

White Girl in Danger

Michael R Jackson music, lyrics, book

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Latoya Edwards's 'Blackgrounder' Keesha, who yearns for a leading role; Kayla Davion, Morgan Siobhan Green and Jennifer Fouché; Keesha (far right) with the 'Megans'

Michael R Jackson, who won both a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award for *A Strange Loop*, continues to refashion US Musical Theatre with the Off-Broadway premiere of *White Girl in Danger* – an overstuffed send-up of white-dominated pop culture and the efforts of Black artists to find a voice where they've been excluded for so long.

Even before the curtain goes up, the audience watches video clips (projection design by Josh Higgason) teasing the soap opera of the title – where 'Allwhite' characters dominate the storylines while non-white players are relegated to the 'Blackground'. (There are more videos during intermission, plugging everything from 'Pine-White' cleaner to an Oprah-like talk show called *Mammy*.) Within this realm, young Blackgrounder Keesha (Latoya Edwards) yearns for a leading role – one that doesn't involve either slavery or police violence. In a perverse line of thinking, she even longs to become the victim of the serial killer decimating the ranks of the 'Allwhite' cast, tangible proof that hers is a story worth telling.

The 'Allwhite' protagonists are a hoot. There's perpetual victim Meagan (Lauren Marcus), fragile bulimic Maegan (Alyse Alan Louis) and druggy bad girl Megan (Molly Hager), each of whom Keesha envies because they're able to 'choose their own adventures'. That mostly entails bristling at their mothers, who conform to different personas (all played by Liz Lark Brown), and enduring the attentions of their equally typecast boyfriends (all played by Eric William Morris). Jackson squeezes additional comedic juice out of namedropping various 1990s personalities: Carrie Whiteshaw, Melissa Joan Whitehart, Brian Austin Greenwhite.

The reappropriation extends to the production's look, with Adam Rigg's sets and

Montana Levi Blanco's costumes borrowing heavily from candy-coloured TV shows like *Saved by the Bell*. Jackson's score, too, offers clever pastiches of everything from Katy Perry pop to Sondheim's *Into the Woods*. (At one point, the 'Megans' channel the singing style of '90s pop stars like angry Alanis Morissette and belty Christina Aguilera.) But the strongest

“Jackson's score offers clever pastiches of everything from Katy Perry to Sondheim”

tunes are reserved for Keesha and her onstage mom, who evolves from mother to nurse to assistant district attorney as her daughter rises through the ranks of the soap-world hierarchy. The irrepressible Tarra Conner Jones – whose character, Nell Gibbs, is a nod to '80s sitcom stars Nell Carter and Marla Gibbs – not only gets

some of the show's best lines but its strongest, most roof-rattling songs. She's one of the few performers whose voice is able to blast through Jonathan Deans's murky sound design (which too often reduces witty lyrics to aural static).

Jackson is brimming with ideas, too many for one three-hour show packed with plots and subplots that mimic their daytime-drama source material. Towards the end, even Nell seems to throw up an 'Allwhite' flag at the repetition and lack of focus: 'This story is so crazy!' But the manic storytelling culminates in a riveting

monologue by a janitor (James Jackson Jr) who emerges as a stand-in for the author. Not unlike the musical-writing Usher in *A Strange Loop*, Jackson's Clarence delivers a meta confessional that lays bare the genuine struggle to inject Black representation into traditionally white-focused narratives.

Like many ingenious works by Black playwrights in recent years, such as James Ijames's *Fat Ham*, Jordan Cooper's *Ain't No Mo'* and Jackie Sibbles Drury's *Fairview*, Michael R Jackson's oeuvre seems to embody what literary critic Harold Bloom called 'the anxiety of influence' – how creators operate in tension with the canon of artists who came before. That anxiety weighs heavily on *White Girl in Danger*, sometimes holding the cast's feet down just when they want to soar. Lileana Blain-Cruz's overly broad direction exacerbates some of the shortcomings, dialling up the energy so that there's little room to breathe. There's a method to all this madness, though, leaving the tantalising possibility that Jackson might hone this promising but flawed show into a glistening gem with even sharper edges.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Latoya Edwards, Tarra Conner Jones, Molly Hager, Alyse Alan Louis, Lauren Marcus, Eric William Morris, James Jackson Jr, Liz Lark Brown, Kayla Davion, Morgan Siobhan Green, Jennifer Fouché *et al*

Direction Lileana Blain-Cruz

Music direction Meg Zervoulis

Orchestrations Lynne Shankel

Choreography Raja Feather Kelly

Set Adam Rigg

Lighting Jen Schriever

Sound Jonathan Deans

Costumes Montana Levi Blanco

Hair/wigs Cookie Jordan

Projections Josh Higgason

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