

This is a bit of a Catch Up post, in that the events described herein occurred Saturday last, but I am only just now getting around to writing them down.

Saturday was a full day for **Pawn** with a matinee of *Shuck 'n' Jive*, at Soho Theatre, in Soho, and an evening performance of *Dirty Crusty*, at The Yard, in Hackney Wick. And it actually turns out to be a pretty good double bill.

Shuck 'n' Jive is a piece by Cassiopeia Berkeley-Agyepong and Simone Ibbett-Brown, about two young black women named Cassi & Simone, played by Tanisha Spring and Olivia Onyehara, respectively. Directed by Lakesha Arie-Angelo, the two performers are on a single set, between two risers of seating, on a long, narrow stage. At each end of the stage are set walls, studded with props which will be used during the show, as well as a pair of video screens which grant us visibility into the character's text messages.



The plot is simple enough; Cassi & Simone are frustrated in their intersectional lot in life. They are black in a white-dominated society, and they are women in a male dominated society. Not only that, but they are artists in a society which doesn't deem that too important, providing a third axis to their intersectionality. We are voyeurs on the wall of their auditions, which inevitably devolve, at least in their minds, from Ophelia's soliloquys into minstrel show rags.



They're fed up, and they're not going to take it any more! So, in Howard Beal meets Mickey Rooney, they're going to put on a show, and most of the rest of our show is watching Cassi & Simone plan how to put together their ground-breaking new show about black women artists putting on a show for unappreciative white producers, and audiences.

So, how well does it work? Pretty good, if you ask me. There's a little preachiness now and then, but the diverse audience at this Soho matinee seemed appreciative of even that. One of the show's best bits, which pops up now and then, is a Game Show divertissement called *Fine When We're Friends* in which a racial- or gender-insensitive or ignorant phrase is read aloud, and contestants must identify whether this would be generally acceptable, acceptable from a friend, or not acceptable at all. Overall there's a very optimistic air to this piece, well performed by the high energy duo of Spring & Onyehara, who's bubbly energy and, at times, wide-eyed enthusiasm, infects the viewer.



So is this a minstrel show itself? Perhaps, but one with a point, and acid point. Next up was Claire Barron's *Dirty Crusty* at The Yard. I mention the playwright before the title as Ms Barron has earned top billing, with her earlier successes, *Dance Nation*, *You Got Older*, *I'll Never Love Again*, and *Baby Screams Miracle*. Barron's work has won her Obie awards, Pulitzer nods, Drama Circle nominations, etc. Girl got game. This production, directed by The Yard's founder and Artistic Director, Jay Miller, stars Akiya Henry as Jeanie, an aimless thirty-something, Douggie McMeekin as Victor, Jeanie's neighbour and old friend, and Abiona Omonua as Synda, a dancer and instructor at a local youth club.



Photo by Maurizio Martorana

Plot? There is no real high mission on this tale of a woman finding herself in the middle of her life (in her eyes, she's pretty young if you ask me) and feeling as though she's just been drifting sideways, with no forward movement. She doesn't really like her friends; lives like a slob; wants sex but not love; and feels like she's getting out of life exactly what she's putting into it; Nothing.

After skipping out on a party, she runs into Victor on the way home. Not having seen each other in some time, they realize they're now neighbours. It's not really giving too much away to reveal that they quickly decide that they want to fuck a lot, but not get too attached. Yeah, right. We all know how that goes. Meanwhile, Jeanie stumbles across Synda practicing her ballet steps through the windows of the kids club. They strike up a discussion and soon Synda is teaching Jeanie rudimentary dance, and considering her for a role in a small performance piece.

So these three people, in various combinations, bounce off of each other and impinge upon each other's dreams and fears. That Jeanie and Synda are both black is, perhaps, totally ancillary to the story, but having just seen *Shuck 'n' Jive*, perhaps **Pawn** was sensitized to this fact. Victor is white, yet there is no real racial tension implied or expressed. Perhaps just colour-blind casting at it's best?

I shan't go in to much more depth. This is a somewhat aimless play. until it very much isn't, but to reveal the ways and means of that would be to reveal too much. I liked this show, a lot. The performances were top notch across the board. Henry, as Jeanie, has perhaps the heaviest lift of all, as aimlessness can be so hard to portray, but she does so with viscious passivity. Omonua is somewhat a cypher as Synda, but comes into her own later in the show. McMeekin deserves special note for his affable willingness to do whatever is required of him by this script, and his director's whims, and to do so gamely.

Shuck 'n' Jive closed its run at Soho Theatre following Saturday evening's performance. *Dirty Crusty* having only just opened last Thursday, runs through 30 November at [The Yard](#),

Queen's Yard, Hackney Wick, E9 5EN; Box Office Line is 0333 320 2896.