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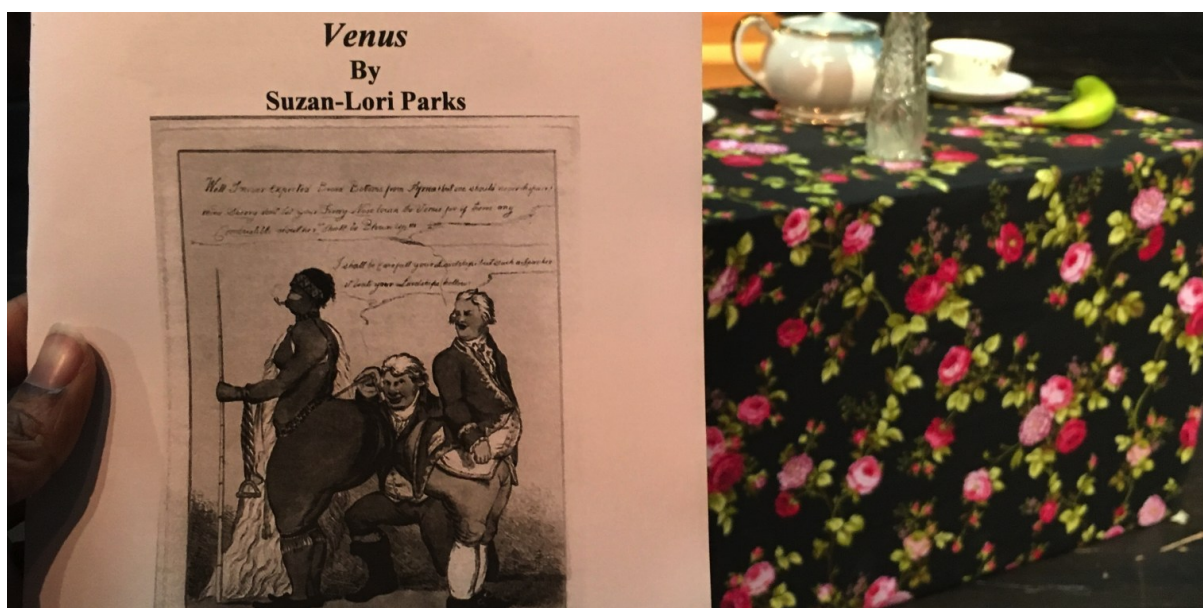
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### Venus: A Review by Ashlynn Thompson

Mar 20, 2017 | BLOGS, NIGHT AT THE THEATRE, THE CLASSROOM



Words and photo by Ashlynn Thompson

## The Facts

Play: Venus

Author: Suzan-Lori Parks

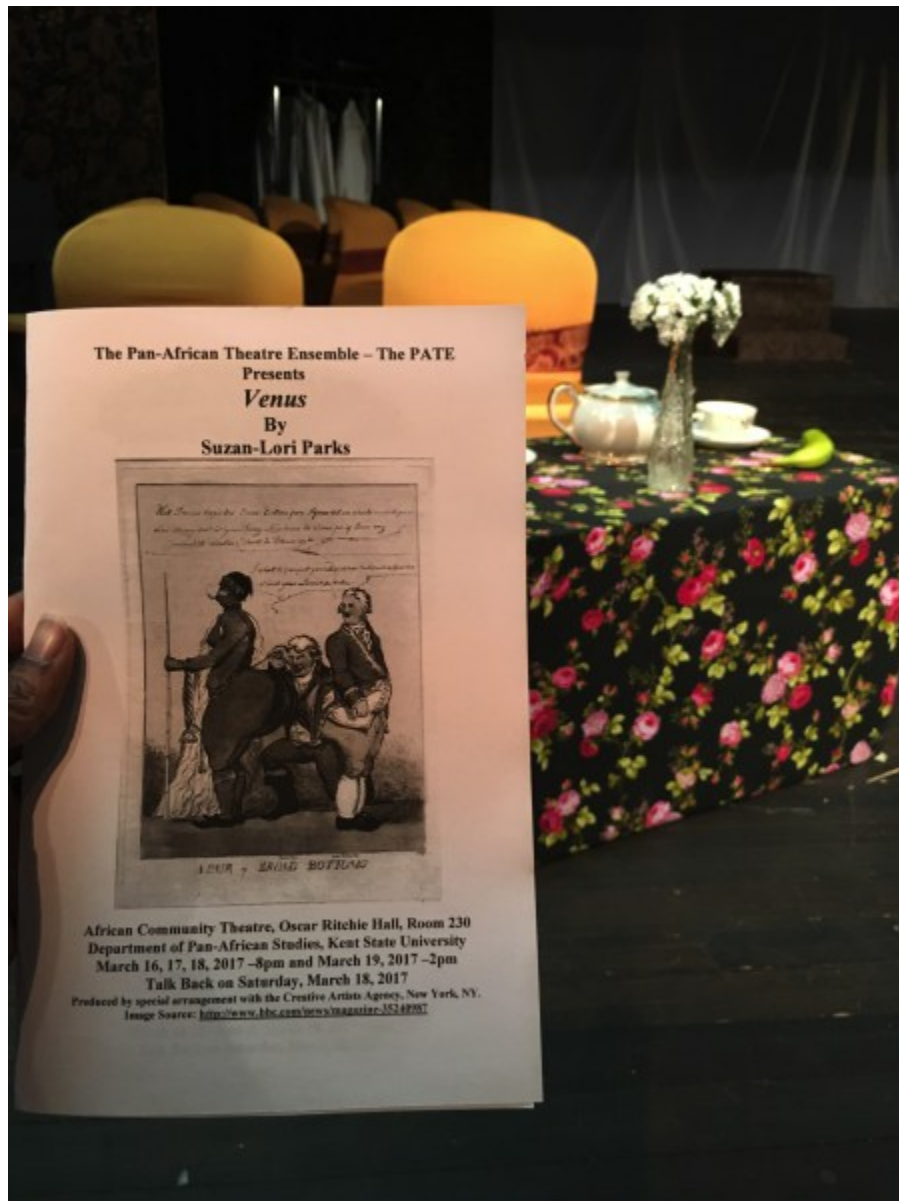
Director: Dr. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson

