

Isaiah Henry

December 5, 2023

‘Twisted Melodies’

I recently was able to see the production of *Twisted Melodies* at The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. The show follows the soul singer, R&B singer, and St. Louis native Donny Hathaway in his last moments before he tragically commits suicide due to his intense schizophrenia. The beautiful and gut-wrenching telling of the singer's demise was written and performed by, also St. Louis native, Kelvin Roston Jr. and has been touring around theaters in the United States since 2015; however, I think specific direction from Reggie D. White aided the production in many ways.

Reggie D. White is an accomplished performer (*The Inheritance* on Broadway) and director who also serves as the Associate Artistic Director at The Repertory Theatre. *Twisted Melodies* is a one man show and regarding that challenge of directing White said “[Kelvin Roston Jr.] brings all of his rich, rigorous imagination as an actor to the table and all of his thoughtful intentionality around text to the table. I’ve never directed a play where the playwright was in the play and I think that helps a little bit” (The Rep Youtube). It’s an interesting thought as a young director having to direct a one person show. I feel they are typically written and acted by the same person and White explains how that can make the process easier. So much of the dramaturgical and glossary work is done by the writer, and if that is also the actor, that the conversations of the play, intentional blocking, and character journey can be even more specific and in-depth because there’s already a head start on table work. Whether or not this was the case for this production, I still found that the specificity and the character journey were incredibly clear. The team of White and Roston Jr. made it felt like we were actually watching Donny

Hathaway in real time. It felt like the team had a pristine vision of who this man was and what these final moments looked like.

I find that the incorporation of Hathaway's songs is a masterful touch that is clearly in the original script, but with character direction from White, didn't feel forced and didn't make the show feel like a campy musical. It felt like a play with music throughout, but not because there were musical numbers, but because Hathaway was in so much suffering and pain that the only way he could express himself was through song. It seemed that White masterfully coached Roston Jr. to achieve these complex and confusing mental states that Hathaway seemed to be in. They all felt extremely authentic, lived through, and motivated. They served as an obstacle as well as an explanation. I think finding obstacles in a one man show can be difficult but the creative team seemed to formulate this show very well and incorporate creative design choices through lighting, sound, song, and acting to create obstacles for the character to overcome. Roston played out situations as if Hathaway was explaining it to the audience. The incorporation of the audience I found to be well done. We were meant to be a figment of Hathaway's schizophrenic state which gave him purpose to keep talking, singing, and interacting with us. At times it felt as if we should run on stage and help him, tell him everything is okay, but of course this is a theatrical production where that would be silly; however, the thought and feeling remains.

*Twisted Melodies* at The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis was a masterful, creative, and inspiring production. With the creative duo of director Reggie D. White and Writer/Actor Kelvin Roston Jr., specificities in blocking, character work, and design were heightened to a level that was fully enjoyable to witness as an audience member and young director/actor.