

**DESSA ROSE.** Book and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens. Music by Stephen Flaherty. Based on the novel by Sherley Anne Williams. Directed by Rick Lombardo. Musical Direction by Todd C. Gordon. Choreographed by Kelli Edwards. New Repertory Theatre, Watertown, MA. 7 May 2008.

Most of the critical praise enjoyed by lyricist Lynn Ahrens and composer Stephen Flaherty since their collaboration began with *Lucky Stiff* in 1988 has centered on the wildly successful *Ragtime*. *Seussical the Musical*, although a critical failure, remains tremendously popular, profiting from myriad community, school, and regional theatre productions. The team's songs from *Once on This Island*, *A Man of No Importance*, and even the animated film *Anastasia* have entered the repertoire of the aspiring musical theatre performer. One wonders, then, why one of their most recent endeavors, *Dessa Rose*, which premiered at Lincoln Center in 2005, remains comparatively unknown. Although *Dessa Rose* raises provocative questions about historiography, the New Repertory Theatre's production (May 2008) suggests that the musical suffers from intrinsic problems of structure, narrative, and embodiment that are perhaps insurmountable.

As with *Ragtime*, Ahrens adapted *Dessa Rose* from a novel containing several narrative lines. The product, however, was less successful. In the absence of Terrence McNally's skillful book-writing and with less time for workshop development, Ahrens and Flaherty may have lacked opportunities to resolve the inevitable problems of stage adaptation. (*Ragtime* benefited from a three-year development process that included workshops, a concept album, and two pre-Broadway engagements in Toronto and Los Angeles.) Devotion to the structure of the source material may have contributed to the musical's uneven narrative framework. Sherley Anne Williams's episodic novel is divided into sections providing three separate points of view: that of Adam Nehemia, a journalist out to capture the story of a murderous slave for his eager publisher; Rufel (Ruth in the musical), a white woman abandoned by her philandering husband on his plantation; and the title character, a pregnant slave-coffle rebellion leader. While the clever contrast of narrative voices functions effectively in Williams's novel, it causes complications in the musical. Lacking the clear transitions and structural consistency of *Ragtime*, *Dessa Rose* is an uneven experience for the spectator: the narrative voices guiding the audience through the musical shift among Ruth, Dessa, and occasionally Nehemia, their perspectives sporadically jumping from temporal points of view.



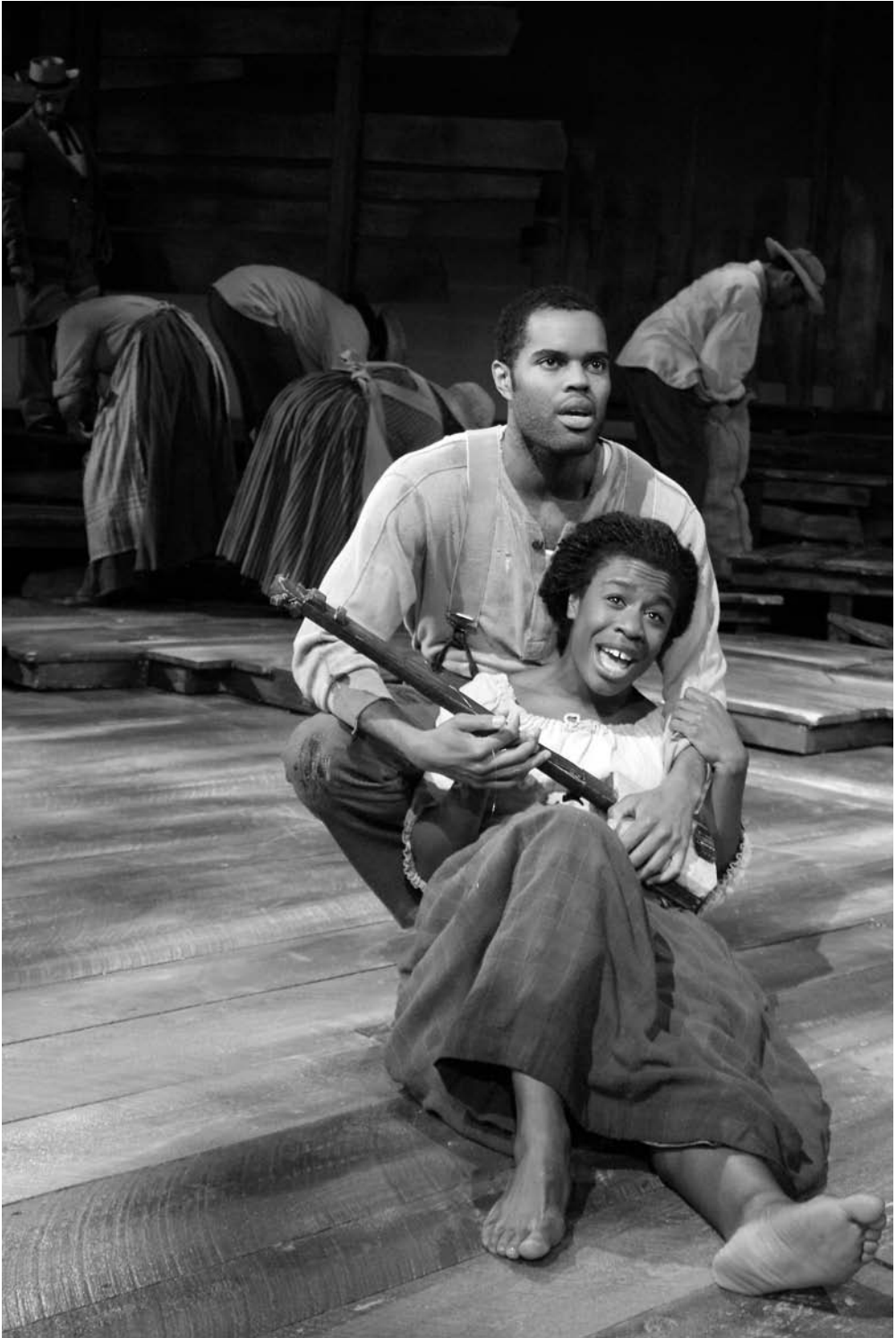
Uzo Aduba and Leigh Barrett in *Dessa Rose*. Photo: Andrew Brilliant/Brilliant Pictures.

