

ARTS EVENTS

Under Pressure

In Ground Floor Theatre's *black do crack*, Florinda Bryant shatters the myth that black women must go it alone

BY ROBERT FAIRES

The woman stands alone, still, caught in bursts of light like emergency flashers in a facility on lockdown. Sounds of phones ringing and fingers clattering on keyboards, amplified to harsh levels, almost drown out her voice as she runs through a string of phrases that seem related to daily routines: a question she asks when answering the phone on the job, a query of a co-worker on break. She's smiling as she asks the unseen caller, "How can I help you today?" and the cheeriness appears sincere, but there's also a tension evident behind it, a sense of this woman working to hold it together in the face of the punishing noise and glare. And as it goes on and on, and the same scene is repeated again and again, it becomes clear that the biggest part of her daily routine is the pressure, the relentless force pressing down on this woman, squeezing the breath out of her, the very life.

But then, to describe it as a single force doesn't do justice to the stress this woman – this *black* woman, it must be noted – is under; it is not one force but many forces: sexism and racism, most often in a toxic mix; single parenting; poverty; life-threatening medical conditions (which can't be treated properly because of the poverty); and a lifetime of being told that she is expected to "keep on pushing on" with no help, except whatever God may provide.

In *black do crack*, a new solo work that Florinda Bryant seems to have written in her own blood, the strains she

depicts are at once deeply personal and representative of black women throughout this land. When Bryant speaks bitterly of being passed over by a white supervisor while white women with less experience receive raises and promotions, you can easily imagine this being drawn from the writer-performer's own life and from the lives of countless peers of hers. The same goes for her tales of working multiple jobs just to keep her children fed, the painful decision to skip buying medicine that she needs for her high blood pressure because she needs the money for her family, of having to skip work to care for a child and being punished for it when white co-workers



BLACK DO CRACK
Ground Floor Theatre,
979 Springdale
www.groundfloortheatre.org
Through March 2
Running time: 1 hr.

with kids never are. When Bryant stands soaked in red light, balling her fists and letting fly a scream of rage, we can see hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of black women in the shadows behind her, and she is no more alone when she shows herself numbing her pain, pulling from her bra bottles of booze, and then a cigarette, and then cocaine.

In giving voice and presence to these cruelties crushing African-American women, *black do crack* is powerful enough. But the situation it addresses that makes it still more potent – and *vital*, to borrow a term from an audience member at the performance I saw – is black women believing that they must shoulder their burdens alone, without aid, and that doing otherwise is to be weak or, worse, mentally unsound. "I'm not crazy," Bryant insists to an unseen therapist when



PHOTO BY TIA BOYD

her character seeks counseling, and the defensiveness in her voice is heartbreaking. Of course, she isn't – but that's the message that's been hammered home inside the culture for as long as she's been alive: Black don't crack. With this work, Bryant aims to shatter that myth, to shout that it's time to reach out and find support and assistance. As the show ends, Bryant has turned from the notion that, because her life is so hard, God must not love her to the belief that love is there and waiting. She stands confidently in the spotlight, and though she may stand by herself on the stage, she knows – and we know – she is surrounded by helping hands.

THEATRE

OPENING

A DOLL'S HOUSE, PART 2 Alrighty, then! FronteraFest's over, **Ken Webster's** been making theatre in Austin for 40 years, and now here's the latest from **Hyde Park Theatre**: It's **Lucas Hnath's** highly modern sequel to Henrik Ibsen's classic, in which Nora must return 15 years after her dramatic exit to face all she left behind. This long-awaited continuation is directed by that award-winning Webster and features **Katherine Catmull, Tom Green, Sarah Chong Harmer, and Cyndi Williams**. *Thu.-Sat., Feb. 28-March 30, 8pm. Hyde Park Theatre, 511 W. 43rd, 512/479-7529. \$23-27 (pay what you can, Thursdays). www.hydeparktheatre.org.*

LYSISTRATA Aristophanes' comedy of an anti-war sex strike brims with innuendo and bawdy fun while taking a hard look at the folly of war and politics, the struggle for equality, and the eternal battle of the sexes. Directed by **Jeremy White** for **City Theatre**. *Feb. 28-March 10. Thu.-Sat., 8pm; Sun., 4 & 8pm. Santa Cruz Theatre, 1805 E. Seventh, 512/524-2870. \$15-25. www.citytheatreAustin.org.*

TESTIFY: MATCHED The long-running series offers this night of true tales about pairing up: stories of swiping left and right, stumbling upon an unlikely partner, literally wrestling with a co-worker, matching outside of labels, and finding a tribe of fellow misfits. *Thu., Feb. 28, 7:30pm. Spider House Ballroom, 2906 Fruth, 512/480-9562. \$5. testify@testifyatx.com, www.testifyatx.com.*

