

Theater review: Biographical drama keeps its focus on lessons from Gordon Parks' early life

[Rob Hubbard](#) March 21, 2022 at 10:48 a.m.



"Parks" features: (L-R) are Ivory Doublette, Kevin Brown Jr., Darrick Mosley, Monica E. Scott (an understudy for Jamila Anderson), Darius Dotch and Mikell Sapp, with Pearce Bunting partially hidden behind. (Photo by Rick Spaulding)

When children are encouraged to dream with the words, "You can be anything," the advising adult could use as an example Gordon Parks.

For Parks was so many things. In addition to being one of the most important photographers of the 20th century, he was also a songwriter,

novelist, film director, composer, poet, painter, and the writer of some marvelous memoirs.

The first of those was called "A Choice of Weapons," its title derived from the idea that — as many of his fellow young Black men responded to their rage at racism by picking up guns and knives — he chose art as his weapon. His camera captured images from the lives of Black Americans that opened the eyes of multiple generations, primarily through his long relationship with Life magazine.

It is that memoir's early chapters that inspired "Parks," an intriguing new play by Harrison David Rivers that premiered this weekend at St. Paul's History Theatre. Concentrating on the formative 13 years that Parks spent in the Twin Cities — most of his teens and 20s — it's a kind of fantasia on the central themes and events in the life of a young man recognizing his mission in life.

It's also something of a jukebox musical, although you don't find many traditional gospel tunes on a jukebox. Under the guidance of multi-Grammy-nominated gospel artist Darnell Davis, a very talented cast of eight enhances the play's most moving moments with the sadness, comfort and confidence found in the anthems of African-American churches.

Combine that with skillfully sculpted characterizations and excellently executed design elements, and you have a biographical drama that admirably keeps its focus firmly on the important lessons one can derive from Parks' early life.

So "Parks" is, by and large, a success, a memoir for the stage that keeps its protagonist decidedly human-sized where other writers might have been tempted to place Parks on a pedestal. But it also stumbles a bit in unnecessary interludes, conversations and songs that don't propel the story

forward, resulting in a 2-hour-and-20-minute show that may have been more effective if pared down.

It's a story rooted in hardship, for young Parks loses his mother in one of the play's first scenes — although she continues to play an important role as a mentor who's more memory than ghost — moves to St. Paul with his sister, is thrown out by her husband, and spends most of his first Minnesota winter homeless.

On the streets, he encounters race-based hostility and almost turns to robbery. But Rivers emphasizes that the warmth and generosity of others was key to getting Parks through the difficulties. His ascent from rock bottom was clearly not just a solo effort.

Despite Kevin Brown Jr.'s solid performance as Parks, the egalitarian script is devised in such a way that many a minor character steals scenes from him. Whenever Jamila Anderson lifts her beautiful voice in song, she becomes the center of attention, and her portrayal of Parks' mother is a fine blend of tough and tender. Mikell Sapp admirably inhabits some of the play's most compassionate characters, and Pearce Bunting has a series of brief, rich portrayals.

But Parks was a man best known for visuals, and this production is filled with splendid images, many of them large-scale projections of his photographs. Seitu Jones' scenic design and Kathy Maxwell's videos are expertly interwoven. A turntable sets things in motion to excellent effect, but so does the high-energy direction of Talvin Wilks, leaving never a stagnant moment in this rush of youthful activity.

Yes, there are flaws in Rivers' script: James A. Williams' narration provides welcome entrée to the story, but eventually feels like unnecessary interruption. And the first-act finale of the old children's song, "There's a

Hole in the Bucket," is a baffling addition. But, like Parks' celebrated photographic eye, this show mostly keeps its focus firmly on what's most important to telling the story.

If you go

- **What:** "Parks"
- **When:** Through April 10
- **Where:** History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul
- **Tickets:** \$53-\$15, available at historytheatre.org
- **Capsule:** Strong music, design and portrayals make the Renaissance man's youth come alive.
- **Note:** "Parks" is available for streaming, April 4-10 (\$40-\$25)