

Latifah's 'Beauty Shop' weaves sophmoric tale

By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

When we last saw Gina Norris (Queen Latifah), the sassy sister was working a hot comb at the beauty parlor next-door to Calvin's Barbershop in Chicago. Now, she's a doting single-mom and has relocated to Atlanta where she's moved in with her late husband's family in order to be able to afford to send her daughter, Vanessa (Paige Hurd), a child prodigy, to a private music conservatory.

At the point of departure, Gina is employed at an upscale salon run by a flamboyant, foreign creep named Jorge (Kevin Bacon). This arrangement is okay until the day she mistakes his use of the word "moniker" for an ethnic slur.

Gina ignorantly calls him a racist and quits on the spot, without the benefit of a fallback position, except for her special invention, Hair Crack conditioner.

She decides to open her own shop, but because the bank will only lend her \$30,000, the best place she can rent is a dive in dire need of an extreme makeover. Gina can thank her lucky stars that there's a handsome, African handyman (Djimon Hounsou) living in the apartment upstairs, who is willing to pitch in. Plus, not only is Joe available and interested, but he likes her kid, too, and can play a particularly soulful rendition of Stevie Wonder's "Knocks Me Off My Feet" on the piano.

Although it's painfully obvious where that acquaintance is headed, expect a long wait



Ladies are definitely first in "Beauty Shop," a spinoff of the popular "Barbershop" films.

before any romance blossoms. Putting business ahead of love, Gina instead focuses on hiring Jorge's disgruntled help and stealing a few of his favorite clients. This could come back to bite her later, especially if her ex-boss can find a bribable state inspector willing to shut down his employee-turned-competitor.

However, almost immediately, Gina's establishment, ala Calvin's Barber Shop, becomes the popular gathering spot where both clients and stylists lose all their inhibitions, feeling comfortable enough to say whatever's on their minds, however inane. Mostly they

seem to be thinking about sex, race, sex, eating, sex gays, sex and social status. Oh, and did I mention sex?

What the place lacks in polish, it more than makes up for with ghetto fabulous flair. Gina's opinionated help is played by Alfre Woodard, Keisha Knight-Pulliam, Alicia Silverstone and Bryce Wilson, while Andie MacDowell, Della Reese, Mena Suvari, Kimora Lee Simmons are among her just as colorful customers.

Then, there are the regulars from the 'hood who wander in and out to provide a little comic relief, like Willie (Little JJ), a prepubescent gnome given who constantly propositions females with the most vulgar of terms

(such as "money shot") as if he's a loser pervert standing on a street corner. He has an infinite supply of corny pick-up lines for the flattered objects of his injections.

What woman wouldn't want to be asked "Is your _____ named Visa? Because it's everywhere I want to be." Always keeping it real, so to speak, the dialogue is sprinkled with healthy doses of such seductive slanguage, along with slurs and curses, like the N-word, the T-word, "bling-bling," "bitch," "up in here," and "heifer."

This over-plotted picture has more sidebars than Joe can shake his spear at. Will Willie finally find a woman who gives him the time of day? How will Vanessa fare at her big piano recital? Can a White girl get a Black ass simply by eating soul food? Will the sisters work with a White stylist? Will that change when she starts dating a sensitive Black man they assumed was a homosexual? Will a rich White client with Jungle Fever then try to steal him away? Can the diabolical Jorge figure out a way to eliminate the competition. And, most importantly, will Gina and Joe (and Vanessa) live happily ever after?

Remarkably, all these loose ends are eventually tied-up and to the audience's satisfaction.

Yet, Beauty Shop first does far too much harm in its sophomoric, locker room approach to Black-White, gay-straight, and male-female relating to dupe anybody into believing that the damage could be undone by a sweet storybook ending.

Fair (1 star). Rated PG-13 for sex, expletives, ethnic slurs and drug references.

Review: Denzel detached in mounted 'Caesar' play

NEW YORK (AP) - "Brutus is an honorable man," says Mark Antony during one of the more famous speeches that pepper William Shakespeare's blood-soaked "Julius Caesar," now being revived on Broadway. Yet watching Denzel Washington's curiously detached performance as Brutus (one of the co-conspirators who kill the fabled Roman emperor), enigma is more the word that comes to mind.

Washington, the reason this revival was mounted in the first place, has a magnetic, forceful screen persona suggesting strength and warmth at the same time. Yet on stage, at least in this aggressive, modern-dress production directed by Daniel Sullivan, the actor comes across as subdued. His voice, while strong, lacks variety, producing a monotone at odds with the other, more vocally acrobatic actors on stage.

Brutus is a man in the middle - torn between his loyalty to Caesar and his devotion to Rome. The man's searing internal conflict should find its way to the sur-

face. Here it produces a slightly furrowed brow and a tentative portrait.

Sullivan's tough-minded production is agreeably straightforward, despite his placing the play within an odd time frame. A decaying ancient Rome is atmospherically realized in designer Ralph Funicello's crumbling set, but it's also a world of cell phones, metal detectors, briefcases and machine guns.

These conspirators are White-collar terrorists, all dressed in business attire. Washington, a sparkling stud in his left ear, makes a stylish entrance in a gray suit offset by a crisp blue shirt.

Best of the lot is Colm Feore, a fiercely manipulative Cassius who woos Brutus with the ardor of a true believer. Among the others, Jack Willis, as a burly, almost comic Casca, and Patrick Page as a particularly unctuous Decius Brutus, stand out.

As the title character, William Sadler is suitably hearty and personable, yet drawn with enough shading to make the man's egocentricity show through. The dramatic high point of any "Julius Caesar"

should be Mark Antony's famous eulogy for Caesar, "Friends, Romans, Countrymen," a not-so-subtle call-to-arms that will make the rabble rise up against the men who killed Caesar.

Sullivan stages it dramatically, with the actors spilling into the theater's aisles and standing in the boxes above the stage. Eamonn Walker's Antony is brooding and can command an audience.

Women in "Julius Caesar" are generally forgotten creatures and that's the case here. "Julius Caesar" is not the most subtle of Shakespeare's plays, particularly as it drives toward a violent conclusion in a series of battle scenes. At the Belasco Theatre, they consist of actors wearing camouflage and running across the stage while explosions and gunfire pierce the air. This could be one of the noisiest productions of "Julius Caesar" on record.

Washington handles these final moments well. He has an athletic grace and precision. And there is a nobility in the death of Brutus. Yet it's the actor's interpretation of the man's life that is the puzzlement.



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