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The new Black view

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Newman hits home with a play on Jackie Robinson

By Linda Armstrong
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When we think of Jackie Robinson, we all think of the African-American man who came from the Negro Baseball League and was the first Black man to play in the all-white Major Leagues, as second baseman with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Of course Robinson faced a lot of racism, from umpires as well as fans. But no matter what Robinson faced, he kept going. He was a hero to Blacks.

A production called "Stealin' Home (A Baseball Fantasy)" looks at that side of Robinson's life, but also gives the audience more of the story of Robinson the human being. It looks at some of the things that happened in his life that did not garner praise from the African-American community. This play gives a more balanced picture of Robinson than one is used to seeing in a production focused on a historical legend. It also shows this great player a lot of respect and love. "Stealin' Home" is written by Fred Newman, the artistic director of the Castillo Theatre on West 42nd Street, which is both producing and presenting the play. Newman is also co-directing the production along with David Nackman.

With this production Newman helps the audience to get to know Robinson in an honest way. Using a Black female character by the name of Sojourner, he constantly gives Robinson the opportunity to hear what Black people are feeling about him. This character comes to

him in different forms, as a young waitress in the '40s and again as a young waitress in the '70s. She is someone who keeps his head from swelling. While she will praise him as a hero for Black people, she will also chastise him. In one scene she tells him to remember that he is a Black man working in a white man's world, after he laughs and proudly recalls pulling off a trick play he learned in the Negro League. She lets him know that he may have fooled the white umpire this time, but that same umpire will get his revenge. This is not child's play.

Robinson is shown to be a loyal husband, a loving father and a genuinely kind person, but he was also quick to respond to racism. The play takes the audience from seeing a young, energetic Robinson to later seeing an older Robinson who is no longer part of the Majors, but is instead Vice President of Chock Full O' Nuts Coffee and has become a Republican. We see a fragile, diabetic, half-blind Robinson who has done with his life what he felt he had to do to survive.

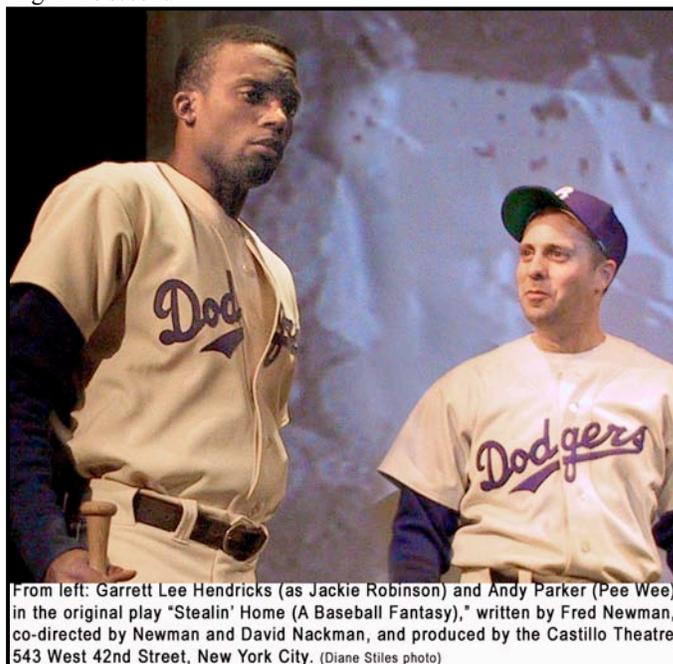
The play ends with an interesting fantasy in which Robinson, now living in his second lifetime, realizes that Sojourner is someone who had reoccurred throughout his first lifetime and finally gets to ask her what she wanted. She responds that she wants him to be happy. In the end he is happy, he is old, but he's in uniform as the manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Cast members in this production will have you riveted. They include Garrett Lee Hendricks as Robinson, Andy Parker as his teammate and team captain Pee Wee (Robinson's real-life friend), and Donisha

Brown as Sojourner.

Baseball and Jackie Robinson are definitely the focus of the Castillo Theatre for the next two months. The opening weekend of the show was used to honor and financially benefit the Harlem RBI (Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities), located in East Harlem. This 501(c)(3) organization was founded in 1991 and serves youth ages 7-18 by using baseball, softball and teamwork to provide inner-city youth with opportunities to play, to learn, and grow. It integrates youth development with sports activities and team participation. Harlem RBI has programs including year-round baseball and softball; an afterschool program; internship opportunities; counseling and referral services; the REAL (Reading and Enrichment Academy of Learning) kids summer program; and Team Enrichment, a group-based activities program for junior high school participants.

In addition to this production, which will play through December 12, the Castillo Theatre is having a Jackie Robinson and baseball festival that includes a gallery exhibition of Brooklyn Dodger baseball art in the lobby, as well as two special public dialogues on Robinson's impact on baseball. The first one occurred Sunday, October 10th, after the 2 p.m. show. It featured Tom Stanton, author of "Hank Aaron and the Home Run That Changed America." To find out the date of the second dialogue and to purchase tickets for "Stealin' Home," call 212-941-1234.



From left: Garrett Lee Hendricks (as Jackie Robinson) and Andy Parker (Pee Wee) in the original play "Stealin' Home (A Baseball Fantasy)," written by Fred Newman, co-directed by Newman and David Nackman, and produced by the Castillo Theatre 543 West 42nd Street, New York City. (Diane Stiles photo)