts I and III, titled “The Book of Revelations” and “The Book of Genesis,” take us from the end of the world back to the beginning, to the garden and the great flood, to regeneration. The production’s final scene, with its spectacular collapse and its magnificent tree growing through (or perhaps from) the ruins, beautifully captured the extent to which *Appropriate* is not really about the Lafayettes at all: it’s about the house and about the land on which it stands and eventually falls. It’s about the soil.

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