

# THE NEW YORKER

THE THEATRE

## YOUNG AMERICAN

*Stew on his peripatetic youth.*

by Hilton Als

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Not since Stephen Sondheim introduced a kind of Jewish skepticism and irony to the Broadway musical, in the nineteen-fifties, and Tony Kushner revolved his 2003 show, “Caroline, or Change,” around the ways in which class intersects with race have we had such a finely crafted, ethnic-minded American musical as “Passing Strange” (at the Public). “Passing Strange” is a brilliant work about migration—a geographical migration but also its hero’s migration beyond the tenets of “blackness” and toward selfhood. Unlike Sondheim and Kushner, the musician and singer Stew, who created “Passing Strange,” which is an autobiography of sorts, doesn’t distract us with exoticism or nostalgia; his story centers on a young black man who discovers his own Americanness while growing up, first, in Los Angeles and, later, in Europe. The Youth (Daniel Breaker) is a rock-and-roll Candide—a wanderer whose innocence is never entirely corrupted.

At the start of the show, three musicians rise through the stage. They support or provide counterpoint to the guitar-wielding Narrator, the Youth’s older alter ego, who is played by Stew. (In addition to writing the show’s book and lyrics, Stew co-wrote the propulsive music, with Heidi Rodewald.) After introducing himself (“Now, you don’t know me / And I don’t know you / So let’s cut to the chase / My name is Stew / I’ll be narrating this gig so just sit tight”), the Narrator, a short, stocky charmer, with a shaved head, yellow-tinted glasses, and a cotton-candy goatee, wins us over almost at once. Given the rock-and-roll element of the show, we are somewhat jadedly expecting a more colored version of “Rent,” with a bit of “Hedwig and the Angry Inch” thrown in. Instead, the Narrator establishes himself as an ironist with a comfortable, middle-class pedigree. In his distinctive, soothing baritone, Stew sings, staring straight out at the audience, “Now, since it’s my job I’m gonna set the scene / In a big two-story black middle-class dream / With all the mod cons, the manicured lawns / Some savings bonds, a boy and his mom / Talkin’ mid-seventies South Central L.A. / A colored paradise where the palm trees sway / But this promised land wasn’t delivering the goods / Even in this best of all possible hoods.”

The Youth’s mother (Eisa Davis) enters. She stands ramrod straight and beautiful, her hair pulled back in a bun. She’s imperious but loving as she confronts her son with righteous indignation about his interest in Buddhism. Why won’t he go with her to the Lord’s house? Slouching in a bright-colored shirt, his eyes as big as those in a Keane painting, the teen-aged Youth will have none of this. Why should he go to church? he asks. (The majority of the show is sung, not spoken.) What do all those black people wailing and shouting for salvation have to do with true spirituality? (In a side-splitting moment, the Narrator points out how the mother slips into “Negro dialect” when admonishing her son about religion—thus sending up the standard American theatrical device of making black performers sound more “real” by substituting “de” for “the.”)

The Youth does eventually go with her to church, but he discovers a different god there: rock and roll. He realizes that the gospel music his mother and the other parishioners sing is where Chuck Berry had his roots. Not that the Youth wants to be a rock star—not exactly. He’s more interested in an offshoot of rock, punk music, which separates him further from conventional ideas of blackness in the seventies.

Before long, the Youth has assembled a ragtag band, the Scaryotypes, that plays punk—badly. Good parodists, Stew



and Rodewald exaggerate punk's driving, staccato rhythms and make a tender joke of them. Still, Stew has something less humorous to say about youth in general and this Youth in particular, when he has him sing, in an unmelodic drone:

1-2-3-4 1-2-3-4  
I'm at war with Negro mores  
I'm at war with ghetto norms  
My mother stands in doorways beggin'  
me to conform  
Be a good football-playin' snazzy-dressin'  
brother  
So the sisters won't be able to tell me  
from the others—  
Yeah I'm the sole brother—up in this  
motherfucker. . . .  
So "Roots" blew your mind? You didn't  
know it was that bad?  
I learned that shit in third grade. In Miss  
Medearis's class.  
But yer still a buncha slaves. And yer  
driving me insane,  
Cuz now the whip across your back is  
connected to your brain.

What the Narrator calls the Youth's "search for the real" begins here. And we marvel at his bravery. He's ill at ease with any stereotype that defines him as anything other than an artist—a free spirit. Still, he doesn't feel that he can mine his freedom in Los Angeles. He wants to find a new life in one of the foreign movies he loves. He wants to decamp for Europe and make the images in his head real.

Stew and the show's exceptionally gifted director, Annie Dorsen, skewer the scene in which the Youth leaves his long-suffering mother by making it look and sound like an Antonioni movie. The mother dons a head scarf and shades; she and the Youth hug poles as they speak in voices that sound as if they'd been dubbed. When the Youth finally leaves, Stew sings, in "Merci Beaucoup, M. Godard," about what the Youth imagines his new life will be like: "Naked girls at breakfast tables / Talking Hegel and Camus . . . / And men dressed up in Gauloise smoke / Quote Marx right back at you." Arriving in Amsterdam, where, naturally, he gets stoned on hash and free love, the Youth learns to exploit the condition in which many black expatriates find themselves: being seen as representatives of their race, speaking for their "people."

Of course, the irony is not lost on us. Didn't the Youth leave America to avoid falling into just this trap? But somehow it's different here, largely because he admires his audience more: they're white and European, not the disapproving members of his mother's church, let alone his mother herself. In Amsterdam, the Youth can develop an unimpeachable shtick; he's a cool black dude, a songwriter who speaks the truth. The voice of the real, however, keeps interrupting his fantasies: his mother calls long-distance to ask when he's coming home. When will he live among his own people again? In his drive to establish his difference, the Youth cannot hear, let alone grasp, what his mother is trying to tell him: We all belong to someone. We may sever the ties for a while, she suggests, but family is the movie that none of us can rewrite or rewind.

Time passes, and the Youth finds himself living among a group of anarchists in Berlin. (The supporting cast takes on multiple roles, and all are exceptional, as are the leading players.) It's Christmas, and the Youth refuses to return home to what he sees as bourgeois safety. The anarchists disappoint him, though, by doing just that; their sentimentality overrules their commitment to destruction. The Youth is forced to face what they are doing, and what he himself has been doing: playing a role that has little, if anything, to do with the truth, avoiding acceptance of the ways in which he is limited by the heart. Returning home, he discovers that the world he knew has changed. Has he? Yes and no. He's still annoyed by his mother's friends' pieties, but he learns to honor his mother, too. In the end, he realizes that she was always his one true attachment.

With "Passing Strange," Stew, Rodewald, and Dorsen have created a work of such singularity that it prompts comparisons less to traditional theatre than to the eccentric iconoclasm of the producer Prince Paul, who, in works like his 1999 hip-hop opera, "A Prince Among Thieves," ushered in the sound of the New Negro. Whether he knows it or not, Stew has picked up the baton. Imagine what he could do if he were to reimagine the work of that other black expat in

Europe who gets a nod or two in “Passing Strange”: the original “strange” black American, James Baldwin. ◆

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