

Back to Alabama with Cleage and Baldwin

2 Southern playwrights get personal with the history of the Civil Rights Movement



In Baldwin's *Night Blooms* at Horizon Theatre Company, foreground: Marguerite Hannah, left, and Harrison Long; in background from left, Lala Cochran, Tom Thon, Jill Jane Clements.

Margaret Baldwin's *Night Blooms* starring Prof. Long was featured in *American Theatre Magazine*, the premiere monthly theatre publication in the United States. For her work Baldwin received the 2011 Gene-Gabriel Moore Playwriting Award (Atlanta's Tony Award.)

It was a joy to work with you as an actor on this piece. "Clayton" is a new character in the play. Before this workshop he was only a vague idea in my head. But thanks to your thoughtful presence and feedback, he has really come alive for me. Your voice and vision are a vital part of the development process.

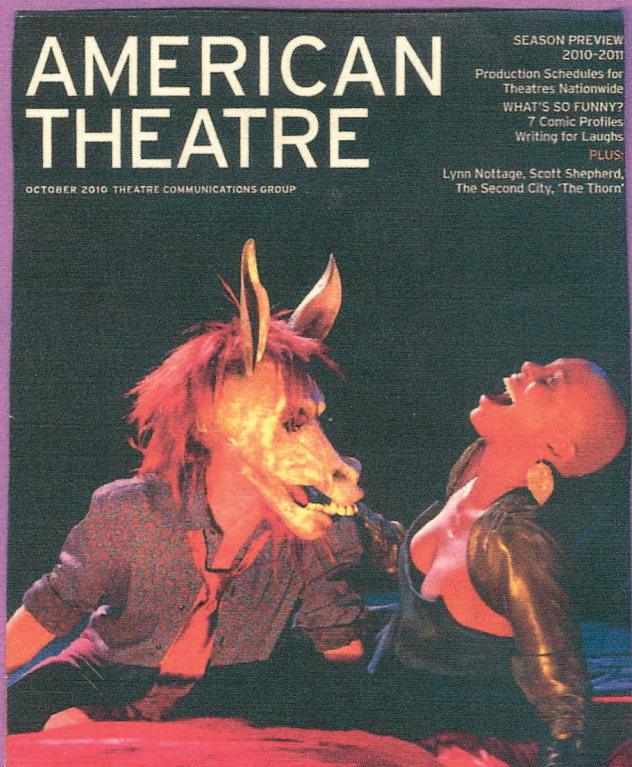
Margaret Baldwin – Playwright, *Night Blooms*

AN INTERVIEW BY WENDELL BROCK

AMERICA'S COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF THE CIVIL Rights Movement is catalogued from a public database of headlines and photographs, marches and boycotts, martyrs and villains. We sometimes forget that in the inner sanctums of cities such as Selma, Atlanta and Jackson, ordinary people engaged in private dramas the same way that humans always have: falling in love, having children, trying to put food on the table, worrying about sickness and death.

In two plays debuting this fall, Atlanta playwrights Pearl Cleage and Margaret Baldwin dig into the rich, messy, complicated lives of two Alabama families as they watch history unfold from behind lace-curtained windows, circa the mid-'60s. Cleage's *The Nacirema Society Requests the Honor of Your Presence at a Celebration of Their First One Hundred Years*, about an upper-crust Montgomery family preparing for a society cotillion, runs at Alabama Shakespeare Festival, where it was commissioned, through Oct. 3, then plays Atlanta's Alliance Theatre Oct. 20–Nov. 14. Baldwin's *Night Blooms*, about the relationship between a white Selma family and its black maid on the cusp of the third Selma-to-Montgomery march of 1965, runs through Oct. 24 at Atlanta's Horizon Theatre as part of the company's New South Play Festival.

