

queer chaos at its finest. It was messy, fast-and-loose, and the ideal theatre for the TikTok crowd that has become used to micro-video content on their phones. Despite running for nearly 105 minutes, *Circle Jerk* was fast-paced and played right into the way that young people consume entertainment today.

The use of digital tech was a coup, with thirteen cameras helping to build the multimedia spectacle. Just when audiences might have started to question whether the performance is live or filmed beforehand, we witnessed behind-the-scenes shots during which we saw actors quickly changing and running to their next filming location. These behind-the-curtain peaks, while potentially distracting from the show, only added to the dramaturgical world of the digital production.

Although I struggle with digital theatre, I didn't struggle with *Circle Jerk*. In fact, I watched it three times during its closing weekend. Not surprisingly, as a fully digital piece of theatre, *Circle Jerk* was best experienced in digital community. During each live performance of the show, a riotous Twitter chat erupted, extending the show far beyond *Circle Jerk's* original intent. Indeed, engaging in the Twitter chat became as much of a performance and critique of digital culture as *Circle Jerk* itself. Days later, as I quoted the show's memes, danced the trends, and scrolled through TikTok, I realized that I too was part of the circle jerk.

TREVOR BOFFONE
University of Houston

THE AMEN CORNER. By James Baldwin.
Directed by Whitney White. Shakespeare Theatre Company, Washington, D.C. February 28, 2020.

Often heralded as one of the most formidable and influential American novelists, essayists, and public intellectuals of the twentieth century, James Baldwin remains underappreciated as a playwright. While he did not contribute a vast body of work to the modern theatrical canon—only publishing two full-length plays during his lifetime—it is notable that drama was one of the forms Baldwin began experimenting with earliest in his career. Indeed, not long after achieving acclaim with his first novel, the semi-autobiographical *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Baldwin turned his attention to *The Amen Corner* (1954). The evocative three-act epic, which tells the story of Sister Margaret Alexander and the conflict-riddled storefront church she leads in Harlem, excavates and reckons with many of the moral,

racial, and existential themes that preoccupied Baldwin during his early years as a “boy preacher” and would later become hallmarks of his work. In the soul-stirring, roof-raising revival she staged at the Shakespeare Theatre Company, director Whitney White surfaced fresh resonances and meanings in many of those themes and, in so doing, laid bare the enduring beauty and bounty of Baldwin's dramatic imagination.

Baldwin sharpens particular focus on the spirit, rituals, and traditions of the Black church—and the contradictions there within—in his dramaturgy. White ensured that audiences remained immersed in these essential aspects of Black culture throughout her production. Daniel Soule's scenic design helped set the tone and atmosphere from the outset. Heeding the call Baldwin offers in the play's stage directions for a synthesis between the internal and external worlds, Soule placed center stage the mauve, carpet-lined interior of the church sanctuary that becomes the site of much of the play's action, and surrounded it with towering brick walls (replete with terraces) that evoked the high-density housing complexes that continue to line many of the streets in Harlem. He positioned the apartment that Sister Margaret (Mia Ellis) shares with her teenage son David (Antonio Michael Woodard) and older sister Odessa (Harriet Foy) a level below the pulpit, outfitting the otherwise nondescript kitchen with a bright blue Frigidaire. The sprawling design provided a suitable backdrop for the powerhouse choir (skillfully led by music director Victor Simonson and comprised of some of the D.C. region's most fiery and accomplished singer-performers) that White assembled to deliver renditions of classic spiritual and gospel tunes, inviting call and response throughout the performance. The environment also served as a potent visual representation of the tensions animating Baldwin's text.

Sister Margaret's very narrow convictions about what it means to live a righteous and sanctified life is the source of many of those tensions. While members of her church and family initially seem to align with her decidedly low tolerance for any demonstrations of worldliness, there are early signs of rifts and resentments. When, for example, Sister Margaret disapproves of Brother Boxer (Phil McGlaston), a loyal church elder, taking on a job delivering liquor, his wife, Sister Boxer (Deidra La-Wan Starnes), and the sanctimoniously chaste Sister Moore (E. Faye Butler) drop hints of their irritation about her intransigence. The trio becomes even more loose-lipped and defiant when Luke (Chiké Johnson), Sister Margaret's estranged husband, unexpectedly shows up and exposes the fraudulence of her testimony about being abandoned. Butler's turn as Sister Moore, who successfully leads a



The cast of *The Amen Corner*. (Photo: Scott Suchman.)



