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Rashid Johnson: Dutchman, Russian & Turkish Baths, New York

Amiri Baraka's 1964 play is restaged in a suitably sweaty environment



Rashid Johnson's 'Dutchman'

Dutchman, playwright Amiri Baraka's political allegory of race relations, shocked viewers when initially performed at the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village in 1964; it provoked outrage when re-conceived there in 2007; and its latest revival, as a performance artwork by Rashid Johnson for the Performa 13 biennial, leaves its audience sweating. The Chicago artist has retained Baraka's script, but in place of the set on which the original was staged – a New York City subway car – Johnson has transplanted his version into the moist chambers of the East Village's historic Russian & Turkish Baths.

As viewers arrive, they are asked to remove their clothing and don a cotton robe before proceeding downstairs, where each of the play's three acts takes place in a different steam room (warm and wet; cool; scalding). This *mise-en-scène* ensures that the drama is experienced not only as a narrative but as a progression of physical sensations: the crush of bodies, the smell of burning wood, and the close, oppressive air transform the suffocating space of Baraka's train-car interior into a visceral reality.

The story opens as Lula – sensual, predatory, white – sidles up to her unwitting prey, a young black man named Clay. She says she caught him staring at her ass, takes a seat, and lets her the robe fall away to reveal a cherry-red bikini. Writhing with discomfort, Clay denies her accusation, and a tortuous seduction begins. Though Lula's flirtation is abusive, spliced with racist mockery, irony and contempt, her victim is blinded by desire. "You middle-class black bastard," she sneers, when he declines to get up and dance for her. "Forget your social-working mother for a few seconds and let's knock stomachs. You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man." But Clay is unfazed. In the first room, Clay manages to resist Lula's still-moderated assault with his temerity. In the flat grey light of the second room, the air cools down as things heat up. "Things work on you until you hate them," she purrs in his ear, and her prescient diagnosis propels us into the third and final room, flaming hot. As the audience oozes sweat and struggles to breathe, the discourse devolves into violence. "You're afraid of white people!" Lula taunts, and Clay,

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finally, erupts. “I sit here in this buttoned-up suit to keep myself from cutting all your throats,” he howls. “Murder, just murder, would make us all sane.”

The piece is rife with metaphor: the tiered benches of each steam room recall an amphitheatre, which in turn evokes a Roman tragedy – and if an expectation is created, it is not disappointed. Johnson describes himself as a “post-black artist;” *Dutchman* suggests that race is present all around us, as real and invisible as heat.



13.performa-arts.org