

# "The Best House on Sugar Hill" Moves to the South End"

By Beverly Creasey

409 EDGECOMBE AVENUE is Katherine Butler Jones' sprawling valentine to the glamorous place where she grew up. The stately Harlem building (now a historical landmark) was a magnet for the Harlem Renaissance elite, an address everyone knew, whose halls echoed with art, music, politics and intrigue.

The Up You Mighty Race production (playing at the BCA through April 21) featured Fulani Haynes in a tour de force performance as the mighty queen of the numbers game, a formidable woman who kept Dutch Schultz and the mob out of her territory, wrote a weekly newspaper column and defied the authorities every step of the way.

The play unfolds GRAND HOTEL style, like the famous film in which we meet each resident and hear each person's story against a historical backdrop of famous names and events. There's even an aspiring actor named James Jones who works at 409 but we're left to speculate if his stage name added an "Earl." The rest of Harlem royalty earns at least, and often much more, than a mention from the playwright.

Jones takes a while to set up the queen's set-up but when she does, the drama literally explodes. (Until then, it's anybody's guess just what the real focus of the play is, partly because all the other residents are so fascinating.) Swirling around the charismatic Mme. St. Clair are a fiercely loyal doorman/confidant (played with wry comic finesse by Michael Nurse), a husband-pinching fortune teller (Lau Lapidés sizzles as the sexy seer) and an endless stream of bodyguards, henchmen and tony party-goers.

Pamela Lambert amuses as the haughty NAACP society matron, Christina Marie Bynoe dominates as the take-no-prisoners district attorney, Keith Mascoll slinks about (in a cape!) as the two-timing firebrand and Deama Battle shakes the ether as Mme.'s charismatic grandmother. At my performance, director Akiba Abaka niftily stepped in to portray the resident hairdresser (based on the playwright's mother), an inviting woman who came to know everyone's secrets.

Akiba lets the action draw out slowly--- like a skein of yarn unrolling for the knitter--- so that we can savor every nuance of the story. It turns out the playwright has enough material for two plays and that's just Act I! Peter Colao's set is dramatic all by itself, from its black & white parquet tiled floor to its gold-wreathed columns. The set even replicates the period elevator, complete with cheeky operator, Santio Cupon.

Joy Adams' costumes for Haynes are perfection, from the elegant, chocolate chiffon creation---topped with drop dead period furs--- right down to her black velvet evening coat and diamond earrings. Adams bathes Mme. in crimson for her bloodcurdling meltdown scene and strips away all the carefully design pretense for her heartbreaking downfall. See 409 EDGECOMB for Haynes' rollercoaster ride to fame.

"409 Edgecombe Avenue" (5 - 21 April)

[UP YOU MIGHTY RACE](#)

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