

Theater Review: JB3 Entertainment Presents World Premiere of Moving Historical Drama 'Althea & Angela'



Althea & Angela - Photo provided by JB3 Entertainment



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Groundbreaking athlete Althea Gibson – the first Black American to win a Grand Slam tennis title – comes brilliantly to life in JB3 Entertainment’s world premiere production of Todd Olson’s *Althea & Angela*, directed by James Blackmon.

Olson’s play unfolds Gibson’s (Jaymi Horn) life through the lens of her enduring friendship with British tennis star (ostracized among the UK tennis scene for being Jewish) Angela Buxton (Mallory Fischer), from their first meeting as rivals, through a run as doubles champions and into old age. Stephen Woosley supplies crucial support as the representative of everyone else in the world, usually men, and often (though not always) terrible.

Compressing such history into a tight 70 minutes with no intermission, Olson chooses the scenes and lines we're privy to with razor-sharp precision. The snapshots the audience gets – mostly centered on 1956 but flashing forward and back in time – expertly imply two entire lives and multiple intersecting worlds.

With such tight focus, *Althea & Angela* lives and dies by its performances, and it's hard to imagine two better takes on these iconic characters. Horn burns her performance onto the audience's consciousness, smoothly shifting between the quiet intensity and power the character was known for and equally vivid warmth and generosity. Her chilling, steel-spine delivery of lines like "Losers say 'It's possible, but it's hard,' winners say, 'It's hard, but it's possible.'" made me sit up a little straighter in my seat. Watching a hard-fought victory over a backdrop of racist commentary plays with the ambiguity of how much of that is internalized and how much is accurate, depressing reportage. Again and again, Horn humanizes Gibson without ever losing sight of exactly how impressive what she's doing is – including a lovely singing voice when we see a glimpse of one of Gibson's post-tennis careers as a cabaret singer.

Fischer has the task of slipping between Angela Buxton as a person and as an omniscient narrator, filling us in on the rest of both their lives and doing it brilliantly. She makes Buxton into an independent person, not just a foil for the more impressive Gibson, with a light touch that belies a depth experience. The chemistry between Fischer and Horn clicks and spins like beautiful clockwork.

Blackmon's direction makes the most of that electric chemistry with a handful of props and a mostly bare stage, aided by Kurt Mueller's evocative lighting. He uses the physicality of the sport and the performance to pulse-pounding effect; he stages the tennis matches with the characters facing the audience in an interesting play between the distance of being in the stands and the almost uncomfortable intimacy of being inside their heads, and he sets up the rest of their life in a similar circling way, always in some sort of motion.

Althea Gibson titled her memoir *So Much to Live For*, and without shying away from the pain and the struggle of that life, *Althea & Angela* gives us a perfect reinforcement of that aphorism. It's an exciting slice of history, well-told; a profound look at the reasons and rewards of connecting with one another; and a dazzling reminder of how much beauty there is in being alive.

Althea & Angela runs through August 27 at MadLab with performances at 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For tickets and more information, visit jb3entertainment.com/altheaandangela.



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