

The Magnificent Dunbar Hotel

PHOTO BY TONORO MATSUSHITA



The talented ensemble cast opulently adorned by costume designer Naila Aladdin Sanders.

The Magnificent Dunbar Hotel" is as grand as its title. A talented cast of 20 makes this smart, lavish and stylish show an unforgettable theater experience.

Los Angeles-based The Robey Theater Company commissioned acclaimed playwright Levy Lee Simon to pen "Dunbar;" the production is based on the real Central Avenue Los Angeles landmark that was the home away from home for the black rich and famous in the '30s and '40s. Many of those luminaries – including Lena Horne, Ethel Waters, Duke Ellington, Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois – are in Simon's tale, which is deeply rooted in historical facts.

The Dunbar Hotel – which is named for famed poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, whose spirit provides narration and even bits of verse throughout the show – is the star of the show. Its grandness is a source of great pride for the black community, and its owner, Lucius Lomax, and his wife, Minnie, are luminaries in the neighborhood.

Outside its walls, Los Angeles is not a kind town to blacks. Segregation, bigoted cops and even Ku Klux Klansmen abound. The Lomaxes, their staff and guests confront those external issues and many internal ones as well, including love, faith, pain and struggle. There are impressive visual effects and music, too, including a dynamic rendition of "Sweet Georgia Brown" delivered by feuding divas Horne (Tiffany Coty) and Waters (Elizabeth June).

All of the action plays out on a beautiful Micheal D. Ricks-created set and takes place over the course of seven decades. The audience sees how The Dunbar is affected by events that shaped the 20th century, including World War II, integration – which mainly caused the hotel's undoing as black guests flocked to white establishments that had previously barred them – and the drug war of the '80s that had a detrimental effect on black communities throughout the nation.

The play's world premiere in November 2014 garnered acclaim from critics. "Informative and engaging, this underappreciated chapter of our local history is portrayed with panache and grace," the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed. Blogger Joe



Ben Guillory



Ethel Waters (Elizabeth June) and Lena Horne (Tiffany Coty) perform.

Straw raved that the play "is a wonderful historical time capsule, opened in a theatrical setting, giving startling revelations of stories and events of famous people in fleeting moments of time."

Ben Guillory, who is familiar to movie fans for his role as Grady (Shug Avery's husband) in "The Color Purple," directs. Guillory co-founded The Robey (named for Paul Robeson) 20 years ago with actor Danny Glover and serves as its artistic director. The cast also includes Jovan Adepo, Vanoy Burnough, Cydney Wayne Davis, Eddie Goines, Julio Hanson, Tommy Hicks, Doug Jewell, Melvin Ishmael Johnson, Kyle Connor McDuffie, Jason Mimms, Ashlee Olivia, Dwain A. Perry, Vanja Renee, Kem Saunders, Jah Shams, Petal d'Avril Walker, Sammie Wayne IV and Rhonda Stubbins White. ■