

The New York Times

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2005

A Heroine Who Embraced Reform (and Explosives)

By NEIL GENZLINGER

"Day of Reckoning," a play about the anarchist and labor reformer Lucy Parsons, is unevenly paced and clumsily staged, but it has this saving grace: Unlike some other theatrical efforts associated with Black History Month, it is not shallow hero worship. Parsons was a decidedly flawed hero, and Melody Cooper, the playwright, leaves those flaws in plain sight.

Although Ms. Cooper, who also stars as Parsons in the production now at the All Stars Project, throws in some time-jumping techniques, the play is basically a straightforward biography. The first act is set primarily in Waco, Tex., where Parsons meets the crusading white man who would become her husband and fellow agitator, Albert Parsons (Christopher Conant). Here we get the first hint that this mixed-race woman does not quite fit the black-pride mold: calling herself Lucy Gonzalez and passing as Mexican and American Indian, she chafes at any suggestion by Albert that she is black.

Lucy Parsons, a tough labor crusader not without flaws.

The play, produced by Five Points Presents... doesn't really find its voice, though, until Act II, when Lucy and Albert, hounded out of Waco by racist threats, move to Chicago and become involved in the labor movement. They help organize a major railroad strike in 1877, and Ms. Cooper makes clear that Lucy Parsons was not far from the violent radicals of the 1960's and 70's. "I think when we derailed that engine, they finally knew we mean business," she says of the railroads. And she exhorts her followers, "Learn to use explosives."

The Parsons have two children, but their domestic bliss is shattered by the Haymarket Riot of 1886, in which Albert is implicated. In Ms. Cooper's formulation, his martyrdom causes Lucy to lose her bearings, and their son, Albert Jr. (David Adams), pays the appalling

'Day of Reckoning'

All Stars Project

ing price. Here again, Lucy is anything but heroic. By the play's end she has much to atone for. (She died in a fire in 1942, at 89.)



Roger Grunwald
Melody Cooper and Christopher Conant in "Day of Reckoning."

Ms. Cooper's recounting of this fascinating life, and the interracial love story at the center of it, could benefit from a large infusion of understatement; her script milks the many dramatic moments like an overwrought movie-of-the-week. She has also surrounded herself with actors who are not as good as she is, a discrepancy that is made even more glaring by Madelyn Chapman's never subtle direction.

Still, Lucy Parsons's story is one that deserves to be told, especially at a time when those with radical ideas are again under intense scrutiny.

"Day of Reckoning" is at the All Stars Project, 543 West 42nd Street, Clinton, through Feb. 27th.