

The ghosts of African-American history gather for a vibrant, emotion-filled reunion in Marta J. Effinger's imaginative play "Whispers Want to Holler," now in an expertly acted production directed by Runako Jahi at ETA Square Creative Arts Foundation. And as in the plays of August Wilson, in which ghosts also frequently play a crucial role, these spectres set the living on the road to deeper understanding and clarity of purpose.

In a program note, Effinger, who has worked frequently as a dramaturg, and who holds graduate degrees from Yale and Northwestern University, writes that one of the inspirations for her play was a magazine article about the discovery, during the 1990s, of a "lost" African-American burial ground in lower Manhattan. But rather than turning that story into a documentary, she has spun a more original tale here--one in which the spirits of many archetypal personages who dwell in the African-American consciousness are brought to life.

"Whispers Want to Holler" has little to do with an actual hallowed burial ground but instead is rooted in a contemporary tale of personal mourning and of a neighborhood that, depending on your viewpoint, is either headed for spiritual destruction or gentrification. It steps off with a funky New Orleans-style funeral march as Olive Cross (the charismatic Carolyn Nelson), buries her beloved son, Jordan, who was murdered on the brink of his 18th birthday.

Olive runs a second-hand shop in a run-down, crime-ridden area of the city that she has steadfastly refused to abandon. She and her son were gifted scavengers with an eye for salvageable junk and castoffs, and they were devoted to holding on to their neighborhood. But now she is filled with bitterness, believing she has sacrificed Jordan to some self-deluding loyalty to "her people," when she should have devoted herself to his safety. And she is ready to sell her property to a real estate developer who is hot to transform the tattered neighborhood into an upscale assemblage of condos and coffee shops.

Olive's neighbor and "auntie," Edris Dennis (the irrepressible Martrice Edge), a native of Tobago, is adamant that she not sell out. But the grief-stricken mother dismisses her, only to be besieged by the ghosts of her historical legacy. They arrive with great pomp and circumstance, weaving the tales of their own past lives.

This gathering, conjured with great verve and passion by Effinger, and staged with impressive panache by Jahi, includes quite a range of characters, all memorably portrayed. Among them are the Washerwoman (Makeba Ayo Pace), a rebellious slave woman who was hung for her impudence; the emblematic Black Woman from the Baptist Women's Convention of 1900 (Daryl Charisse), a formidable figure of righteousness and sanctity in Victorian dress; the Soldier (Terrance Watts), a Civil War soldier dumped into a pauper's grave without acknowledgement that he was a freed man; the mostly mute and seductive Jazz Musician (Ethan Henry), who ends up on drugs, and Street (Sati Word), Olive's late husband, a militant activist of the 1960s.

Also crucial to the scene are two children: the Pupil (Michael Cordero), a beguilingly proper and precocious little striver of an earlier age who is in the Booker T. Washington mold, and who dies of pneumonia before his teens, and Little Sallie Walker (Renata Sago), a streetwise, semi-orphaned and far less educated girl from Olive's own neighborhood. Both Cordero, an eighth grader, and Sago, a high school student, are students in ETA's Youth Performance Workshop, and they possess stage presence and technique to burn. (They will alternate with Brandon Jackson and Barbara-Jean Stansil.)

Reginald Wilson's arborlike frame set and Kanika Sago's historically eclectic costumes add considerable flair to the proceedings. And while Effinger's play might benefit from some prudent trimming that would enable it to be performed in a single 90-minute sweep rather than two acts, even in its current format, "Whispers Want to Holler" is an adventurous, polished and fully engaging production.

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