

## World-premiere: “Sugarhill” harbors weathered hearts

[Review](#) April 19, 2015 Encore Staff

by Carolyn Hayes Harmer

Article: 9599; Posted: April 19, 2015 at 4:00 p.m.

Local playwright Linda Ramsay-Detherage strikes quite a delicate balance in her latest play, “Sugarhill.” This tale of one mother’s tenuous journey back from loss manages to combine heartache, tenderness, cheeky humor, cultural evolution, and the dual grimness and possibility of the future into a single enigmatic fable.

In the enchanting world-premiere production at the Jewish Ensemble Theatre, director Christopher Bremer and an incomparable cast send toughened hearts overflowing.

The setting is an idyllic plantation building in little Sugarhill, Louisiana. Designer Daniel C. Walker’s whitewashed scenic design and blazing lighting scheme convey an unseasonable December heat wave; sound designer Matt Lira’s palette of crickets and faraway noises lend a sense of remoteness. The year is 1941, and the world is again on the brink of upheaval. It’s becoming a bad time to be Jewish in faraway Europe, and it is still a very bad time to be black in the Deep South. But for now, this affectionately dilapidated household has problems enough at home—chief among them their lovely, broken Marietta.

Award-winning actress Inga R. Wilson has returned to Michigan for this production, and her turn in the starring role is tremendous. Marietta has just been released from the hospital after suffering an injury and then undergoing electroshock therapy to improve her mental state. As her family treats this frail specimen with kid gloves, Wilson adapts to her unreliable memory, pulsing in and out of fugue. Her hands flutter to ward off her evergreen grief: the absence of her recently dead son, an absentee husband rendered catatonic by a burst blood vessel.

A sweet series of coincidences heralds the arrival of a stranger (Jonathan West), a wounded black man on the lam from white aggressors. Marietta allows herself to believe that this outsider has a cosmic connection to her late son, and insists on providing Mr. Franklin with safe haven. The bulk of the play’s two acts charts Franklin’s brief visit with the family, which fosters organic opportunities for discovery, soul searching, and healing.

The surrounding characters have distinct aims, and their personalities come through not merely in speaking, but in deliberate listening and reacting. The result is a rich tapestry of character work by a stellar ensemble. As the sage family patriarch and the insolent nursemaid, Arthur Beer and Dominique Lowell form an amiably crotchety old comedy team. Pushy comic foil Sonja Marquis kills with culinary kindness, while authoritarian Joel Mitchell is at once politically slick and fiendishly vile. And as Marietta’s felled, mute husband, York Griffith’s work is nearly imperceptible, a marathon of restraint.

There are secrets in “Sugarhill” that are better left unspoiled; suffice it to say, the production is grounded in tenderness, but also wafts on an endearing air of mystery. The result is two bittersweet but satisfying hours — for all its heartbreaking resilience, this charming story ultimately infuses its audience with renewed faith in the virtue of optimism and compassion.

# ***Jewish News Review Sugarhill***

## **JET presents a moving tale of Southern Drama**

### **Ronelle Grier Contributing Writer**

"Telling our own stories, in our own time, is what heals us," says Captain John Youngblood (Arthur Beer), a character in the current JET production of *Sugarhill*. Indeed, some powerful stories are conveyed by "the Captain" and his colorful cohorts in this dynamic play by local writer Linda Ramsay-Detherage.

Directed by JET Executive Director Christopher Bremer, the play takes place in the small town of Sugarhill, LA, during a December heat wave in 1941. War is raging in Europe and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor is imminent, but the family of Civil War veteran Captain Youngblood is fighting a more personal battle: His granddaughter, Marietta (Inga R. Wilson), is returning from a mental hospital after an aborted suicide attempt. We learn her anguish was caused by the recent death of her 12-year-old son, which also triggered a brain aneurysm in her husband, Tom (York Griffith), leaving him confined to a wheelchair in a catatonic state.



While the captain and the family caregiver, Yvette (Dominique Lowell), a Jew whose family emigrated from pre-war France, attempt to deal with Marietta's fragile mental state and unreliable memory, the result of electroshock therapy she received in the hospital, a mysterious visitor named Mr. Franklin (Jonathan West) arrives, a black man who was wounded during a manhunt by a local white posse. Marietta, believing his appearance is mystically tied to a note left by her deceased son, tends to his wounds and helps him hide from his would-be captors.

The story that unfolds is a beautifully written and skillfully acted medley of heartbreak, hope, history, and the qualities of human nature that endure regardless of time and circumstances.

Wilson is outstanding as Marietta, a woman with the persona of a fragile Southern belle and the underlying strength of a steel magnolia, and the rest of the talented ensemble cast members add context and depth.

Comic relief is provided by Sonja Marquis, who plays Marietta's over-bearing sister-in-law, Laurel, whose unwanted visits include an endless supply of vile casseroles; and Joel Mitchell, as Laurel's husband, Davis, the town mayor and resident bigot. There also is entertaining interplay between the recalcitrant Captain and the feisty Yvette. West is excellent as the mysterious Mr. Franklin, an educated man who manages to play dumb under the suspicious scrutiny of Davis, who is determined to subject Franklin to some deep Southern justice; namely, a lynching.

The atmospheric set and lighting design by Daniel C. Walker is a beautiful replication of a white-washed former plantation house, replete with moss-covered trees alight with fireflies. Period costumes by Mary Copenhagen and props by Diane Ulseth complete the overall effect, which is further enhanced by the realistic sounds of crickets and baking dogs, orchestrated by Matt Lira.

*Sugarhill* runs through May 10 at the Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield. (248) 788-2900; jetttheatre.org.

