
PERFORMING

At the Unicorn Theatre, “Toni Stone” Spotlights an Unsung Hero of Baseball (and American) History

Victor Wishna • September 22, 2022



Jaeda LaVonne in “Toni Stone.” (Cynthia Levin/Unicorn Theatre)

groundbreaking subject currently at the Unicorn Theatre, it might just be this: *Keep your eye on the ball.*

Before the show even begins, there it is—glowing white, illuminated by a pinpoint spotlight in the middle of an otherwise bare and darkened stage, begging for our attention. A young woman in midcentury baseball garb strides forward, picks it up, and holds it aloft.

“I want to tell you about *reaching*,” she says. “You may have heard...I’m the first woman to ever play professional ball.”

Of course, what makes *Toni Stone*—and Toni Stone, who debuted in the otherwise all-male Negro Leagues in 1953—so compelling is that most people in the audience will not have heard of her, or her record of perseverance in the face of an array of obstacles: disapproving parents who tried to steer her away from baseball, coaches and owners who saw her as a novelty, white fans who hurled racist insults and worse at her and her teammates, and even the men on her own team, who sometimes tried to sabotage her or directly threatened her with sexual violence.

The Unicorn’s production of Lydia R. Diamond’s poetic if uneven script helps to correct the historical record, thanks to an all-star performance by Jaeda LaVonne in the title role, and an impressive display of teamwork. After all, this is no one-woman show; eight male actors cover all the other bases and subplots. It’s a strong choice (by the playwright and any producer who takes this play on) that makes for exciting stagecraft and emphasizes both the camaraderie of baseball and Stone’s isolation as the only woman in an at-times crowded playing space. Jenise Cook’s rousing, game-like choreography, set on scenic designer Atif Rome’s subtle evocation of a baseball diamond, gives three dimensions to Stone’s lyrical narrations.



The cast of “Toni Stone.” (Cynthia Levin/Unicorn Theatre)

Another choice doesn’t pay off quite as well. In her show-starting monologue, Toni also warns us that she can’t tell a story linearly (“My brain doesn’t work that way”), and Diamond has chosen to frame this as an exercise in memory, a series of not-necessarily-sequential anecdotes and asides. While, altogether, this creates a portrait of Stone’s lived experience, the lack of context can make for frustrating storytelling—Where is this? When is this?—especially with a story that’s true but not well known. Diamond has condensed Stone’s time in pro baseball to her one season with the Indianapolis Clowns (from the play, you would never know that she was then traded to Buck O’Neil’s Monarchs and played right here in Kansas City), and I was surprised the program didn’t provide so much as a dramaturg’s note or timeline of Stone’s baseball career. So it’s probably a good idea to check out the Wikipedia entry beforehand.

The only largely chronological plotline is Toni’s tavern-set courtship with a businessman named Alberga, 30-plus years her senior, which plays out in

be baseball.

While the entire ensemble is strong, L. Roi Hawkins stands out for his steady performance as Alberga, as does Robert Vardiman, called upon frequently to portray Millie, the prostitute/life-coach that Toni befriends on road trips.

In the end, of course, this is all about Toni, and Diamond and LaVonne (under the direction of Brad Shaw) do an admirable job of creating a character from a real person about whom very little primary evidence survives. Mainstream media of the time did not cover the Negro Leagues, Stone gave few interviews before she passed away in 1996, and author Martha Ackerman relied largely on those who knew and had played alongside her to write the only biography of Stone (*Curveball*, 2010), upon which much of this play is based.

Stone was not technically the first woman to play professional baseball; the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League fielded teams comprised entirely of (white) women during World War II, as portrayed in the 1992 film “A League of Their Own,” and the spin-off series currently streaming on Amazon Prime Video.

But Stone was the first to play with “the boys,” as she calls them (“but you are not allowed to call them that—they’re men”); her league was the league of O’Neil and Jackie Robinson and Hank Aaron (whose roster spot she filled), and she made it her own.

Stone—for all of her seeming inability to tell an orderly story—never lost focus. She knew what she wanted. She never took her eye off the ball. And *Toni Stone* is a deserving tribute to an overlooked pioneer who is known today only because she never stopped reaching.

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