

Theater review

“Hoop Jumper,” by Vicki Lynn Mooney



From left, Russ Tall Chief, Mariah Webb and Shawnee Brittan star in the world premiere production of Tulsa-born playwright Vicki Lynn Mooney's "Hoop Jumper," the main stage production of Oklahoma City Theatre Company's Sixth Annual Native American New Play Festival.

A hard-hitting, at times hard-to-watch play about life before statehood didn't offer easy answers, but engaged spectators with strong characters.

"Hoop Jumper," by Tulsa native Vicki Lynn Mooney, premiered Thursday in the basement CitySpace Theatre at Civic Center Music Hall.

The play, which won Oklahoma City Theatre Company's Native American Play Festival, was rough in some spots, riveting in others.

Russ Tall Chief was measured and quietly resonant as Weli, a mixed-blood Cherokee barber, given the nickname Hoop Jumper by his tribe, for trying to please his white wife.

Tall Chief was just hesitant enough in an opening scene, in which their two daughters are put on the Dawes allotment rolls, by a grudging, grouchy white commissioner. More trouble comes when two old pals, played with the right roguishness by Roy Lumpkin and Deron Twohatchet, try to draw Weli back to booze, and the outlaw life.

Mariah Webb as Florence got across the young wife's loving and materialistic sides, exacerbated by her father urging her to get more allotments — by having more children!

Clad in black, Shawnee Brittan played the father with the right amount of villainous flourish, but stopped well short of overkill, giving the role the complexity it deserved. Angela Startz brought toughness and much-needed earthy humor to Aunt Jane, who loves her many children, stands up to Florence and is a mother-sister figure to Weli.

Lasting the better part of two hours, directed by Rachel Irick, "Hoop Jumper" benefited from a well-constructed set, representing the front porch and facade of the family house.

The play by the New York-based author offers us a strong, uncompromising view of early-day Indian-white frictions. As such, it is recommended during the rest of its run, especially to those with an open mind and an interest in history.

— John Brandenburg, for The Oklahoman