## DONALD CALAMIA REVIEW

Sweet 'Sugarhill' tackles still-timely topics

By Donald V. Calamia

One sure sign that a play has engaged the minds and imaginations of its audience is how quickly and eagerly the patrons begin analyzing the story once the houselights come up. That was certainly the case at a recent performance of "Sugarhill" at The Jewish Ensemble Theatre in West Bloomfield, where animated debates could be heard from energized patrons as they slowly walked out of the theater. And if one needs additional proof to test my theory, a woman sitting a few seats to my right couldn't wait for the show to conclude before loudly and passionately registering her thoughts about an unexpected twist that occurs during the drama's final minutes.

Yes, "Sugarhill" by Linda Ramsay-Detherage is *that* type of play – a conversation starter that will have you pondering its multi-layered complexities long after you've left the theater. For a critic, though, it's a tough nut to break open, because to reveal too much would ruin the experience for future theatergoers.

So let's just say that "Sugarhill" tells the story of a black man (Jonathan West) on the run from local law enforcement who finds himself on the property of a white family touched by recent tragedies who tends to his wounds while he – in turn – tends to theirs.

What's so special about *that*, you may be wondering? For starters, the year is 1941. The location is a small town in Louisiana. And the property Mr. Franklin stumbles upon is a former slave plantation, now owned by 95-year-old Captain John Youngblood (Arthur Beer), who served as a Confederate officer in the Civil War. More importantly, however, Mayor David Longfellow (Joel Mitchell) is very willing, able and eager to enforce those pesky Jim Crow laws that make it illegal for the captain and his family to assist an unregistered Negro in their home – which means that everyone's life, liberty and pursuit of happiness are in dire jeopardy should the mayor catch on to what the Youngblood family is up to. As recent history continues to point out, the legacy of race and race relations in America is far-more complicated than Americans accustomed to 15-second politically correct soundbites seem capable of grasping. Or acknowledging. So rather than using her bloody pulpit to make a political statement that sheds no new or thoughtful light on the subject, Ramsay-Detherage boils the subject down to its most basic human element – the family – and places her story in an era when even a tender touch could land a person in jail. (Or worse.) Her lesson is simply this: That even in the face of danger and personal harm, people instinctively want to reach out and help others in their time of need – whether a friend, a family member or even a stranger.

In "Sugarhill," it's all of the above.

After receiving critical acclaim at staged reading festivals across the country, the world premiere of "Sugarhill" is in the hands of JET's executive director, Christopher Bremer. What's readily apparent from the get-go is how much thought went into staging this production. Each of the technical elements works in total unison with the others to help tell the story, while all of the characters are carefully drawn and expertly presented.

That's especially true of Beer's Captain. One of the longtime gems of the local industry, Beer tackles the role with equal amounts of gusto and nuance, as he seems to easily travel across the many emotions – both subtle and not-so subtle – that his aged character faces.

Equally noteworthy is the return of Inga R. Wilson to the Detroit stage in the role of the Captain's married granddaughter, Marietta Trudeau. Reportedly written with Wilson in mind, the role is a perfect fit for the actress, as it requires her to summon the widest range of emotions possible, a skill she has long been noted for – and which she accomplishes with great passion and believability.

Comedy relief is provided by the delightful Sonja Marquis, who is making her JET debut as Laurel Trudeau-Longfellow, wife of the mayor. Marquis sparkles every time she storms the stage as the in-law who tries way too hard to fit in, and – as the Captain utters, "takes all the oxygen out of the air."

Mitchell – another highly regarded local actor – hits the ground like a tornado in search of a trailer park. Subtle he's not; every word and action of the mayor is carefully played with and powerfully delivered for its most dramatic effect. His intensity is *so* strong, one can imagine boos and hisses would come his way if "Sugarhill" was conceived as a melodrama. By contract, subtle is West's middle name. What Mitchell delivers through his words, West accomplishes through perfectly executed facial expressions and body language.

Rounding out the superb cast are Dominique Lowell as housekeeper and caretaker Yvette Degas, and York Griffith as Marietta's husband, Tom. (Griffith likely has the toughest role of all; see the show to find out why.) Set and lighting designer Daniel C. Walker places the action on a wrap-around front porch and yard that look like they were picked up from somewhere down South and moved to the basement of the Jewish Community Center. Set dressings and props by Diane E. Ulseth help define the place and time, while Matt Lira's sound design couldn't be better. (You really believe a car is pulling up the driveway and the bloodhounds are indeed getting closer.)

Now, 16 hours after leaving the theater, specific aspects of "Sugarhill" are still dancing across my brain – particularly its ending. Did its surprise O. Henry-esque conclusion take away from the story as a whole, as the woman to my right seemed to project? (The final few minutes – which threaten to move the story from historical drama to science fiction – don't come out of the blue, however, but progress from earlier plot revelations.) Or would it have been more satisfying for the story to conclude a few minutes earlier when something is discovered in Tom's hand? (Sometimes less is more.) At this point, I don't have the answer. But – to me, at least – leaving an audience hungry to know more or pondering the complexities of the story just told are sure signs that theatrical magic has indeed been cast by playwright and artists alike. And the magic of "Sugarhill" will be felt for days or weeks to come.

#### Sugarhill

The Jewish Ensemble Theatre

In the DeRoy Theatre on the campus of the Jewish Community Center

6600 West Maple Rd., West Bloomfield

7:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 6

7:30 p.m. Friday, May 8

5 p.m. Saturday, May 9

8:30 p.m. Saturday, May 9

2 p.m. Sunday, May 10

Tickets: \$41-\$48

(248) 788-2900

[www.jetttheatre.org](http://www.jetttheatre.org)