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University of Alabama's 'Seven Guitars' pulses with vividness

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Published: Friday, October 11, 2013 at 3:30 a.m.

In a show built around a young blues singer who scores an unexpected hit record, more than one refrain plays.

That's literally true of the sound design for "Seven Guitars," which erupts with ecstatic blasts of Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson and other blues greats.

But it's from within playwright August Wilson's language, and the subtexts and themes of "Seven Guitars" that the strains of a musical style, called "nothin' but a good man feelin' bad" by Tuscaloosa's own Johnny Shines, emerge.

A rooster crowing endlessly within the big city underscores how out of place Wilson felt his African-American characters were, living in Philadelphia, or even in Chicago, where Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton (Nick Rashad Burroughs), a gifted musician, feels his destiny awaits.

The rooster crows, annoying everyone around, when all its owner needs is to run down to Woolworth and spend a buck and a half on an alarm clock.

Despite what some believe about opportunities represented by the great migration north, Wilson once said: "I think we should have stayed in the South. We attempted to transplant what in essence was an emerging culture, a culture that had grown out of our experiences of 200 years as slaves in the South. The cities of the urban north have not been hospitable. If we had stayed in the South, we could have strengthened our culture."

The rooster cries for rootlessness and displacement, not able to find firm ground.

On the surface the characters are often celebratory and dancing. There's Barton, his band mates Canewell (Gerard Jones) and Red Carter (Jay Jurden), his disenchanted love Vera (Jessica Briana Kelly), smart-mouthed friend and neighbor Louise (Rachel Baber), Louise's promiscuous niece Ruby (Tierra Washington) and their disturbed, physically and mentally ill friend Hedley (Mottel Foster).

But the backbeat is dark, droning, a dirge, the hellhounds on their trails seen in all the ways society conspires to flatten dreams: If you've got too much money in your pocket, you must be a thief; not enough, you're a vagrant. Get you comin' and goin'.

Still, this production, directed by Seth Panitch with the verve and fluidity typical of his previous work here, doesn't seem laden with despair as much as it seems a deep and deeply disturbing portrait of a time and place, a chapter in Wilson's ongoing saga. After all, no one here gets out alive.

Barton, and to a lesser extent Red and the women, love high style, not just looking good but feeling that warming sense of having made it that fine things can bring, or at least suggest.

So it's crucial to note that costume designer Randy Hozian, with hair and makeup designer Jerrilyn Lanier, have pulled together some dazzling looks, layered over the more every day clothing, to create a real sense of rising and falling fortunes. Add to that a subtle lighting schematic by Keegan Butler, illuminating a detailed and ultimately foreboding neighborhood of gentle decay, as designed by David Hartwell, and this is one of the shows where even the inanimate objects resound on multiple levels.

Burroughs crackles in the lead, making it apparent even in non-sung moments why Schoolboy is the star here, both in the show and within the context of the show. He's kinetic and hilarious, dazzling, sympathetic and terrifying by turns as he tries to find the shape of Schoolboy's next incarnation. It's a real work of passion and discipline.

Foster, in real life a healthy young man, transforms himself into the growling, hunched-over, chanting and ranting Hedley, a bit of a mystic, a bit of a madman, like a more primitive version of a blues shouter, someone who might have been revered around a roaring fire. His is another bit of theatrical magic.

Jurden glides through like a musician and ladies' man born, and likewise Jones provides great comic moments but with some stranger and sadder bits as the more melancholy of the two. Baber snaps out many of the best lines as the saucy Louise, like Foster playing an older, more experienced character with deceptive ease, and Washington adds some depth to Ruby's lightness with her acceptance of Hedley's dream. Kelly serves as the most anchored character here, while still allowing Vera moments of joy as she comes to believe in Schoolboy's ability to change for the better.

As an ensemble, the work more closely resembles jive or early jazz, what with everyone getting solo spots to shine, even in light of the more flamboyant roles for Burroughs and Foster.

It's a testament to Panitch's guidance that the ebb and flow succeeds so strongly despite a few abruptly cut-off musical notes and minor technical glitches opening night. While the entirety of the show takes place in a depressed backyard, with rows of rooftops extending into the distance like stones in a cemetery, it pulses with a vividness not dependent on the shine of a new electric guitar or a store-bought suit. The glow shines from within, an irrepressible spirit that might be bruised but can't be crushed.

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