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Entertainment

'Fannie Lou Hamer' is a beautiful bounce back for local theater: review

Updated Oct 16, 2020; Posted Oct 16, 2020



A new, socially distanced production "Fannie Lou Hamer — Speak on It!" at Premiere Stages in Union. (Ian Alfano)

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By [Patrick Maley](#) | [For NJ Advance Media](#)

Theater has been down before.

Among humanity's oldest and most consistent social practices, theater has been shuttered in the past by economic hardships, political and religious censorship, war, and plague. But again and again humans have shown a dogged resilience in their urge to gather in the dark and watch others get up on stage and play pretend. COVID-19 has closed playhouses around the world since March, but this same urge to participate in the art of performance has emerged, first in all sorts of inventive online performances and now, in small doses, live performance. Wounded and halting though it is, theater is finding a way back on its feet.

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It seems a simple thing, but the world is different now, and so here is what turns out to be a remarkable statement: On a warm autumn evening in Union, covered in masks and cautiously distanced from one another under a tent, an audience assembled a show.

Premiere Stages has gone to great lengths to produce a rousing version of Cheryl L. West's new play, *Fannie Lou Hamer: Speak on It!*—which runs for only five shows through the weekend—a topical biographical sketch of an influential civil rights leader in the 1960s and 70s. The historical Hamer's activism covered a variety of causes, but the play focuses on her commitment to voting rights. Learning only late in life that Black people were entitled to vote, Hamer made it her mission to spread the message of voting's importance and to help as many disenfranchised people as possible get registered. She continued despite constant intimidation and episodes of terrible police brutality.

West's 60-minute play is a monologue by Hamer (a warm and often vibrant Rema Webb), interspersed with stirring spirituals accompanied by an on-stage musician, Kena Anae. Staged against the beautiful brick backdrop of the Liberty Hall Museum, the show takes place on and around a large wagon that could have been the centerpiece of a get-out-the-vote barnstorming tour. Marshall Jones III's direction harnesses David M. Barber's scenic design in order to invoke the mood of a rally, as Webb speaks directly to the audience, and invites them to sing and clap along with her.

What opens as a more-or-less flat recitation of voting platitudes progresses into a more textured and moving play when we start to learn more about Hamer as a person. Her biography and struggles make her rah-rah attitude at the play's opening less of a feel-good celebration of democracy and more of an urgent call to action on behalf of the country's most vulnerable citizens.

The script is studded with contemporary references (its loose conceit is that Hamer has arrived from the past to continue her mission, which proves as pressing as ever), showing West's insistence that the greatest threat to the work of Hamer and her brave colleagues is complacency. Rally banners hang around the set, most of which barker

specifically to Hamer's historical moment, but the largest and most prominent banner reads "People Died So You Can Vote!," a message that the play suggest is lastingly crucial.

There is some fine symbiosis in the dedication of Fannie Lou Hamer and the art of theater: in the face of terrible odds and frightening conditions, both refuse to be deterred. It is therefore only fitting that the banner of live theater be buoyed defiantly back to life by Hamer's fighting spirit this election season. The experience at Premiere Stages may look and feel different than theater as we remember it or hope it to be again, but it is a wonderful testament to the social value and emotional power of live performance.

FANNIE LOU HAMER: SPEAK ON IT

Premiere Stages

Liberty Hall Museum, 1003 Morris Ave, Union

Tickets available online (<http://www.premierestagesatkean.com/current-shows>), running through Sunday.

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