

Byhalia, Mississippi (review)

July 12, 2017 by [Tim Treanor](https://dctheatrescene.com/author/tim-treanor/) (<https://dctheatrescene.com/author/tim-treanor/>)

This year the Contemporary American Theater Festival, like the nation itself, has given itself over to political conflict. Whether we are in the classroom, or a Nazi interrogation chamber, or an Amish community or even in the recollections of a young girl at war with her parents and all authority, we are seeing human protagonists bump up against the powerful in a rule-based society.



(l-r) Yaegel T. Welch and Jason Babinsky in *Byhalia, Mississippi* at Contemporary American Theater Festival (Photo: Seth Freeman)

Such plays, in general, require heroes and villains, and the five other plays I saw had them, to varying degrees. You would expect the same out of a play set in Byhalia, a town where, forty-three years ago, a policeman shot an unarmed Black prisoner in the back, and then claimed that he killed himself running into a fence. That you get something better is due, certainly, to the skill and ambition of playwright Evan Linder — but it is also due to the spirit of Alfred “Skip” Robinson who, by leading a contentious boycott, forced the town to look at itself, and become better.

The *Byhalia* which opens up to us on the Frank Stage is one in which Jim (Jason Babinsky), an unemployed construction worker, can have Karl (Yaegel T. Welch), an African-American, as his closest friend — and no one is self-conscious about it. Even Jim's bible-thumping, tart-tongued mother in law, Celeste (Hollis McCarthy), is more troubled by the crib Karl built than she is by his race.



(l-r) Jessica Savage and Hollis McCarthy

And Laurel (Jessica Savage), Jim's wife, is about to have a baby. The characters banter and laugh like folks in a good Neil Simon play. They make themselves endearing, even irresistible. They are all sinners like us, and so induce us to take a rooting interest in each one of them.

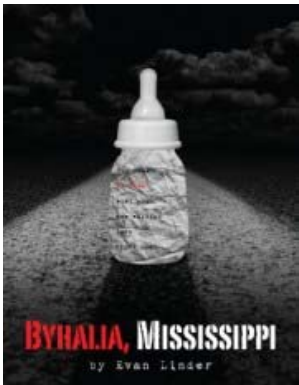
And then something happens. Laurel delivers her baby — and they discover he is Black. Jim first, absurdly, accuses Karl of fathering the baby, and then, finally disabused of that notion, abandons the family home to live with Karl.

It is ostensibly Laurel's infidelity which has torn their family apart, and not race, but race remains an unwelcome lingering presence, like the odor of fish gone bad. "You killed my baby," Jim says to Laurel, by way of explaining why her infidelity was different, and worse, than the time he was unfaithful to her. He does not explain why he cannot claim the fatherhood being offered to him. In *Byhalia, Mississippi*, he doesn't have to.



(l-r) Jessica Savage and Adrian Kiser

But race doesn't come to the fore until Ayesha (Adrian Kiser), the wife of the upper-crust man who actually impregnated Laurel, puts it there. Ayesha, in a devastating conversation to Laurel, spells out exactly what it took for her and her husband, as African-Americans, to achieve the level of success they did in Byhalia. Later, she confronts Karl about the cost of his friendship with Jim.



Byhalia, Mississippi



closes July 30, 2017

[Details and tickets](https://dctheatrescene.com/show/byhalia-mississippi/) (<https://dctheatrescene.com/show/byhalia-mississippi/>)

When you see this play, as I hope you do, take a moment to admire the art which Linder and this

fine cast have put into it. There is not an ounce of judgment or condescension for these characters; their flaws are funny because they're human. When Laurel receives the gift of a tiny t-shirt with the imprint of a Native American chief in headdress and a card saying "welcome to your little papoose" from her fellow-teachers, your sympathy is with her (and them), and not with Janine, the one teacher who refused to sign it because of its racial misappropriation. But Janine is a good person too, we come to learn.

The cast, with great naturalness, renders the characters as likeable and flawed, with the flaws accentuating the likeability. Babinsky is wonderful at this; he makes Jim instantly recognizable — the brother-in-law who has trouble keeping a job, and yet makes your sister so happy. Savage's Laurel is a little rarer; smart and funny, but unable to avoid doing things that make you raise your eyebrows. Savage inhabits this character at every moment, and so does Kiser inhabit Ayesha — one of those people you enjoy, but with whom you must be careful, lest you be called for your lazy thinking. Welch's Karl radiates stability; he is a warm, comforting presence on stage until he is not. McCarthy gives Celeste a self-awareness which makes us enjoy her even though she is narrow-minded and occasionally self-righteous.

Linder animates the text with purpose. Everything the characters say and do is significant. Even the set (which David M. Barber designed) is fraught with meaning. Jim has framed an Ole Miss t-shirt and it dominates the room. I don't think it's because Jim went there (have you framed your college t-shirt?); I think it's aspirational. Jim has imagined the life of his nascent child, at least twenty-two years into the future.

"You were my plan," Jim and Laurel tell each other; meaning you were the one I wanted to share smiles with when Celeste went off on one of her rants; you were the one I wanted to sweat with over the mortgage; you were the one I wanted to celebrate with when our child got accepted at Ole Miss; you were the one I wanted to tell when I got my cancer diagnosis; yours was the last face I wanted to see before I died. And when they say this, you may discover, to your surprise, that Jim and Laurel together was your plan, too.

"Birth is all," the poet Ted Hughes wrote. "Nothing else matters." The urgent call that the future — as represented by the tiny bundle of need resting in Karl's imperfectly-constructed crib — makes on the present focuses our attention on the important stuff, just as the boycott "Skip" Robinson led focused the attention of Byhalia on the important stuff, forty-three years ago.

Byhalia, Mississippi by Evan Linder, directed by Marc Masterson, assisted by Shaun M. McCracken, who also served as dramaturg. Featuring Jessica Savage, Hollis McCarthy, Jason Babinsky, Yaegel T. Welch, and Adrian Kiser. Set design: David M. Barber. Costume design:

Trever Bowen . Lighting design: D. M. Wood . Sound design: Miles Polaski . Technical Director: Zack Hiatt . Production stage manager: Debra A. Acquavella . Stage manager: Tina Shackelford, assisted by Emily Pathman . Produced by the Contemporary American Theater Festival .
Reviewed by Tim Treanor.



About Tim Treanor

Tim Treanor is a senior writer for DC Theatre Scene. He is a 2011 Fellow of the National Critics Institute and has written over 600 reviews for DCTS. His novel, "Capital City," with Lee Hurwitz was published November 1, 2016. He lives in a log home in the woods of Southern Maryland with his dear bride, DCTS Editor Lorraine Treanor. For more Tim Treanor, go to [timtreanorauthor.com](http://www.timtreanorauthor.com). (<http://www.timtreanorauthor.com>)

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