

Review: Despite the Priming, 'The Cotillion' Is Far From Flawless

Colette Robert's play takes aim at antiquated rites of passage, and how they can promote classism, colorism and retrograde gender politics.

By Maya Phillips

May 12, 2023

The Harriet Holland Social Club Presents the 84th Annual Star-Burst Cotillion in the Grand Ballroom of the Renaissance Hotel

The enterprising president of the Harriet Holland Social Club just wants the cotillion to be successful. The floral centerpieces are in place, a band is onstage, and the draperies are neatly tucked in and tied. The debutantes are primed and primed. By night's end, she hopes, these young women will set off into their bright futures.

Presented by New Georges and the Movement Theater Company at A.R.T./New York Theaters, "The Harriet Holland Social Club Presents the 84th Annual Star-Burst Cotillion in the Grand Ballroom of the Renaissance Hotel," written and directed by Colette Robert, mimics the proceedings of debutante balls. There's the introduction of the debutantes, the father-daughter dance and a multicourse dinner, but this cotillion — and the production — is far from flawless.

Madam President (Akyiaa Wilson), a 2-D villain, encourages the debutantes (Claire Fort, Caturah Brown, Starr Kirkland, Aigner Mizzelle, Monique St. Cyr, Portland Thomas) to prioritize appearances and wealth, hurling critiques with no regard for them as individuals. The more enlightened vice president (a hilarious Jehan O. Young, with priceless passive-aggressive expressions and line reads) pushes for more substance, like community outreach, and less of the superficial focus on style and status.

The script clearly has something to say about these antiquated rites of passage. But Robert doesn't go beyond the obvious: Instead of being a source of uplift and empowerment, the script says, Black debutante balls often promote classism, colorism and retrograde gender politics, like the objectification of Black women's bodies. And yet, cotillions aren't the source of the problem; they're a symptom of a more nuanced social and cultural infrastructure. The play's lack of deeper inquiry and character-building leaves us feeling unsated — even as the debutantes begin to question the whole affair.

Structurally, the play never finds its footing. It mostly takes place in real time, but sometimes it veers off into a kind of choreopoem, with the girls speaking from the future, posing as if on an auction block or tearing off their dresses. And the uneven direction results in scenes in which the actors' delivery is stilted — full of anticipatory pauses, not the naturalistic flow of conversation.

More graceful is Teresa L. Williams's set design, transforming the theater into a ballroom, and Stacey Derosier's snazzy lighting, which creates a party atmosphere. And the fabulous Harriet Holland Social Club singers (Kayla Coleman, Cherye J. Davis, Cristina Pitter, Montria Walker) give Marvettes and Ronettes vibes, with their shimmery dresses (fantastic all-around costume design by Mika Eubanks) and choreography (nicHi douglas). The music (Dionne McClain-Freeney) expounds on the show's themes via clever lyrics and a catchy score, played by the band on piano, upright bass and drums.

It seems as if "The Cotillion" is trying to replicate what the writer Jocelyn Bioh did so well in "School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play," which didn't critique beauty pageants as much as the culture that created them.

Robert's show did inspire me to ask my mother about her cotillion. I was expecting embarrassment. "I enjoyed it," she said. Her experience didn't change her life for better or for worse. "The Cotillion" forgets: This is also just a party.

The Harriet Holland Social Club Presents the 84th Annual Star-Burst Cotillion in the Grand Ballroom of the Renaissance Hotel

Through May 27 at A.R.T./New York Theaters, Manhattan; newgeorges.org. Running time: 1 hour 40 minutes.

Maya Phillips is a critic at large. She is the author of "NERD: Adventures in Fandom From This Universe to the Multiverse" and the poetry collection "Erou." More about Maya Phillips

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 2 of the New York edition with the headline: Dressed Up for a Party, But Reality Intervenes