

NEW YORK POST

LATE CITY FINAL

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Thomas Wolfe's brilliant take on the racial divide

THOMAS Wolfe, the playwright? In 1923, the famous novelist wrote a play in Harvard called "Welcome to Our City" (originally "Niggertown").

The play, with more than half he cast in blackface, was put on for two performances at the school until the current revival at the Mint Theater.

The Mint, an invaluable organization devoted to finding forgotten theater in the English-speaking theater, has unearthed a real gem. It's a young man's play. There's too much going on, but, God!, what humanity, what promise for our stage Wolfe had!

It's a crowded drama taking

place in the fictional town of Altamont, N.C. (Wolfe was from Asheville.)

The town is in the hands of the greedy and racist white establishment typified by old gentry Rutledge, his smooth young real-estate assistant, Sorrell, and Sorrell's stooge, Bailey.

They support a vulgar, anti-Darwinian ("monkeys" were a big political issue then) Democratic demagogue for governor.

But mainly they are eager for a real-estate deal in the center of the town where African-Americans — including the dedicated doctor, Johnson, and old Uncle Amos — have their homes.

THEATER REVIEW



Donald Lyons

WELCOME TO OUR CITY

Mint Theater, 311 W. 43rd St., through Oct. 8
(212) 315-9434

At first, the doctor agrees to sell, but later refuses when he sees his daughter being seduced by young Lee Rutledge, a college-educated rebel who actually likes the girl.

It is, surprisingly, old Rutledge

who turns out to be sympathetic to the blacks, but he is not in time to prevent the burning down of the black homes and the massacre of the blacks by the National Guard.

This is a drama of immense social force. Wolfe knew what he was writing about. The blend of qualities in people — their racism and greed, their humanity and hope — is startling and shocking.

It's epic, sprawling theater, a sadly lost opportunity our stage did not, in the early 1920s, take.

Director Jonathan Bank presents the play with a stark, unadorned simplicity, letting the people, whom Wolfe imbued with such humanity, emerge.

Excelling are the white Rutledge family (Lee Moore as the surprising father, Colleen Smith Wallnau as the cultivated mother, Michael Moore as the son) and the black Johnson family (Eric R. Moreland as the proud doctor father and Sylvester Gregory as his daughter, proud of her "yellow" skin).

Haakon Jepsen is impressive as the smooth real-estate man; Gregory Mikell is strikingly contemporary as the agitator from Boston; Ward Asquith brings sadness to the old prof.

History explains but does not excuse; we must change. What a loss was Wolfe's voice for our stage. What a discovery Jonathan Kent's Mint Theater has made.