

May 15, 2007

THEATER REVIEW | 'PASSING STRANGE'

Look Back in Chagrin: A Rocker's Progress

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#)

A portrait of the artist as a confused young black man emerges in vivid colors in the fresh, exuberant and biting funny new musical "Passing Strange," which opened last night at the [Public Theater](#). The biography of a songwriter on a wayward journey of self-discovery, this bracingly inventive show introduces an exciting new voice to contemporary musical theater, a witty wordsmith, composer and performer who goes by the single name Stew.

Stew has a cult following as a performer and recording artist, but to look at him, you'd never take him for a rock troubadour. Bald and big-bellied, with a neat goatee and quirky eyeglasses, he has an air more professorial than swoon-inducing. Narrating the story of his life in song, sometimes from a podium or a desk, he slides those glasses up his big, domed forehead to peer skeptically at the dubious antics of his fictionalized younger self, played with impish spirit by Daniel Breaker. Stew watches in sorrow, amazement and occasional embarrassment as the callow young man he once was struts and struggles, pouts and fusses his way to maturity on a voyage that takes him from the not-so-mean streets of Los Angeles to the hash bars of Amsterdam and the post-punk cabarets of Berlin.

But Professor Stew can also play a mean guitar, and when necessary, he strides the stage like an evangelical preacher, or a preening rocker, to whip the audience into a froth. Part concert, with Stew leading an onstage band; part book musical with a full (and terrific) cast, "Passing Strange" defies generic categories. This is wholly appropriate, since the story being told doesn't run in any of the familiar grooves of the African-American experience in 20th-century America. And if it does trace the classic story of the artist as a self-styled outsider at odds with mainstream culture (as personified by Mom), "Passing Strange" sets this boilerplate arc to a quirky new rhythm.

Our hero-rebel grew up comfortably in black bourgeois Los Angeles, "a colored paradise where the palm trees sway," and there's hardly a word about the cruelties of racism in American culture in "Passing Strange." (Hardly an earnest word, anyway. One highlight is a hilarious mock-minstrel song in which Stew lampoons the way he once capitalized on stereotypes about the black American experience to gain some street cred with German radicals.)

As a teenager, Stew was a Zen Buddhist who smirked at the hats of the ladies in church, at least until one Sunday when "the organ whispered a promise," the spirit moved him to ecstasy, and he found himself called not to God but to the making of music and the forging of a life in art. (His mother, played with wry warmth by Eisa Davis, is not pleased. "Don't you know the difference between the sacred and the profane?" she hisses. Citing his own scripture to defend his pronouncement that "church ain't nothin' but rock 'n' roll," the young Stew stutters back, "But it was on [PBS!](#)")

After that epiphany, Stew joins the choir and forms a bond with its leader, the pastor's flamboyant son Mr. Franklin (a charismatic Colman Domingo, also terrific as a ranting Berlin performance artist). In a scene both ruefully funny and tender, the young Stew gets high with Mr. Franklin as they listen to Puccini in a blue VW bug. The desolation of a life lived in compromise is brought home to him in a haze of pot smoke.

Mr. Franklin worships Maria Callas, regrets his own timidity and urges the young Stew to escape to Europe and find his real spiritual home. "I mean, baby, we're all freaks depending on the backdrop," he shrugs. Bright-eyed with wonder, young Stew jokes that they're both "black folks passing for black folks."

The music, composed by Stew and Heidi Rodewald (who also plays bass), is straight-ahead guitar-driven rock rather than rhythm and blues

(though of course the line between them is easily blurred). As Stew searches for his own musical voice, the disparate styles referred to range from '60s Europop to '70s punk to '80s electronic to Gilbert and Sullivan and [Kurt Weill](#). The score contains a tiny musical quote (a joke, really) from [James Brown](#), but also a smidgen of "My Fair Lady." Stew's gift for smart comic wordplay would be the envy of many a rapper, but the more lyrical passages in "Passing Strange" are carefully sculptured, considered and reflective, not hot and bothered. (Occasionally, Stew does try a little too hard for poetic profundity.)

The show follows the budding musician from his garage-band days in Los Angeles to coffeehouses in Amsterdam, where he indulges in the usual condiments of a rock 'n' roll life, and from there to Berlin, where he falls in with a group of political and aesthetic radicals. "Celibacy is the only sane response to a world gone wild," declares one new friend, a "critical theorist and postmodern pornographer." "My porno films feature fully clothed men making business deals."

"Narrative is a capitalist plot!" is the rallying cry of another. If so, "Passing Strange" is not likely to face accusations of spreading the doctrine. As the show ambles past the two-hour mark, its episodic story line becomes a liability. Because Stew's aesthetic and moral awakening takes place against a shifting backdrop, no other characters stick around long enough to claim a full role in the proceedings, despite perfectly pitched comic performances from the whole cast. The spectacle of watching a young man try on various emotional and artistic attitudes will strike happy chords in the hearts of ex-dreamers of youthful dreams, but colder eyes may see it as an extended exercise in musical navel-gazing.

Still, engagement is sustained by the unusual combination of driving rock music and a tart satiric tone, a delicate balance that the show maintains throughout with surprising ease. Although some sequences would benefit from trimming, the director, Annie Dorsen, shapes the individual scenes smartly and effectively, with the help of the modern-dance choreographer Karole Armitage ("movement coordinator" is her credit), who keeps the energetic cast in almost constant motion when it's center stage. (I should acknowledge that Ms. Dorsen is an acquaintance.)

For all its witty puncturing of youthful pretension, and despite the sardonic attitude Stew often strikes toward his younger self, "Passing Strange" is also full of heart. It dares in its playful way to honor those big questions that have set adolescent souls yearning for centuries. How to discover and be true to your convictions, how to live a meaningful life and still pay the bills, how to find the understanding you need without throwing away the love you're offered. Its mournful finale also acknowledges the damage that accrues in those heedless years spent asking them with such stridency, before you come to realize that learning to listen is just as important as making yourself heard.

PASSING STRANGE

Book and lyrics by Stew; music by Stew and Heidi Rodewald; directed and created in collaboration with Annie Dorsen; sets by David Korins; costumes by Elizabeth Hope Clancy; lighting by Kevin Adams; sound by Tony Smolenski IV; movement coordinator, Karole Armitage; musical director, Ms. Rodewald; musical supervisor, Jon Spurney; production stage manager, Cynthia Cahill; general manager, Nicki Genovese; associate producers, Bill Bragin, Peter DuBois and Mandy Hackett; director of production, Ruth E. Sternberg. Presented by the [Public Theater](#), Oskar Eustis, artistic director; Mara Manus, executive director, in association with Berkeley Repertory Theater, Tony Taccone, artistic director; Susan Medak, managing director. At the Public Theater, 425 Lafayette Street, at Astor Place, East Village; (212) 967-7555. Through June 3. Running time: 2 hours 30 minutes.

WITH: De'Adre Aziza (Edwina/Marianna/Sudabey), Daniel Breaker (Youth), Eisa Davis (Mother), Colman Domingo (Mr. Franklin/Joop/Mr. Venus), Chad Goodridge (Hugo/Christophe/Terry), Rebecca Naomi Jones (Sherry/Renata/Desi) and Stew (Narrator).

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