

When renowned poet Mari Evans decided to adapt Zora Neale Hurston's classic novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to the stage, she faced a slew of challenges. Published in 1937 and considered to be one of the most influential novels in African American literature, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is such a groundbreaking and unforgettable story, that to re-tell it would require the same level of superb storytelling that Hurston was noted for.

Secondly, Hurston's gift of preserving fading Black Southern speech and folklore in literature is not easily translated to the contemporary, urban theater.

Finally, making her adaptation into a musical creates very high expectations for young actors. Not only must they have the ability to convincingly portray rural, Black southern life of 75 years ago, but they must also be able to sing and dance. It's a tall order, even for a writer as gifted as Evans.

Well, not only did Evans meet that order with a dazzling adaptation and complementary music, but eta Creative Arts Foundation serves it up on a silver platter with masterful direction and a flawless ensemble cast.

Reprised by popular demand, eta's production of *Eyes* manages to capture all of the beauty, humor, and color of Zora Neale Hurston's famous story. The intriguing life of main character Janie Crawford is plucked from the Florida back woods, and vividly portrayed for Chicago audiences, recalling all the vitality and wit of the novel.

What is most impressive about this production is not simply the attention paid to the novel's details. It's the authenticity and emotion that comes through, which is always a hallmark of good African American art.

By conjuring up the hope, loss, and joy of a time when Black people were discovering who they were, director Runako Jahi has re-created a classic for the stage. Under his skillful direction, these young actors not only convincingly speak in a southern drawl as thick as blackstrap molasses, they move, gesture, and walk as if they are on the dusty roads of Florida, circa 1930.

From the time she skips onto the stage, Alana Arenas is Janie. From her angelic face, to her thick, flowing hair, to her pure heart, Arenas captures every aspect of the character.

Opening with the melancholy tune *Where Is My Love Awaiting?*, Arenas' rich vocals translate the constant longing that Janie feels. It is only the appearance of Granny (played with quiet authority by Catterria Brown) that helps the audience understand Janie's plight. "My head ain't gray enough? My back ain't broke enough?" she says to Janie's idea that she should be in love before she marries.

Explaining a Black woman's drastic need for protection and respect, she promptly marries Janie off to an elderly neighbor, Logan Killick, (humorously played by Edward Sydney Rebb). Before long, Janie runs off with Jodie Starks (James Earl Jones II who gives a dead-on performance filled with smooth talk and earnest determination), a Black man in firm control of his destiny. She learns that status and privilege can also be used to oppress and after Jody dies, she marries her third (15 years younger) husband, the fun-loving Tea Cake (Terrence Watts, charming as the young free spirit).

In between Janie's adventures and trials, a jazz funeral, tap-dancing, and a calypso dance interpretation are thrown in to evoke the richness and diversity of Black culture. This production holds enough history, insight, and culture to serve as a barometer of how far we have come and where our community is headed in terms of relationships. Boasting a standing-room only crowd, night after night, *Eyes* deserves to become the next African American classic.