

## Review: The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin at Stratford East

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*A story of hope and humour: B. L. Sherrington reviews the UK premiere of Kirsten Childs' musical.*

[B. L. SHERRINGTON](#)



The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. Photo: Tristram Kenton.

The journey to accepting yourself is never an easy one, but when you're a little black girl growing up during the civil rights movement, it sure as hell is no skip down the yellow brick road. In Josette Bushell-Mingo's production, we first meet Viveca (Karis Jack), as a school girl of around 9 years old, affectionately known as Bubbly. In 'Welcome to my LA', it's the end of the Swinging Sixties with beehives, capri pants and swing dresses to match. Her upbeat nature is uplifting and endearing, but this is California, and for a young person of colour this attitude is outright dangerous, bordering on stupidity.

Bubbly represents the after-effects of an intolerant society. A drastic change in tone to the musical occurs when another character ridicules her for looking like one of the girls blown up in the Alabama church murders. Suddenly the narrative moves away from the positive, sunny mindset of Bubbly's innocence to the reality of a racist environment.

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Her daddy (Trevor. A. Toussaint) is a working class, hard-working and loving father. He insists that Bubbly: "Smile, smile. Things aren't as bad as they seem." Without noticing it, and while trying to protect his daughter from reading about the Alabama murders he acts as her enabler and in fact makes the

world more unsafe for her. Her mommy (Sharon Wattis) on the other hand, is tired of Bubbly living in a fairytale. She demonstrates accepting reality by providing tough love. Bubbly also gets these messages from other people, learning from an early age that lighter is better when her dance teacher declares, "Act your age, not your colour." She also takes on the criticisms of the other black girls who call her a "crazy, sick, pathetic Oreo bitch."

Bubbly is constantly trying to run from the reality of racism. When she dreams about Harriet Tubman, a group of slaves and a trio of KKK members, she seeks reassurance from her doll, Chitty Chatty. When said

doll tells her “You’re fucked up,” it is the reality check she dramatically needs, but Bubbly is quick to deny this.

During the hippy era, she attracts the attention Cosmic Rainbow (Llandyll Gove). “Your hair is so Hendrix,” he insists. It’s unclear whether she’s truly interested in him, but given the fact she believes white is better it’s no surprise she jumps at the chance to name him her boyfriend. Her mommy voices the resistance towards integration, insisting “Jim Crow is still the status quo,” and therefore is not impressed by her daughter’s interracial love story.

Writer Kirsten Childs and Bushell-Mingo work hand in hand to demonstrate the character traits of the angry black women while not encouraging it. Emily, a school friend of Bubbly’s who embodies the belief system of the Black Panther Party insists: don’t smile, shake your afro, roll your neck and suck your teeth. Childs subtly represents the different eras by forcing Bubbly to confront reality against her will at each step of her journey.

When the older Viveca (now played by Sophia McKay) goes to live in New York City she can’t avoid the realities of racism. When a stage director insists, “Don’t go white on me,” the young Viveca appears on stage screaming “What do you think this is, camouflage?” At this point in the musical it is clear the young Viveca is the voice of reason. She says the things every minority wishes they could say, but wouldn’t want to be punished for.

When she is confronted with sex, Bubbly finally sheds her idealism. She’s in heaven from her first orgasm, but during her exposure to casual relationships she is shocked to learn that her partner believes: “A woman is a mystery, don’t ever get to know.” It’s fitting that when she finally experiences womanhood, her childish ideals disappear.

The part that costume (Holly Parr) plays in bringing this story to life is considerable. It is beautiful to see how Bubbly slowly learns to accept herself through fashion. When she lands in corporate America, she wears her afro large and proud. She dresses in bold colours and stands out from the rest of the secretaries by wearing trousers. And when she arrives for a second audition, no longer willing to please others, we see her in a bold coloured pea dress, a-larger-than-life afro and an air of finally being at peace with herself.

Set during civil rights movement, Bubbly's journey is a important one to see onstage. We do not forget where she came from, from the slaves and the images of the four girls killed in Alabama. In the programme notes Childs insists, "I chose to write a story of hope and humour about the ridiculousness of racism and intolerance... Now, as it was back then, allowing it to consume you is self defeating and unproductive."

*The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds her Chameleon Skin is on at the Theatre Royal Stratford East until 11 March 2017. Click [here](#) for more details.*

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DIRECTED BY Josette Bushell-Mingo

WRITTEN BY Kristen Childs