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Theater / Jayne Blanchard

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Clockwise from front: Chinasa Ogbuagu as the Hottentot Venus falls victim to exploiters played by MaryBeth Wise, Kimberly Parker Green, James O. Dunn, Erik Andrews, Denise Diggs and Nehal Joshi in "Venus."

Tragic 'Venus' shines at Olney

In her native South Africa, Sarah Baartman possessed a body shape prized by her people. In 19th century Europe, she was dubbed the "Hottentot Venus" and paraded around freak shows and ersatz medical displays where people gawked at what they considered her outsized buttocks and genitalia.

Sarah Baartman's short life of degradation and exploitation (she died at 26, a broke and broken-down prostitute) is the subject of Suzan-Lori Parks' electrifying, free-form play "Venus."

Amid a hurly-burly atmos-

phere of musical vignettes, acrobatics, melodrama, slide shows and astute clowning, the story of Venus unfolds in 31 swift, sharp scenes.

Under the florid, expansive direction of Eve Muson, the full potential of the play's mix of tragedy, circus, historical record, and comedy comes to fruition. Miss Parks' work, with its use of repetition, rhyme, street patois and anachronistic language, has a sound all its own, and Miss Muson's approach brings out all the odd poetry and musicality of "Venus."

The production is bold and disturbing, unafraid to address the impudence and biting

humor of Miss Parks' play. Miss Muson's Fellini-esque staging confronts the combustible subject matter full throttle, not even shying away from having certain characters appear in blackface.

This is not a show for the priggish, since everything from the British fascination with all things "native" and racist depictions of blacks in popular culture to the fetishizing of black women's hips and thighs are brought into the wide open.

Miss Parks treats these taboo topics with a sense of horror and humor that invigorates. She challenges us to look at our history — all of our history — not just the parts we've

sanitized or revised to fit our current comfort level.

To give you an idea of the perceptions of African people in the early 1800s, Baron Georges Couvier, who dissected Sarah's body, remembered the young woman as having moves "that reminded one of the monkey and her external genitalia recalled those of the orangutan."

Much of "Venus" chafes, notably the fall of Venus (Chinasa Ogbuagu), the South African girl trundled off to England by a ship's doctor, who tells her she could become rich by allowing white foreigners to stare at her body. Instead, she becomes a sideshow attraction

hawked by the preying Mother Showman (the magnificently bawdy Barbara Pinolini), a "savage" in an iron cage who is not only ogled by the voyeuristic public but poked, prodded and examined by shady scientists and academics.

The various people who use and abuse Venus are portrayed by a protean chorus of six actors (Erik Andrews, Denise Diggs, James O. Dunn, Kimberly Parker Green, Nehal Joshi, MaryBeth Wise), and a high-stepping, cakewalking character called the Negro Resurrectionist (Michael Anthony Williams, striking the right balance between farce and feeling) serving as narrator and sympathetic voice.

Still, Venus emerges not as the goddess of love and fertility, but a symbol of man's brutality. Even the man who professes to love her, the obsessive Baron Docteur (Ken Yatta Rogers), first plies her with chocolates, champagne and Paris gowns before casting her aside as if she were nothing more than a dried-out specimen slide.

The circus atmosphere of "Venus" is lively and provocative, and if there is a drawback it might be that the vivid burlesque undermines the emotional intensity at times. As greatly compelling and sympathetic as Miss Ogbuagu is as Venus, the production's ironic distance does keep us far away from the main character.

In a sense, this makes us as guilty of the same fascinated, Peeping Tom tendencies as the hordes of people were who stared at the Venus Hottentot in 1810.

Which makes "Venus" not just a play, but a mirror.

★★★½
WHAT: "Venus" by Suzan-Lori Parks
WHERE: Olney Theatre Center, 2001 Olney-Sandy Springs Road, Olney
WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Sundays, 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Through Sept. 26.
TICKETS: \$15 to \$36
PHONE: 301/924-4485

MAXIMUM RATING: FOUR STARS