

## **A Woman's Rule: Review of The Harlem Classical Theatre's production of *Fit for a Queen***



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**A Theatre Review by Juan R. Recondo**

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The Harlem Classical Theatre production of Betty Shamieh's *Fit for a Queen* is an exploration of sexual politics and power set in ancient Egypt. The action revolves around Queen Hatshepsut's (April Yvette Thompson) relationship with her servant, confidant, and lover, Senenmut (Sheriah Irving). Historians believe that Hatshepsut was the second known female pharaoh who ruled Egypt from 1478 to 1458 B.C.E. after the death of her husband, Thutmose II (reigned 1493-79 B.C.E.). The play takes creative license by shortening Hatshepsut's twenty-year reign to emphasize how the character loses her godly status because she is a woman. Thutmose III (Eshan Bay) is next in line to become pharaoh, yet he is more interested in his gardens than in Egypt and so the queen takes over the throne. Hatshepsut's own

daughter, Nefereru (Shereen Macklin), who is married to her half-brother, Thutmose III, persuades her husband to claim the throne as its rightful heir after the passing of their father, Thutmose II (Gilbert Cruz). Nevertheless, even when the play is about the struggle for the throne among the ancient Egyptian ruling elite, it mainly focuses on Senenmut's passionate affair with Hatshepsut and how the servant's actions lead to her mistress's coronation as pharaoh and her ultimate downfall.

The tempestuous relationship between Senenmut and Hatshepsut at the center of the play adds needed complexity to the intermingling of love and power. Sheriah Irving's performance as Senenmut masterfully portrays how the cunning servant uses her position to achieve her own goals. The play opens by displaying Senenmut's control over her male lover, Wanre (John Clarence Stewart), whom she blackmails into having sex. Later, to strengthen her control over Wanre, she orders his wife's death. While these character traits could make her appear as a terrible villain, Senenmut's tenderness towards Hatshepsut seems honest. Irving's achievement in playing Senenmut lies in how, even when the audience understands that the character is using her influence over Hatshepsut for her own means, her love for the queen still feels pure and delicate. At the same time, April Yvette Thompson instills her performance as Hatshepsut with an unwavering royal dignity, which accentuates her vulnerability during her private moments with Senenmut. This constant movement between opposites informs Christopher and Justin Swader's set design. The performing space has two opposing platforms. One mostly represents the queen's quarters and the other is occupied by the ailing pharaoh. This separation poses Gilbert Cruz's performance of Thutmose II as a weakened sexual predator frustrated due to his impotence against Hatshepsut's dignified demeanor. After Thutmose dies and Hatshepsut occupies his side of the performing area when she assumes power, her discussions with Senenmut on how to abolish slavery contrast the deceased pharaoh's indifference towards his subjects. In moments like these, Tamilla Woodward's direction is at the top of its game. Yet the play's constant switching from serious drama to physical comedy gives the show a somewhat confused tone. At times, scenes lose some of their dramatic effectiveness when a slave leaves the performing space by walking in a ridiculous manner or a character reacts in an exaggerated way to some serious news. In these instances, Woodward should have gone for a more cohesive production concept rather than lightening the mood with unnecessary comic elements.



Sheria Irving as Senenmut, April Yvette Thompson as Hatshepsut, Photo Credit: Harlem Classical Theatre

During the last few years, the Classical Theatre of Harlem has produced some of Shakespeare's plays. But in their most recent production, they have traveled far into the past with Shamieh's *Fit for a Queen*, whose action takes place at the time when the Abydos Passion Play was still in performance. This text survives carved on the Ikhernofret Stela that dates back to 1868 B.C.E. and is the earliest account of a yearly sacred performance, which took place between 2500 and 550 B.C.E. in the city of Abydos in ancient Egypt. It tells the story of Osiris's murder by his brother, Set, and how his sister/wife, Isis, and Anubis bring him back to life. Osiris does not live for long, but his son, Horus, conceived through Osiris's union with Isis, defeats Set and establishes the long line of pharaohs who ruled throughout Egyptian history. Rachel Dozier-Ezell's fantastic costume design not only reconstructs an imaginary ancient Egypt through the crowns, jewelry, and clothing worn by the characters; but it also sets the action within the mystical performance of Osiris's story through elements such as the golden testicles worn by the pharaoh in the play to symbolize his status. According to myth, Osiris used a golden phallus to impregnate his sister/wife Isis and so she is able to give birth to Horus and the long lineage of future Egyptian pharaohs. In the play, the golden testicles pass from Thutmose II to Hatshepsut when she becomes queen, recognizing Isis's own representation in the future of Egypt. Furthermore, Shamieh's use of modern English with phrases from our urban reality inevitably turn the play into a comment on current times. The Classical Theatre of Harlem's production of *Fit for a Queen* not only references the origins of performance in Ancient Egypt, but also comments on how the historical U.S. presidential elections of 2016 will possibly conclude with a woman defeating a weak man only interested in his own aggrandizement and personal satisfaction. The show played in October at the 3LD Art & Technology Center in New York City.

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