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FLYIN' WEST

Crossroads Theatre Company begins the 15th anniversary season with FLYIN' WEST, a play by Pearl Cleage. Everything happens in the fall of 1898 on a Kansas homestead near the black township of Nicodemus. Sophie owns the land with her sister Fannie and hopes the black townsfolk will stand together against white speculators. Sophie believes that owning land is the fulfillment of being free, but when her sister Minnie comes home, trouble follows. Minnie is married to Frank, a worldly mulatto who's passed for white in London and who's appalled by the blackness of Nicodemus. Will the sisters stand together against Frank and the white speculators? Will the promise of the future be fulfilled.

FLYIN' WEST resembles the masterworks of Anton Chekhov, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*. Flyin' West happens around the same time of epochal changes, and the parallels with Chekhov's images, especially of the land as a birthright and a means to a future, seem obvious -- but there's more. Subtext is always elusive but many energies are at work in Cleage's play, energies uniquely American in the pioneer spirit of the settlers, energies uniquely African-American as the first generation after slavery needs roots of the past and for the future, and also energies universal in the strength of women. It's only at the climax that the play falters somewhat as comedy overcomes tragedy, so that the play ends hopefully. Actually, the black communities in the West didn't survive -- but the final moments of FLYIN' WEST aren't so historical or even romantic but images of women and the earth, the strength and timelessness of life itself.

Ricardo Khan directed the superb production, with scenery of Daniel Proett, costumes of Judy Dearing, and just the right actors. Olivia Cole is most remarkable as Miss Leah, once a slave mother who'd birthed and lost ten children sold away. When she laments her babies lost but hopes for all the babies to come, her heart is the soul of FLYIN' WEST, now at Crossroads Theatre in New Brunswick.

I'm Michael Bourne ... 9-28-93