Theater: African Community Theatre

Theater Company: Pan-African Theatre Ensemble

Performance Dates: March 16 — March 19, 2017

Run Time: 2 hours



## Story Summary

This play is based on the true story of Saartie "Sarah" Baartman, an African woman who is tricked into traveling to London to be in a freak

show because of her large and “abnormal” (by European standards) buttocks. She becomes the main attraction as “The Hottentot Venus” and is exploited by audiences, especially her showman. The cruelty and apathy of humanity is a major theme in this play as well as the perceived inferiority of Africans. Sexual abuse, greed and suffering also play significant roles.

## Directorial Concept

As stated in the playbill, the director’s concept was to create “a European world environment” where “Baartman’s difference is an anomaly, pronounced and unwelcome, with disgust and pleasure.” Meaning that within the European environment that Forbes-Erickson conceptualized, Sarah’s body and skin color are the main focus. Scenes are intercut with projections of drawings and sculptures of the real Sarah Baartman, as well as her skeleton and wax figure which were put on display in a museum, paintings of the European goddess Venus, videos of the actors speaking on the sexism and hate faced by black women on a daily basis and pictures from modern popular culture that exclusively emphasize a woman’s body. Forbes-Erickson’s passion for this subject is evident and the production is well executed, but this does not make for a lighthearted experience.

## Why this is worth seeing ... or not

This play is very difficult to watch. The subject matter alone renders it ill-suited for the faint of heart, and this combined with the visuals on-stage make the dehumanization of Sarah extremely real. This reaches its peak when she is literally put on a leash and dragged to be exhibited. Several scenes are repeated in the second act to emphasize her daily exploitation and misery.

## Elements of Production

Production elements are used to emphasize Sarah’s anguish or draw attention to the inhumanity of her exhibition. Spotlights, in particular, are used to depict this; for example, a red spotlight is used in a scene where the showman was advertising Sarah to the audience and demanding that she show off her greatest assets and her dancing skills. Sound is also an integral part of telling this wretched tale. Eerie carnival music is used to set the mood for the freak show on several occasions, and classical piano was used in the second act to perfectly underscore Sarah’s pain and misery. The set design, meant to emulate a 19th century European world, does not change. Several blocks were utilized for Sarah’s display with chairs and tables seated around them, and jars were dispersed throughout the stage representing pickled body parts to highlight the pseudoscience used to justify racism and medical experiments of this

time. The costumes make the 1800's setting readily apparent, and Sarah's flesh colored, skin-tight bodysuit make her objectification all the more real. These production elements are effective in getting the audience to recognize and detest the atrocity of the freak show.

## The Acting

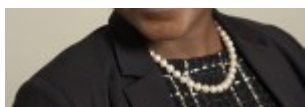
The acting by almost everyone in this production was phenomenal. The two that clearly stood out were Maya Nicholson, a senior majoring in theatre studies who portrays Sarah, and Sydney Smith, a junior majoring in theatre studies who plays The Man's Brother and The Mother-Showman. Great respect must be given to Nicholson for undertaking this role; she was placed in an exceptionally vulnerable position the entire production by being put on display in a skin-tight bodysuit and allowing the other characters to physically and emotionally abuse her. Nicholson's performance was especially nuanced, the sheer exhaustion and gradual deterioration of being exhibited as a freak was visible in her visage and body. Even though this all took place on the stage, it still takes enormous courage to play the role of a person literally treated as an animal. Smith plays The Man's Brother, who tricks Sarah into coming to London and immediately develops a sexual attraction for her. Smith's convincing portrayal of the corrupt acquirer is dwarfed by her performance as The Mother-Showman. Never in a school production have I seen a more authentic performance of a character so consumed by greed and apathetic to the pain of another, it's reminiscent of Mo'Nique as Mary in the movie "Precious." Both are exceptional in their own right; Smith's The Mother-Showman is the perfect contrast to Nicholson's Sarah. In a particularly powerful scene, Sarah hesitantly demands more money for her degradation, but The Mother-Showman swiftly shuts this idea down by threatening her with sexual abuse by her many male viewers. Defeated, Sarah nullifies her threat by saying this happens already.

## Final Thoughts

This play is not for everyone. I would only recommend it for those willing to experience dark humor and brutally honest subject matter. While it was extremely uncomfortable for me to watch, and I must confess I considered walking out at more than one point during the show, this does not mean true stories such as this should not be shared. A play with a powerful message about humanity makes viewers think deeply about themselves and their own apathy.



*Ashlynn Thompson is a freshman majoring in fashion merchandising and minoring in French in Kent State's Honors College. She has a passion for the performing arts and has acted for years. In 2016, she directed the play "The Matchmaker" and*



*also plotted the lighting, scenic and costume design. In addition to writing performing arts reviews for The Burr, Thompson interns for the fashion blog website CollegeFashionista, participates on the Programming Board for Black United Students and will serve as Secretary for the Fashion Student Organization for the 2017/18 school year. Thompson looks forward to bringing her critical eye to the Kent State performing arts scene.*

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