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THEATER REVIEW | 'TILL THE BREAK OF DAWN'

by Charles Isherwood

American Radicals in Havana, Finding Disillusionment Beneath the Beat

As anyone who set foot in an airport over the summer can surely confirm, travel these days invariably involves at least a modicum of drama. Given the much-discussed delays plaguing the nation's airways, it could take you as long to get to Cincinnati as to, say, Cuba, despite that country's status as a travel no-no for Americans.

So you might expect that a trip to Havana by a multicultural group of young radicals from New York City, attending a hip-hop festival, would be spicy subject matter for a playwright. But "Till the Break of Dawn," an intermittently funny but meandering comedy by Danny Hoch, squanders much of its considerable potential as it rambles across more than two hours of often unfocused rapping about race, politics, culture and, yes, rap.

Mr. Hoch is a celebrated performer and writer whose solo shows "Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop" (1998) and "Some People" (1993) were vibrant, funny collective portraits of characters rarely represented onstage, mostly young people of various races caught



From left, Bambadjan Bamba, Jaymes Jorsling, Dominic Colon, Luis Vega and **pattydukes** in "Till the Break of Dawn."

Photo: Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

up in the contradictions of ethnic identity amid the cultural cornucopia of urban life. He does not appear in this, his first new play to be seen in New York since "Jails," preferring to re-

main backstage as both writer and director.

The desire to stretch those artistic muscles is admirable, but Mr. Hoch's

talents for traditional playwriting and directing a stage full of actors still need considerable development and refinement. "Till the Break of Dawn," which opened last night at the Abrons Arts Center under the auspices of the Culture Project, represents a messy if often likable start.

At its best, the play reminds us why Mr. Hoch made such a big splash as a writer and performer. He has a gift for affectionate but gently satiric portraiture, and a flawless ear for the zesty flavor and rhythms of colloquial speech. "Till the Break of Dawn" is peopled with precisely observed urban types with lively tongues that are rarely stilled and bushels full of attitude to fuel their righteous rants.

The play's exposition-heavy opening scene is set in the Brooklyn apartment-cum-office of Gibran (Jaymes Jorsling), the organizer and chief cheerleader for this collective trip to Cuba. As his friends gather, Gibran lays down the ground rules for the trip over soy lattes.

Why the schoolteachers Robert (Johnny Sánchez) and Rebeca (Maribel Lizardo) are aboard is never made precisely clear. They seem to be around mostly to stoke the dramatic fires by seething at each other. The participation of another couple, the mouthy, joint-rolling Web site designer Hector (Flaco Navaja) and the art curator Nancy (pattydukes), is just slightly more logical.

But the only travelers with real business to transact appear to be Big Miff (Dominic Colon), a pear-shaped gangsta rapper whose lyrics mostly appall but whose fame could give the group some extra cachet, and Adam (Matthew-Lee Erlbach), a Jewish entrepreneur who runs a hip-hop label devoted to politically engaged music.

Adam blasts onto the stage with a breathless, funny monologue about a day in the trenches at the record label that provides the play with one of its most concentrated shots of theatrical adrenaline. Vibrating with pent-up frustration, he leaps into a hilarious description of a fruitless day spent trying to corral 20 rappers and their posses for his “Political Prisoners Awareness Project.”

Mr. Erlbach’s bravura delivery of this set piece, seemingly in one breath, while bouncing on his toes all over the stage, is a perfect example of Mr. Hoch’s exhilarating ability to turn a torrent of natural speech into a shapely nugget of performance art.

The motivation of Gibran, meanwhile, appears to have something to do with resolving his conflicted feelings about a six-figure job offer. Will his political cred and independent spirit be compromised if he takes a fat tech job at a company run by white guys?

When the gang lands in Cuba, Gibran will be given an uncomfortable education in the risks of devoting a life to social protest, and will awaken to the disillusioning truth that the ideals espoused by governments of all stripes rarely match the reality on the street. His enthusiastic desire to embrace the ethos of the Cuban state comes up roughly against actual life when he meets Dana (Gwendolen Hardwick), an American woman who has lived in Havana since escaping from a prison in the United States after being convicted on supposedly trumped-up charges during the turbulent days of the Black Power movement. Now she pines sadly for another chance to see her family, and seems unradically eager to sell her visitors some hot cigars and collect those ever-useful dollars.

Mr. Hoch’s natural sympathy for his young idealists does not preclude a proclivity for wry parody. The play makes amusing and astute observations about the skin-deep nature of many young urban liberals’ righteous attitudes, and the unstoppable allure of America’s much-derided cultural imperialism.

A hip-hop artist from France can jump into a lengthy (and tired) screed denouncing Mickey Mouse and McDon-

ald’s shortly after going all goo-goo-eyed in the presence of the cheeseburger-eating, bling-bedecked Big Miff. The besotted young Cuban who helps the visitors negotiate the intricacies of Cuban living, Felito (Luis Vega), tosses around a racial epithet with an eager-eyed freedom that unsettles Gibran. It’s impossible to explain the delicate taboos surrounding the word when the only context available to Felito is the gangsta rap he adores.

“Till the Break of Dawn” is laced with such tart commentary on both the power and the perversities of American culture in the 21st century, seen through the prism of young eyes awakening to the advantages they have long taken for granted despite their status as proverbially oppressed minorities. But taken as a whole, it is a frustrating, underdeveloped sprawl of overexplicit scenes, extraneous rants, underwritten characters and trumped-up scenes of conflict.

Nor does Mr. Hoch reveal an assured hand in shaping the ensemble into a cohesive whole. Most of these young actors are appealing and charismatic, but only a few performances feel fully conceived. Mr. Erlbach’s Adam rarely strikes a false note, and pattydukes brings a spunky, fresh spin to her slender role. Mr. Vega’s panting, puppydog-ish Felito is a charmer, even if his inane spouting of urban slang (“Wassup my homie!”) and tag lines from ads (“You got the chocolate in my peanut butter”) wears thin.

Much else has, too, by the time the play dribbles to a conclusion, as Mr. Hoch brings the visitors’ trip to an end with the cataclysm of 9/11. Notwithstanding this unnecessary attempt to add another layer of significance to the proceedings, “Till the Break of Dawn” has come to seem too much like an overwritten sitcom, a sort of hip-hop “Friends” on a double-episode trip to Cuba.

TILL THE BREAK OF DAWN

Written and directed by Danny Hoch; produced by Allan Buchman; general manager, David Friedman; sets by Andromache Chalfant; lighting by Garin Marschall; costumes by Valerie Marcus Ramshur; sound by Jill B C Duboff; associate producers, Sekka Scher and Clyde Valentin/Hip Hop Theater Festival; production manager, Mr. Marschall; production stage manager, Leanne L. Long; assistant director, Jerry Ruiz. Presented by the Culture Project, Mr. Buchman, artistic director. At the Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand Street, at Pitt Street, Lower East Side; (212) 352-3101. Through October 21. Running time: 2 hours 15 minutes.

WITH: Bambadjan Bamba (Toulouse), Dominic Colon (Big Miff), Matthew-Lee Erlbach (Adam), Flaco Navaja (Hector), pattydukes (Nancy), Gwendolen Hardwick (Dana), Jimmie James (Bobby), Jaymes Jorsling (Gibran), Maribel Lizardo (Rebeca), Johnny Sánchez (Robert) and Luis Vega (Felito).