

STAGE & ARTS

'Parks' is a biographical musical with a touch of poetry

Review: The world premiere production looks at legendary artist Gordon Parks' early years in St. Paul.

By Chris Hewitt (<https://www.startribune.com/chris-hewitt/6370568/>) Star Tribune

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It is a play and it's about a photographer but "Parks" kept reminding me of poetry.

There's poetry in how director Talvin Wilks cast it, caring more about capturing feelings than whether the actors are the same race, age or gender as their characters. There's poetry in the staging, where actors turn rhythmic movement and three piano benches into a streetcar. There's poetry in Seitu Jones' spare set, with evocative images projected on three large screens. And there's poetry in Harrison David Rivers and Robin P. Hickman-Winfield's script, which likens [Gordon Parks](https://www.startribune.com/how-does-a-play-humanize-an-icon/600155616/) (https://www.startribune.com/how-does-a-play-humanize-an-icon/600155616/) — and all of us — to birds, seeking a way to fly.

"Parks" is not a typical biographical play. The world premiere, which incorporates hymns and standards in music director Darnell Davis' lovely piano score, focuses on Parks' harrowing teenage years in St. Paul. It's set before he became a legendary photographer ([one of his most famous works](https://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/exhibitions/public-events/joanne-thornton-wilson) (https://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/exhibitions/public-events/joanne-thornton-wilson) was recently spotlighted on "And Just Like That"), writer ("The Learning Tree") and movie director ("Shaft").

Like poetry, "Parks" uses details to illuminate the big picture. Two actors play him — Kevin Brown Jr. is the young man and James A. Williams is the older "Pigeon Man," who helps his compatriot make sense of things until a key moment when young Gordon no longer needs him. The ensemble tackles many roles, including Parks' mother, Sarah, who dies as the play begins but still visits him in his dreams (script in hand, understudy Monica E. Scott was a moving Sarah at the performance I attended)._____ - -

"Parks" has little to say about its hero's work, since it came after the play's 1928-1938 time frame. Instead, Rivers suggests some incidents that shaped him, that made him reject violence in favor of depicting the culture and conditions that created the violence. Parks referred to his camera as his "weapon" and near the end of "Parks," he finally,



RICK SPAULDIN

During a low moment, Gordon Parks sings "There's a Hole in the Bucket" in "Parks" at History Theatre.

tentatively says, "Maybe I'll take pictures." It's a thrilling moment, along the lines of the one in "Sweeney Todd" when the titular barber reclaims his razors and cries, "At last, my arm's complete again!"

One danger of the way "Parks" tells its story is that the title character can seem passive, observing events rather than participating in them. That occasionally happens, and the final scenes take a little too long to unfold, once we know Parks' destiny is set. But the payoff of the play's approach is evident in gemlike scenes that vividly capture how it must have felt to be a young Black man during the Depression with only his mother's words to keep him strong.

My favorite scene comes at the end of the first act. Brown, accompanied by the ensemble, sings "There's a Hole in the Bucket," reclaiming it from the nursery and revealing that it's really a song about poverty, despair and hope — the very things Gordon Parks would make a career of exploring.

'Parks'

Who: By Harrison David Rivers, in collaboration with Robin P. Hickman-Winfield. Directed by Talvin Wilks.

When: 10 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. Thu., 7:30 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 2 p.m. Sun. Ends April 10.

Where: History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul.

Protocol: Vaccination (or negative COVID test within 72 hours) and masks required.

Tickets: \$35-\$53, 651-292-4323 or [historytheatre.com](https://www.historytheatre.com) (<https://www.historytheatre.com/2021-2022/parks>) .

Theater critic **Chris Hewitt** previously worked at the Pioneer Press in St. Paul, where he covered movies and then theater. Also, he occasionally gets to write book reviews.

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