

Bulrusher



Congo Square Theatre (see Resident companies). By Eisa Davis. Dir. TaRon Patton. With Ericka Ratcliff, Tamberla Perry. 2hrs 35mins; one intermission.

Eisa Davis set her 2006 work in the Northern California town of Boonville, where the residents speak an invented dialect called Boontling. Not that the New York-based playwright-actor makes that real-life condition clear in her script. When new arrival Vera (Tamberla Perry) finally asks Bulrusher (Ericka Ratcliff) why everyone's using these made-up words, you're likely to feel her frustration.

The language isn't the only flight of fancy in the piece, set in 1955. Bulrusher is an orphan who was found floating downriver in a basket, like Moses, which gives her a kind of clairvoyant ability to read people's futures through water. Though she's at least partly black, she's treated with such acceptance by her white neighbors that she barely knows what that means until the appearance of Vera, the first girl Bulrusher's seen who looks like her. Vera comes from Birmingham with secrets of her own, searching for an uncle and bearing *Jet*



BEND IN THE ROAD Perry, left, sends Ratcliff off track.

magazines and tidings of the rocky racial landscape.

The idea of Bulrusher as both a seer and an innocent, protected from the harsh truths of the larger world, is intriguing, and Ratcliff is thoroughly compelling in her portrayal of the girl taking ideas from her new friend and trying them on like clothes. But the characters and circumstances surrounding these two are less convincing in Davis's script, funny words or no.—*Kris Vire*

Down & Derby



The New Colony (see Fringe & storefront). By Aaron Weissman. Dir. Thrisa Hodits. With ensemble cast. 2hrs; one intermission.

Can sports heal communities? New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg declared they can, green-lighting the city's annual marathon to run on schedule just days after Superstorm Sandy subsided. The community disagreed, and Bloomberg caved to pressure to cancel. But in *Down & Derby's* fictional Larkin City, Ohio, still recovering physically and emotionally from its battering by a tornado, the answer is yes, and the healing diversion is less elegant and a lot rougher than pounding out 26.2 miles of pavement: roller derby.

Sisters Hunt Her Ass Thompson and Maul of the Wild (the play's characters are known by their derby names) launch a roller-derby team to cope with their own losses from the storm. When the 11-member Misfit Mavericks take the track, they end up providing the town a brash balm.

On track (sorry) to unfold a lovable losers-style redemption tale, Aaron Weissman's script takes some unexpected turns. Scenes showing individual characters' stories, while



WHEEL YOU OR WON'T YOU Morgan McNaught, center, rolls on.

well acted and integral to later shifts in the play, slow the momentum built up when the Mavericks jest, plan and skate. Director Thrisa Hodits and her charismatic cast negotiate the logistics of skating on an actual track and, with less success, the acoustics of a gymnasium space. The production's adventurous blend of theatricality and grit, from the recurring physical motifs to the breeze kicked up by the pack racing around the track, is worth cheering on.—*Megan Powell*



—Chicago Tribune

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