

A Performance Review of *Sugar in Our Wounds*

Donja R. Love, Playwright

Sarah Bellamy, Director

Penumbra Theatre, St. Paul, Minnesota

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How can fleeting moments of sweetness and radical forms of intimacy punctuate the most inhuman brutality? Donja R. Love's *Sugar in Our Wounds* is a wrenching look at queer love that sparks on a southern plantation some six months before the Emancipation Proclamation. The play is a bittersweet story of hope and sustenance in the grim moments at the precipice of freedom. Penumbra Theatre's production—directed by Sarah Bellamy, who is also leading a long-term institutional transformation to the “Penumbra Center for Racial Healing”, focuses on how such fugitive modes of kinship form a wellspring for survival that reaches the ancestral past and endures through the present.

We begin with scenes depicting the desperate existence of James, Mattie, and Aunt Mamma, who, though not related by blood, have grown into something of a family unit while sharing a tiny slave quarter. James, played with earnest optimism by Nathan Barlow, suffers abusive sexual advances from the plantation owner's daughter, which he endures for a chance to better his station by learning from her how to read. Mattie, played by Alexis Sims, is the owner's illegitimate child. She longs for companionship, as no other man will dare touch her for fear of retribution from her slave-master father. She grows increasingly tremulous as she gets repeatedly subjected to humiliation and excremental punishment from her white half-sister. Aunt Mamma, played by Erika LaVonn, shepherds them both as a stern yet affectionate caretaker, whose unnaturally long life bespeaks ancient wisdom, survival pragmatism, and memory as a form of endurance.

Their lives get upended by the arrival of a recently purchased slave named Henry, who brashly itches to escape the plantation and search for his family. But what begins as a brief respite to recuperate his strength leads to unanticipated companionship that prevents him from running. Henry and James unexpectedly fall in love, and the unfolding of their relationship provides much of the play's narrative thrust. Bellamy's patient staging leans into a pastoral rhythm that allows the audience to revel in scenes of tenderness between them. The slow unfolding of their love grinds against Henry's reflex to escape. This simmering tension within Henry is well-captured by actor Antonio Duke, who imbues the character with a piercing sense of focus, as if constantly thinking of ways to untangle the knot.



Figure 1, Antonio Duke (Henry) and Nathan Barlow (James). Photo credit: Caroline Yang

Many of these tender scenes take place beneath a towering tree, which provides a lush refuge during fleeting moments of sabbath rest. The tree dominates the show's set (designed by Mina Kinukawa) with branches dripping with foliage and imposing tentacles of roots yawning towards the audience and across the stage. It holds mystical qualities as a totem of ancestral memory and as the witness to a long history of lynching upon its branches—"blood at the root," as Aunt Mamma puts it. Bellamy's production insists that the natural world

always remain present and visceral. Even interior scenes in the slave quarters get punctuated with a verdant audioscape of crickets and birdsongs (sound designed by Scott Edwards) and dynamic projections of babbling brooks and starscapes animated on an upstage scrim (media designed by Miko Simmons).

The prominence of nature evokes a sense of cosmic memory that traces back from African roots all the way to today. Although the play's action operates in a realistic vein, the presence of occasional supernatural elements troubles the firm separation between life and death, past and present. In one scene we watch Henry attempt over and over to climb up the tree, only to be shoved off by something like an electric reverberation—perhaps an acknowledgment that the burden of taking on transhistorical wisdom is no simple task. Sometimes the tree quite literally calls out to characters with ethereal ancestral voices, and near the end of the play a montage of these voices threads to today by invoking names like Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, Jr.

This ancestral lineage is key to understanding the play's focus on James and Henry's relationship. "Me and Henry, are we normal?" James innocently asks Aunt Mamma. Breaking her normally stony countenance, she jubilantly affirms "We ain't nothing but spirits" and notes that denying what the heart says because of how a body looks is a violent consequence of the Middle Passage. Aunt Mamma, who wears a pendant filled with soil from Africa and lives an unnaturally long life, bears a resemblance to Aunt Esther who appears in several plays from August Wilson's Century Cycle. She inhabits a space that lies somewhere between a physical caregiver and a supernatural legend. Her existence keeps alive a lasting memory of cultural roots that testify to radical models of human love that colonial Christian morality destroyed.

Queer attachment extends beyond James and Henry's relationship. Mattie also intensely desires Henry, and in one of the show's most touching scenes, she implores him to make love to her.

Henry obliges out of a sense of kindness and amity more so than romantic attraction, and Bellamy's nuanced staging for this moment highlights these complicated emotions. Although the actors remain fully clothed, we watch them have sex while cramped between the beds where Aunt Mamma and James lie asleep. Are we to suspend our disbelief and assume that they do not hear or see this? Or are we to recognize a relaxed approach to sexuality, a model of love that does not conflate intimacy with possession? James never brings up Henry and Mattie's relationship. And although Mattie is heartbroken when she realizes that Henry does not look at her the same way he does James, she ultimately finds some form of contentment that allows them all to maintain a familial bond.

Bellamy's willingness to allow scenes of warmth and intimacy to unfold with a relaxed tempo gives us gentle moments to cling to, helping to make the play's tragic conclusion more bearable. Henry is forced to become a fugitive when the master's daughter falsely claims that he raped her (a vindictive response to his refusal of her own sexual advances). He takes to the forest that, like the tree, exists on a supernatural plane. His route is circular, and time becomes fluid and uncertain as he moves through the wilderness. He eventually finds his way back to the plantation, accepting that he will never find his family, but that "his people"—most especially James—are here.

And yet, Henry's auspicious return prompts the play's gut-wrenching conclusion when we learn that James, heartsick over Henry's sudden departure, has been killed in brutal fashion after climbing to the top of the ancestral tree and shouting out his love for all the plantation to hear. The discovery of James's homosexuality prompts the most vicious and barbaric forms of torture. Playwright Donja R. Love, with Bellamy's expert direction, wants us to see that the pathology that sustains racial violence is even more unmoored by threats to the sexual order of things. Though we do not witness James being whipped, beaten, sexually abused, and eventually killed, we must watch Henry receive this news from Aunt Mamma in stony silence. This includes the detail that sugar was poured into James's wounds to prolong the suffering, so that "the air smelled sweet," and the audience is left thinking about this fleeting saccharinity punctuating the horror.

One of Penumbra Theatre's first shows since returning to regular programming after the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd, *Sugar in Our Wounds* seeks to recuperate eviscerated histories of love and attachment, in order to outline an affirmative and inclusive story of survival.



Figure 2, Erika LaVonn (Aunt Mamma), Antonio Duke (Henry), Alexis Sims (Mattie). Photo credit: Caroline Yang

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