

Review: 'Revival: The Resurrection of Son House' has dazzling songs, needs more story



Cleavant Derricks is riveting as Son House. (Photo: Goat Factory Media Entertainment)

In its world premiere at Geva Theatre Center, *Revival: The Resurrection of Son House* takes us through the blues legend's life with some terrific acting, dazzling songs and an ambitious production.

We follow half a century of Son House's ups and downs (mostly downs) and, as the play's program puts it, we make "frequent stops in the hereafter."

It's a lot of motion that, unfortunately, is not very moving. *Revival* just can't seem to transcend being a straightforward biography in which we get a lot of information, but too little story. Still, there is a good deal of entertainment here, especially in Cleavant Derricks's portrayal of Son House and the performing of Son House's songs.

Before the play's opening, Derricks had said he started out mimicking Son House "to get the flavor," and then he reached a point where he had to "turn it loose" and be himself.

Apparently, his process works. The play's most pleasurable moments come in the music, especially when Derricks — without a microphone and at times with little accompaniment — fills the 516-seat Wilson Stage with his voice. And he does seem to accomplish what he described — embodying Son House without simply mimicking him. He's fun to watch and one can't wait to see what he does next.

Those unfamiliar with Son House's music would do well to listen to some Son House songs before going to the show. "Death Letter," "Grinnin' in Your Face," "John the Revelator" and "Walkin' Blues" are a few of the standout numbers. The music is delivered by a four-piece band, led by guitarist Billy Thompson, a journeyman bluesman in his own right. Both the Son House songs and the original music are well integrated.

Fans of the blues, fans of musicals and maybe fans of the craft of live theater will likely enjoy this show. Despite some inconsequential opening-night glitches and a few instances where actor's voices came in at too low of a level, *Revival* is a professional production top to bottom.

The music is good, the cast is good and the show looks good. So what's the problem? The show's biggest flaw is in Keith Glover's script — though even that is well-crafted. Glover has been nominated for a Pulitzer in the past and the script is a pleasure to listen to and at times eloquent. Though the show could certainly use some more laughs, the scenes are at least amusing and sometimes heart-warming. The problem is they reveal all too little.

We see Son House toil in Jim Crow Mississippi. We see his disappointing relationships with women. We see his spiritual struggle — he was a preacher at first, rejecting the blues, juke joints and alcohol before he embraced all of it. We see him come to Rochester and get rediscovered. We see him outlive his friends. We learn a lot about his life, but we learn little about who he is. The scenes march along year after year, adding up to too little payoff.

Glover attempts to inject some drama by bringing in a chorus of angels to debate Son House's life and decide whether he is to be "delivered or damned by the almighty." Here again, the script is amusing in how the mortal characters sound natural, while the heavenly characters sound, well, supernatural. But at the same time, this ambitious idea is simply too extraneous for this play and feels tacked on. We've got moonshine, juke joints, sin, scandal, betrayal and great music on the earthly plane. Why not stay right here?

With biographies — *Revival* is based on Daniel Beaumont's biography of Son House — come the inherent challenge of creating a drama and remaining true to history. But as we've seen with *Hamilton* and even *The Royale*, a riveting play based on boxer John Johnson that just finished a run at Geva, biography certainly shouldn't negate a stirring story. But that appears to be the case here. Because despite having a lot going for it, *Revival*, to borrow a phrase popularized by a Son House protégé, just can't get its mojo workin'.