In an uncanny feat of timing, Cleage, 61—a well-established playwright (*Blues for an Alabama Sky*, *Flyin' West*) and best-selling novelist with an Oprah Book Club title (*What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*)—and Baldwin, 42, an up-and-comer who teaches theatre at Atlanta's Kennesaw State University and has written original plays for Horizon



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Night Blooms

By Margaret Baldwin
Directed by Karen Robinson

September 24 - October 24, 2010

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Review: "Night Blooms," funny, complex and touching, gets world premiere from Horizon Theatre

by Phil Kloer / Sep 26, 2010

Those actors, all named above, are outstanding, and they all elevate one another's work exactly the way the best theatrical companies do. Director Karen Robinson (and Horizon mainstay Lisa Adler) deserve much applause for bringing Baldwin's "Night Blooms" to life. On opening night, the first time anyone had seen a full production (it's been workshopped a lot), the audience gave the obligatory standing O, then rushed for the exits when the lights came up. "Night Blooms" earns several curtain calls, and the new play deserves your attention if you value the best original Atlanta theater.

D6

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'Night Blooms' an intimate civil rights drama

By Wendell Brock
For the AJC

When Selma matriarch Lucille Stafford awakes one March morning in 1965 to find her late mother's treasured night-blooming cereus about to flower, it's a convenient excuse for shutting out the racial tensions unfolding outside.

But as Lucille calls in her maid to fry chicken and make cheese straws for her "blooming party," the seething political drama in the streets is about to erupt in her own living room.

Like a heady mix of Tennessee Williams and Kathryn Stockett's best-selling novel "The Help," Margaret Baldwin's "Night Blooms" — loosely based on the playwright's Selma grandmother and her longtime maid — is an absorbing portrait of a crumbling social structure that articulates multiple points of view while capturing the tentative



Marguerite Hannah and Harrison Long star in Margaret Baldwin's "Night Blooms," a Southern drama about family tensions during the civil rights movement. Horizon Theatre

moral footing of those caught somewhere in between.

In a fall theater season with an unusual outpouring of Southern stories ("Stealing Dixie," "A Confederacy of Dunces," "Twist"), this Horizon Theatre world premiere directed by Karen Robinson shines like a hidden gem. Marrying a delicious sense of come-

dy with a Chekhovian affection for her subjects, Baldwin shows a careful understanding of the quotidian details of Southern life, circa the 1960s, and the complicated relationships born from the genteel racism, and escalating violence, of a segregated society.

In Lucille (played to heartbreaking effect by Jill Jane Clements), Baldwin

Theater review "Night Blooms"

Grade: B+

8 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays; 8:30 p.m. Saturdays; 5 p.m. Sundays; 3 p.m. Oct. 2, Oct. 9 and Oct. 16, Through Oct. 24. \$20-\$30. Horizon Theatre, 1083 Austin Ave., Atlanta. 404-584-7450, horizontheatre.com. **Bottom line:** Important world premiere shows how civil rights movement affected two families, one black and one white.

win creates a pitch-perfect Southern mama who is as gracious as she is flawed. Told by her daughter Ruth (LaLa Cochran) that a sick neighbor "can't even wipe his own behind," she responds: "We should take him a casserole." Marguerite Hannah portrays the maid, Geneva Willis, with a devotion that's just beginning to crack at

the service with resentment. And Tom Thon is terrific as Lucille's dying husband, who carries a flask, cusses with talent and sneaks smokes even though he's tied to an oxygen tank.

Alas, Cochran isn't nearly so believable as the dutiful daughter, who claims to be socially progressive but whose brittle behavior is suspect. Thanks to Harrison Long's turgid presence, Lucille's son, Clayton — a Unitarian Universalist minister who comes down from Baltimore with an agenda that diverges from the Alabama mainstream — is more annoying and preachy than necessary.

As Ruth's daughter, Lucy, Bethany Anne Lind's approach to inhabiting a 12-year-old mind is a little whiny, while Brittney London plays Geneva's daughter, Raynelle, with naturalness and poise. The girls' forced intimacy leads to an unfiltered

outburst from the grandfather that, shocking and inappropriate as it may be, feels a great deal more authentic than Clayton's anger and disgust.

On the design side, Jeffrey Weber creates a nice, multitered period set that re-creates kitchen, living room and porch, and Sydney Roberts' dresses and hats recall a time when Jackie Kennedy and Coretta Scott King were style-makers.

Though just a tad sentimental, "Night Blooms" spins a wonderfully moving drama about a family clinging to pain and dysfunction. Lucille would rather flick off the TV, with its barrage of images from Bloody Sunday and the March on Montgomery, than "fess up to any sort of injustice or embarrassment. But in acknowledging their struggles and limitations, the Staffords and Willises emerge from a contentious moment in time with a promise of healing and redemption.