



THEATER

Review: Houston civil rights leaders inspire Ensemble Theatre love story

'The Lawsons' is an inspiring, touch tale where romance and history intertwine.

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ENSEMBLE THEATER: "The Lawsons: A Civil Rights Love Story" runs from Feb. 11, 2022, through Feb. 27, 2022

Photo: Mason Rankin

Celebrating its 45th anniversary season, The Ensemble Theatre has chosen the perfect play for February honoring both Black History Month and Valentine's sentiments.

Written by Melda Beaty and directed by artistic director Eileen J. Morris, "The Lawsons: A Civil

Rights Love Story” is based on the real romance of Reverend William and Audrey Lawson, both of whom were central figures in the fight for civil rights in Houston. They wrote hundreds of letters to each other during their courtship.

This commissioned world premiere spans 1952-2015, with screen footage of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s opening the play accompanied by songs of the era and striking, memorable music by composer Charrise Barron. The musical performances are reason enough to see this engaging and historical production.

Action begins with a dramatic scene in which an older Audrey calls her beloved Bill for help, and then the lights go out and we are sent back in time to the beginning of their relationship, one that will span over half a century. One of the strengths of this play is that all of the actors are convincing no matter what age they happen to be playing, and it is a strong ensemble cast.

The romance between William (“Bill”) Lawson (an endearing and convincing Timothy Eric) and Audrey Hoffman (the outstanding Lakeisha Randle Koontz) begins with their letters. Audrey is at college in Tennessee, and after reading one of Bill’s letters to another girl, writes to him. On the screen behind the actors, we actually see some of these original letters, adding a poignant touch to their story.

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Even though Bill lives in Kansas City, he falls in love with her letters too, and they correspond for years before meeting in person. The audience is treated to hearing some of their correspondence, and, whether flirtatious or simply sweet, the letters build a strong bond between Bill and Audrey. By late 1952, Audrey has broken up with her army enlisted boyfriend, and the new couple exchange photos and information about themselves, including Bill’s strong Christian faith.

Bill writes to Audrey that she is “wife material” and they eventually marry. Their correspondence is also the main feature of the song “Letters,” the opening duet of the play, a charming accompaniment to the couple’s growing romance. Audrey smokes a little and says she is “a little fresh.” Bill can’t wait to see her in person and calls her “Little Red.” They are extremely likeable characters, but the photos of them from real life that punctuate the play remind us that they are

not just characters, but part of Houston history.

There are some funny moments, as when Bill tells Audrey “No damage can be done through the mailbox.” But the main historical concerns of the play are serious, including the issues of segregation in Houston, the assassinations of civil rights leaders, and the pressures on Bill Lawson, a Baptist leader not only at Texas Southern University, but also at their Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, to “do something” in the midst of unrest and protest.

We follow the Lawsons from their early marriage and the birth of their children (including award-winning Houston broadcast news journalist Melanie Lawson), and their move to Houston. Their contributions to the Civil Rights movement are dramatized along with moving songs such as “Time for a Change” and “Take This City.” We see their despair when their home is burned. We see the frustration in getting Mayor Cutrer (Foster Davis) to desegregate lunch counters and retail establishments such as Foley’s. We see the reality of their struggles.

This play reminds us that all politics is local, and affects real people in our own neighborhoods. Bill and Audrey Lawson did not believe in violence, and Beaty’s script shows their endurance during fraught and unpredictable times. But their devotion to each other is a certainty.

Audrey’s struggles with Alzheimer’s disease are a significant part of the second act. But the audience sees a long love story intricately connected to social justice, and that in itself is a valentine to Houston and the powerful roles the Lawsons played in its history.

Doni Wilson is a Houston-based writer.



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