E. Faye Butler (Sister Moore) and the cast of *The Amen Corner*. (Photo: Scott Suchman.)

campaign to have Sister Margaret relieved of her preacherly duties, was superlative, endowing the potentially insufferable figure with both levity and gravitas. She was well-matched by Harriet Foy's nuanced rendering of the ever-protective Odessa, with whom she passionately spars throughout the play. Odessa perhaps understands better than anybody the profound pressure and scrutiny her sister faces as a Black woman, church leader, and single parent. Instead of condemnation, she encouraged her fellow parishioners—and, concomitantly, the audience—to find ways to embody and practice grace more fully.

Sister Margaret is one of the most demanding roles written for the American stage, and taking on the part is no easy feat. Ellis mostly proved up to the challenge, bringing the character's many layers and dimensions into sharper focus. She did, however, struggle at times to elevate the florid, protracted sermons that Baldwin scripts into something the audience might experience as rapturous. As such, White's production was often at its most captivating when it shifted focus away from the theatrics and spectacle of the sanctuary scenes to home in on the intimate, fragile relationships Sister Margaret shares with David and Luke. It was in these moments that Ellis provided the clearest window into the character's rich interior life. In so doing, she invited the audience to contend and empathize with the tremendous fear Sister Margaret negotiates about the intensity of her love for both men and its capacity to bring about her undoing. It is only after Luke has succumbed to illness, David has run away to pursue his jazz dreams, and the church elders have stripped her of her leadership position that she ultimately comes to understand the folly of her efforts to deny love's power.

Love, Baldwin reminds us in *The Amen Corner* (and would go on to express more explicitly in his "In Search of a Majority: An Address"), is a growing up. Especially striking and thrilling about White's take on this American classic were the ways in which her staging emphasized this particular theme while also revealing *The Amen Corner's* continued relevance for our times.

ISAAH MATTHEW WOODEN
Brandeis University

GODSPELL. Conceived and originally directed by John-Michael Tebelak. Music and new lyrics by Stephen Schwartz. Directed by Alan Filderman. Berkshire Theatre Group, Outside Under a Tent at the Colonial Theatre, Pittsfield, Massachusetts. August 15, 2020.

The Berkshire Theatre Group's summer 2020 production of Stephen Schwartz and John-Michael Tebelak's frequently produced *Godspell* was the first fully staged musical in the United States to be approved by Actors' Equity Association since the inception of the global coronavirus crisis shut down theatres nationwide in March 2020. As such, this was a landmark historical production: the group's ability to put up the show, with strict health and safety protocols and without leading to the infection of cast, crew, musicians, or audience members, was proof that communal theatrical performance can survive and even thrive in the most unprecedented of times. At the core of the show was unbridled optimism: a can-do attitude designed to remind us that even in the darkest of days, if we are able to come together inclusively and with positivity, we can build (or rebuild) a beautiful world. This was not the insidious, toxic optimism of magical thinking that has led some to call for businesses or schools to reopen willy-nilly; it was a measured positivity characterized by abundant precautions: audience members wore masks throughout, had temperatures taken, signed waivers, gave phone numbers for contact tracing, and numerous social-distancing measures were rigorously put in place. At the same time, *Godspell's* important and uplifting message was at times somewhat undercut by certain failings in the production: from elements of stagecraft to the price point of the tickets. Ultimately, the few disappointments in the staging were of little importance to audience members like myself who had been starving for live theatre over the past months, but the high cost was a more significant issue, since the inaccessibility of the show to diverse audiences meant that the material conditions of the event to some degree belied its message.

Alan Filderman's production was designed to engage with the present moment in a variety of ways. Before the opening number, "Prepare Ye," the cast members spoke about the ways the current crisis had interrupted their lives: disrupting promising