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CHARMING PLAY HAS MUCH TO SAY

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A chunk of coconut is grated. A couple of oranges are sliced. Poundcake batter is mixed, and a ham is studded with pineapple and maraschino cherries. Two elderly women chat and gently tease each other. Not much happens in *Having Our Say*, but the play simmers with the distilled memories of more than 100 years. Emily Mann's adaptation is faithful to the Delany sisters' best-selling memoir, and CATCO's production nicely balances a sense of the historical context of the sisters' lives with a sharp awareness of their individuality.

Having Our Say invites the audience into the suburban New York home of 103-year-old Sadie Delany and her 101-year-old "little sister," Bessie.

Daughters of a slave who became an Episcopal bishop, the two grew up in North Carolina and moved, like five of their siblings, to New York when they were in their 20s. Neither married, and they continued to share a household through the years while Bessie practiced dentistry and Sadie taught domestic science in New York City high schools.

The actresses who play the two capture the long-standing affection between women who are best friends as well as sisters, but who still chafe a little at the differences between them. Sarallen's "sweet sister Sadie," who avoids direct confrontation, has a touch of mischief and a girlish glow beneath her genteel exterior. E.J. Murray's feisty and outspoken Bessie, a born protester of the system, may speak with a growl but reveals a soft heart.

Under the direction of A. Lorraine Robinson, the two spend most of their time together onstage, addressing the audience in conversational tones as they sit in armchairs or at the kitchen table, occasionally raising themselves unsteadily to fetch a box of photos or point out other mementos.

As those who have lived together for years will do, they sometimes finish each other's sentences, though the choice to have them speak too often in chorus sometimes detracts from the otherwise naturalistic dialogue.

In a nice touch, a slide projector is used to show photographs of the Delany siblings as well as their parents and grandparents, as the sisters describe their complex family background. The projector also is used later, though less effectively, to show generic scenes of Harlem and the civil rights movement. These push the sisters too far in the direction of representing "the black experience" as a whole.

The music selected by David Wallingford is also a generic mixtures of gospel, jazz and swing that tells us little about the sisters' particular musical tastes. In contrast, Rob Johnson's realistic sets let the audience into the daily life of the sisters. A revolving platform includes the Delanys' formal dining room and book-lined living room as well as their comfy, old-fashioned kitchen.

The play gives due weight to the impact of historical events, such as the advent of Jim Crow laws, but some of its most memorable moments are the most personal. There's great humor in the sisters' recollections of their pet pig and their accounts of their daily yoga practice, and poignancy as they remember the deaths of their parents.

Having Our Say includes a description of a lynching and a listing of racial epithets encountered by the sisters, but these shouldn't deter parents from taking their children to the play. If history is the sum of the lives of individuals, these two well-lived lives provide a window into the 20th century.

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