

Talk

By Carl Hancock Rux. Dir. Marion McClinton. With ensemble cast.

Public Theater (see Off Broadway).

If after seeing Carl Hancock Rux's new work (which I recommend doing immediately) you feel woozy, exhausted and bewildered, don't worry—you just made it through the most intellectually ambitious play in years. *Talk* is what it's called, and that's what it should generate long after its demanding three hours. An encyclopedic excavation of mid-20th-century ideas about art, race and history, this unique event is not easy to absorb in one sitting. Better to listen hard and try to keep up with the furious conceptual riffs Rux (also a musician and spoken-word artist) madly plays.

Talk is framed as a panel discussion on obscure 1950s novelist and filmmaker Archer Aymes, a fictional meld of Anatole Broyard and Ralph Ellison, whose prose sounds a bit like Gertrude Stein's. The young, earnest Moderator (Anthony Mackie) introduces us to Aymes with a reading from his first and only book, *Mother and Son*. Afterward, the young man indicates that his interest in Aymes springs from a desire to make peace with his ancestors. "We are taught to advance. To walk forward from the place of our beginning," the Moderator says. "Welcome—to regression." Psychobabble, it turns out, is just one mode among the blizzard of discourses to come once the Moderator introduces

a panel that discusses Aymes as artist, celebrity, African-American and revolutionary.

Most of the play is occupied with speechifying and squabbling among four of the subject's contemporaries, whom Rux has named after Platonic dialogues. There's the weaselly journalist Ion (James Himelsbach), who claims to have written the first and definitive biography of Aymes; the art-film diva, Phaedo (Maria Tucci), who starred in Aymes's movie of his novel; a terribly toupeed former talk-show host, Meno (John Seitz), who interviewed the writer; and an activist and musician, Crito (Reg E. Cathey), who shared an Atlanta prison cell with Aymes during a civil-rights march. Hovering on the sidelines is Appollodorus (Karen Kandel), a performance artist who knew the man's sexually adventuresome side.

What emerges from the discussion? Too much to catalog here. The history of the Beats, early television, civil rights, Surrealism and avant-garde film are breathtakingly inventoried by the panelists, who fiercely dispute each other's record and interpretation. After a while, Aymes begins to resemble an African-American Zelig, the Woody Allen character who pops up throughout history.

James Noone's marvelous Hellenistic set, like the characters' names, alludes to antiquity, but the real precedent-setter for *Talk* is Orson Welles, not Socrates. Like *Citizen Kane*, *Talk* shows what happens when you take a life and peel away its layers. The more you peel, the more the man disappears. The very name of Rux's invisible man is a pair of slippery homophones. Is *Archer* to be read as noun or adjective? Is *Aymes* verb or noun? Is all this yackety-yack and name-dropping about zeroing in, or is there a more ironic, oblique goal in mind?

Rux may be drunk on research and theory (a 20-minute coda about Pentheus and Bacchus is an overindulgent mess), but he's willing and able to complicate assumptions about art and race with humor and elegance. Coupled with Marion McClinton's precise, masterful orchestration of voices and painterly tableaux, *Talk* wins the case for a renewed theater of ideas.—David Cote



JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM Mackie's Moderator, left, wants the true story from film diva Tucci.

BOTTOM: CAROL ROSEGG; TOP: SHEILA BURNETT

Critics' picks

Talk

(Off Broadway) Conceived as a panel discussion by Carl Hancock Rux, this dazzling new work dissects art and race in mid-20th-century America—as experienced by fictional novelist Archer Aymes.

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