WELL **Lisa Kron's** play about relationships between mothers and daughters, about the differences between (and maybe the overlappings of) "wellness" and "illness," is directed by **Kristen Rogers** for **Austin Community College**. *Feb. 28-March 10. Thu.-Sat., 7:30pm; Sun., 2pm. ACC Highland, 6101 Highland Campus Dr. \$8. www.austincc.edu.*

V-DAY AUSTIN PRESENTS: THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES **Eve Ensler's** showcase of monologues gave birth to V-Day, a global activist movement to end violence against all women and girls. Here, 20 years later, is the latest iteration, which also features an art auction and an afterparty – with all proceeds going to Hope Alliance of Austin and the ARK Women and Children's Shelter of Texas. *Fri.-Sat., March 2-3, 8pm. CRAFT, 4704 E. Cesar Chavez. \$13.*

WELCOME TO NIGHT VALE: A SPY IN THE DESERT The most downloaded podcast in the world? About what might be the creepiest place on the planet that's not quite of this Earth? Live, onstage, with all its tantalizing tale-spinning intact? These are all questions, and maybe you know the answers, but still some mystery must remain. *Fri., March 1, 8pm. Paramount Theatre, 713 Congress, 512/472-5470. \$20 and up. www.austintheatre.org.*

H.M.S. PINAFORE **Gilbert & Sullivan Austin** presents the dramatic duo's classic comic opera about a lowly sailor and his love for the captain's daughter, a seagoing tale full of topsy-turvy humor and boatloads of bright and cheerful tunes. *Sat., March 2. Brentwood Christian School Performing Arts Center, 11908 N. Lamar, 512/474-5664. \$8-20. www.gilbertsullivan.org.*

WIRES This is a sort of choose-your-own-audio-adventure about ways in which the world is connected. Through a series of choices, you'll both create your own story and craft your own musical composition. The interactive story is presented as a set of handmade books by **Doug Laustsen**, with each book containing a small speaker and audio player. As you read the story you'll also listen to the sounds that correspond to that portion of the story. The end of

each story segment gives you a choice that directs you to a new book. Note: You can reserve a time in advance or show up during viewing hours. *Opening party: Sat., March 2, 7-10pm. Also playing: Sun., noon-8pm. Museum of Human Achievement, Springdale & Lyons, 262/880-6982. Donations accepted. www.wires.lownote.net.*

MERLIN WORKS: IMPROV AT ZACH Here's an improv showcase with spontaneous scenes, hilarious games, songs, and more. Featuring the school's latest graduating class, with special guests – those local improv legends – **The Known Wizards**. *Sun., March 3, 8pm. Zach Theatre's Whisenhunt Stage, 1510 Toomey. \$10. www.merlin-works.com.*

LOCUS OF CONTROL **The Vortex** presents the Austin debut of international touring poet **Jason Bayani**, showcasing his compelling mix of poetry, storytelling, music, and media that explores the lives of Filipino immigrants in America. Directed by **Kat Evasco**. *Thu.-Sun., Feb. 28-March 3. The Vortex, 2307 Manor Rd., 512/478-5282. \$15-35. www.vortexrep.org.*

TARTUFFE **Moliere's** classic satire is a whirlwind of lies, religious hypocrisy, and family feuds – directed here by **Kelly Carolyn Gordon** for **Concordia University**. *March 7-10. Thu.-Sat., 7:30pm; Sun., 2pm. Concordia University, 11400 Concordia University, 512/313-5410. \$10. www.concordia.edu/theatre.*

CLOSING

HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH Director **Dave Steakley** and choreographer **Abe Reybold** bring **John Cameron Mitchell's** glamorous and rockin' musical classic – about "a fourth-wall-smashing East German rock & roll goddess who also happens to be the victim of a botched sex-change operation, trying to find a place to belong in America," of course – back to the Austin stage. *Through March 2. Wed.-Sat., 7:30pm; Sat.-Sun., 2:30pm. Zach Theatre, 202 S. Lamar. \$30-165. www.zachtheatre.org.*



Dog Magic: Woman's Best Friend

Rachel Martin and **Suze Kemper**, those indefatigable **Hard Women**, present an original new work that explores the profound and mysterious bond between women and their dogs. This much-anticipated resurgence of performance art includes monologues, movement, songs, dog ventriloquist dummies, flying marionettes, video interviews, audience interactions, a dog devotional shrine, and a canine version of "Zoltar the Great." Recommended!

March 7-10. Thu.-Sat., 8pm; Sun., 6pm. The Vortex, 2307 Manor Rd., 512/478-5282. \$15-35. www.vortexrep.org.

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