By Darlene Donloe

Playwright Alice Childress is known for creating vivid, fully-developed characters. Her works include: *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But A Sandwich*, *Those Other People, Like One of the Family*, *When the Rattlesnake Sounds*, *Rainbow Jordan* and more.

Her play, *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White* is currently enjoying a fully-partner-cast revival at the Antaeus Theater in North Hollywood.

Considered one of her best works, *Wedding Band* is an interracial love story set during WWI in 1918 in Charleston, S.C. on the Gullah Coast.

Childress has populated this community with interesting and authentic characters. The focus is a black woman named Julia (Karole Foreman) and her lover, a white man named Herman (Leo Marks). The two have had a clandestine relationship for 10 years. Although they are not legally married, this particular day marks their 10th anniversary – of sorts.

In an attempt to keep their secret and to move on from communities that were not accepting of her relationship with a white man, Julia takes up temporary residence in a small, black, backyard tenement. Fanny, the nosy black landlady (Karen Bankhead) is suspicious of Julia’s presence and becomes even more concerned when a white man shows up and shares the cabin.

To seal their love Herman, a baker by trade, puts a ring on it and presents Julia, a seamstress by trade, with a wedding band on a chain.
Theirs is a real love story, but unfortunately during that time in America their love was forbidden.

It’s a bit ironic that this play, which was written in 1962 and set in 1918 brings up the same issues about who people have the right to love that is currently confronting and plaguing many in the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community.

When *Wedding Band* was written in 1962, the subject matter was so controversial and the language so frank, that no theater in New York was willing to produce it. It received its premiere in 1966 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and starred Ruby Dee. It was then followed by a production in 1971 at the Virginian Theatre in Chicago. The play finally made it to New York in 1972. It was directed by Joseph Papp. That production was subsequently broadcast by ABC in 1973 – but eight ABC-TV affiliates refused to carry it.

As Herman’s mother (Anne Gee Byrd) tells it: “There’s something wrong ‘bout mismatched things, be they shoes, socks or people. People don’t like it. They are not gonna letcha do it in peace.”

It would seem she’s right as even the black folk in the community aren’t exactly setting out the welcome mat regarding the interracial relationship that is in their midst. In fact, they are nervous and scared about having a white man in their community, especially after he becomes sick.
Even in 2014, there is still an uneasy atmosphere regarding the notion of black/white love.

It would seem not much has changed since 1918.

This is an emotional, gut-wrenching and powerful play about love, race, tolerance, acceptance and most importantly - life. At times it’s uncomfortably real and brutally honest.

Julia and Herman hiding in a small cabin in a small, unassuming community is a metaphor for living one’s life in a box. Eventually you must emerge and choose to live life on your terms or to yield to the bigotry and hatred of others. Julia and Herman’s love is heartbreaking to watch and even more tear-jerking to feel.

Childress has written some colorful (pun intended) characters – each coming with their own set of circumstances. While there are clearly plots and sub-plots – there are no subordinate roles as each character has its own personality and sorrowful life story. One character bolsters the other. While Julia and Herman are the focus, there are so many stories being told throughout this tome.

Foreman, who has a venerable stage presence, is brilliant and believable as Julia whose personality vacillates from vulnerable to robust. Aloof from her blackness at some points and all-in at other points. She's a proud black woman with a strong constitution.

Byrd brings just the right amount of disdain and disgust to the role of Herman’s mother, as does Karianne Flaathen who plays Herman’s sister, Annabelle.

Fanny, played briskly and capably by Bankhead, is proud to be a black, female landowner. She's been holding it down for so long she forgot to find love. In a last ditch attempt to find love she propositions Nelson, a young soldier home briefly from the war. Nelson is played fervently by Jason Turner.
Nelson’s mother, Lula, played by the vibrant Saundra McClain, is a bit over protective of her son, especially when he goes up against The Bellman (Brian Abraham), who likes to hawk his wares and flex his muscles.

Cheryl Francis Harrington exudes passion and power in the role of Hattie, a mother to Teeta (Olivia Sparks). Hattie longs for the return of her husband, October, from the war.

Sparks and Ranya Jaber, who plays her white friend, are simply adorable and bring not only a freshness and innocence to the community, but the possibility of a hopeful future.
Director Gregg T. Daniel has assembled a tight ensemble. The words and story are brought to life with his fluid and effective direction. In a relatively small space he creates and captures the feeling, mood and rhythm of a real community. Daniel, who has numerous directing credits, most recently directed the New Jersey premiere of playwright Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* at Cape May Stage.

This is a sensational production. This is what theater is all about. When the story, dialogue, direction, acting, set (Francois-Pierre Couture), music (Jeff Gardner), lighting (Michael Gend) and costumes (A. Jeffrey Schoenberg) are firing on all cylinders, the production shines. That combination enhances the show and transports the audience to another time.

*Wedding Band* is one of the best plays of the year with one of the strongest ensembles. *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story In Black and White* is not to be missed!

*Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White* is directed by Gregg T. Daniel and has two casts. This review is for the following ‘Sweet Potatoes’ cast: Karole Foreman, Cheryl Francis Harrington, Saundra McClain, Karen Bankhead, Jason Turner, Anne Gee Byrd, Olivia Sparks, Brian Abraham, Leo Marks, Karianne Flaathen and Ranya Jaber.
The ‘Honey Bunches’ cast includes: Veralyn Jones, Karen Malina White, Nadege August, Peggy Ann Blow, Lynn Milgrim, John Prosky, Jasmine Saint-Clair, Buck Zachary, Mma-Syrai Alek, Belen Greene and Amad Jackson.

On the DONLOE SCALE: D (don’t bother), O (oh, no), N (needs work), L (likeable), O (oh, yeah) and E (excellent), Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story In Black & White gets an E (excellent).

Running time: 2 hr 15 minutes, including one 10-minute intermission.

Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White, Antaeus Theater, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, CA 91601; 8 p.m. Thur.-Sat, 2 p.m. Sat-Sun. through Dec. 7; $30-$34; (818) 506-1983 or www.Antaeus.org.

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