

Perry's 'Colored Girls' lacks color

Box office receipts for Tyler Perry's latest film, "For Colored Girls," dropped 65 percent in the movie's second week. But since much of the debate sparked by the original stage play, "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf," is being repeated nearly 35 years after its Broadway run, it's unlikely the debate will end when the movie's run does.

I saw the original performed in Louisville last year, and I had read select poems from the printed publication of the Broadway production prior to that. Since seeing the movie, I have imagined other ways Ntozake Shange's theatrical masterpiece could have been adapted for the screen.

I've considered a Greek chorus to maintain

Shange's verse while the characters spoke only in dialogue. I've also mulled a more straightforward interpretation that remains in verse but takes advantage of cinematography and editing to overcome any impediments that might cause. Or it could be a series of films that tell the story of any one of the 20-plus stories that Perry morphed into nine and tried to tell in less than two hours.

I'm blaming the backlash against Perry on his breaking away from the rules of storytelling for film, and on the audience's lack of familiarity with

the original work. (If you've seen or read the Shange's original work, a mix of dance and poetry technically called a "choreopoem," you know it's damn ambitious to try to turn that into movie.) But I'm not sure that any of my imagined fixes would satisfy black men who feel maligned by how the movie portrays them.

The commentary from black male bloggers and journalists and from their readers closely mimics the harsh reviews Shange received from black men when her piece debuted in *New York* in 1976. In a recent interview in *The New Yorker*, Shange recalled being frightened by "the vitriol that came my way from many who felt threatened by controversial aspects" of the play.

Shange was accused of stereotyping black men as liars and "players." In the *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, Erskine Peters complained that Shange depicted black men "basically as pasteboards or beasts." Erskine's

critique was recalled by *New Yorker* writer Hilton Als, who also noted that the all-female cast may have made black men feel invisible, something they already felt "in the white world."

In Perry's version, the men are present. But, as Abdul Ali writes in the webzine *The Root*, "Perry's version chose not to write the men in the film as fully human. Instead, they are cardboard props." Meanwhile, a reader commenting on the website *TheGrio.com* said, simply: "A good hard slap in the face is what hard-working and intelligent black men would get by going to see this film."

Obviously, the all-female cast is not the problem. I agree with Ali's point that the male characters are underdeveloped, but really, so are the female leads. Perry didn't write a clean story with perfect character arcs and a satisfying resolution. True to the original, Perry's work is about struggle, and these women struggle with some ugly stuff.

That, my parents and I believe, explains the continuing vitriol from black men. (Feminists have picked a bone with the film, too, for very different reasons.) My mom found that the presence of the men didn't impact the spirit of the work, and she agrees with my dad that the black community — and especially black men — is uncomfortable when confronted with harsh realities. The absence of good guys isn't real, but rape, incest, cheating, HIV and intimate-partner abuse is more rampant than we like to think about.

Shange's original play airs all this dirty laundry, which my dad didn't find offensive. "There is dirty laundry," he said. "And if you don't air it out, it just gets mildewed and it gets worse and worse until you don't have anything to wear at all." ♣

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