

Rep's 'Intimate Apparel' stitches together a seamless drama

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With vibrant colors and vintage costumes, Tennessee Repertory Theatre's current production of *Intimate Apparel* initially gives the impression of a lovely museum exhibit. But thanks to well-drawn characters and a gifted cast of performers, history comes to life with dialogue every bit as rich and colorful as the set itself.

Written by Lynn Nottage, *Intimate Apparel* offers an unusual study in class and race relations through the eyes of its main character, Esther. A gifted African-American seamstress living in Manhattan in 1905, Esther (played with thoughtfulness and intelligence by Stella Reed) sews intimate apparel for a clients ranging from socialites to prostitutes.

She has built a good life for herself, though at 35, she fears she may never marry. Still, Esther continues to dream – of love, happiness and even a successful business venture. So when she begins to receive beautiful love letters from a Caribbean man named George (John Brooks), she opens her heart to the possibilities of romance.

An original story to be sure. But what sets *Intimate Apparel* apart are the every-day interactions between Esther and those who make up her little corner of the world. There's Mrs. Dickson (Tamira A. Henry), a bossy landlady who reminds Esther that "we can't always be so particular" when it comes to men; Mrs. Van Buren (the always entertaining Jenny Littleton), a rich, white socialite trapped in a loveless marriage; Mayme (a delightful Lisa Kimmey), the proverbial prostitute with a heart of gold; and Mr. Marks (Ross Brooks), an unlikely friend in the form of a Hasidic shopkeeper from whom Esther buys her cloth.

It is in these relationships that we see the unavoidable boundaries of class and race. And it is here that we begin to understand the universality of Esther's struggles.

With such fully developed characters, it's easy to see why critics have embraced *Intimate Apparel*. The play won the 2004 New York Drama Critics Circle Award, Outer Critics Circle Award, American Theatre Critics/Steinberg New Play Award and the John Gassner Award for Best Play.

However, the first act drags a bit under the weight of exposition. And some of the blocking seems awkward. This may stem from the set design, which while attractive, does not always lend itself to the action.

Still, this character-driven play successfully draws the audience back in time, challenging our ideas of modern relationships and the choices we make.

All in all, it's a seamless production.

What: *Intimate Apparel*

When: Through April 7. Performances begin at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, April 5; 7:30 p.m. on Fridays (March 30 and April 6); 7:30 p.m. on Saturdays, March 31 and April 7; with a Saturday matinee at 2:30 p.m., on April 7. (Signed Performance April 7, 2:30 p.m.)

Where: Johnson Theater, Tennessee Performing Arts Center, 505 Deaderick St.

Cost: \$10-\$40 (some restrictions apply)

Info: 255-ARTS (2787); ticketmaster.com or tnrep.org

The production carries an audience advisory for its mature content and themes. It is recommended for high school students and above.