From the beginning of the New Repertory Theatre's production, it was clear that *Dessa Rose* is a story of women above all; "We are descended from a long, strong line of *women*," the musical began, the full company lending their voices for the first time on nearly deafening chords on the final lyric. The manner in which their story is told, however, raises competing questions of historiography concerning written versus oral history. "We are handing you down a story, *listen child*, as the music of our memory flows," the full company sings, commencing—and privileging—the unfolding oral history and lending appropriate credence to the spoken slave narrative that drives the action. The musical then calls into question the assumed value of the written text. In order to impress his publisher (and intended father-in-law), Nehemia (played by New Rep veteran Todd Alan Johnson) must record Dessa's story for a salacious book about slave rebellions. "Bloody tales are good for sales," he insists, insinuating that his motivation hardly lies in historical accuracy. When Dessa repeatedly corrects Nehemia's mistaken assumption that her name is Odessa, the journalist notes: "I will write that down, *correctly*, in ink," only to be corrected again later. His significance, then, lies in his embodiment of fallacious slave histories written by contemporaneous white male historians. Such ideological embodiment, however, contributes little to, and even detracts from, the narrative structure of the piece. Nehemia's role in the action dwindles

until he reappears for a final moment of conflict and desperation, culminating in an exasperated display of his notebook to prove his version of Dessa's story. In a moment of melodramatic crisis, the town sheriff declares its contents to be "nothing but scribbles," for he "can't make out a thing."

While the authors may have intended that Nehemia represent this historiographic tension, the split temporality of the narrative voices of Dessa and Ruth—more than fifty years apart—is more difficult to embody. Dessa and Ruth, in their eighties and endowed with the hindsight and nostalgia that tend to accompany advanced age, speak directly to the audience, frequently morphing into their teenage selves to take part in the action they describe. Uzo Aduba, as Dessa, portrayed both the youth and old age of the title character with powerful virtuosity, clearly communicating the character's perspective from each temporal position. Leigh Barrett, as Ruth, was apparently considerably older and handled the challenge of the age binary with less agility. Barrett could not seem to shake the maturity of the elder Ruth when playing the character's adolescence, which created awkward moments with a mother (Dawn C. Tucker) who appeared younger than her daughter, thereby undermining the communication of youthful naivety behind many of Ruth's choices.

Following Ahrens and Flaherty's deserved critical success with *Ragtime*, *Dessa Rose* bore a heavy



De'lon Grant and Uzo Aduba, with the cast of *Dessa Rose*. Photo: Andrew Brilliant/Brilliant Pictures.

burden of expectations when it opened. One occasionally wonders if material left over from *Ragtime* was put to good use in *Dessa Rose* as thematic and musical echoes of loss, racial tension, and hope, through a new generation, permeate the play. Revisiting such issues is surely justified, but one longs for the focused narrative and complexity across themes of storytelling and truth that characterized earlier Ahrens and Flaherty musicals such as *Once on This Island*. In an interview for *Downstage Center*, Ahrens and Flaherty recalled the grueling process of cutting the show during its brief workshop period, because producer and artistic director of Lincoln Center Theatre André Bishop had described it as “a pudding with too many raisins.” *Dessa Rose* may still contain a few raisins too many, but the pudding remains significant for the past achievements and future promise of its creators.

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