

# BACKSTAGE

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE

MARCUS NAYLOR AS JOSH GIBSON & ROB



These lively, vividly performed one-acts chronicle two giants of Negro league baseball: Satchel Paige, who eventually became the first black pitcher in the American League, and Josh Gibson, the powerful catcher and slugger who became Paige's close friend and rival. Eric Coleman's vigorous and sure-footed direction makes for a fast-paced, high-octane double-header.

Michael A. Jones' *Josh: The Black Babe Ruth* opens with Henry Afro-Bradley singing a stirring rendition of the blues standard "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean," followed by a scene of the dying Gibson (Marcus Naylor) wasting away in a sanatorium. From this grim beginning, the play flashes back to Gibson's sibling-like relationship with the happy-go-lucky Paige (R. Ashley Bowles)

and his perennially frustrated attempts to make it into the white-dominated major leagues. Jones gives much attention to Gibson's complicated personal life as he juggles a relentless ex-girlfriend (Toni Seawright) and the voluptuous bar hopper he's currently seeing (Melissa Maxwell). Both women are genuine forces of nature and seem to be competing to out-sass each other. I'd call it a draw.

Gibson also makes a cameo appearance in Fred Newman's *Satchel: A Requiem for Racism*, earnestly assessing his old friend's character for a director of admissions in purgatory (Maryam Myika Day). The conceit is that Paige has been killed in a train wreck and must demonstrate his worthiness to enter heaven; he's

ASHLEY BOWLES AS SACHEL PAIGE  
(Photo by Carmen L De Jesus)

## Josh: The Black Babe Ruth and Satchel: A Requiem for Racism

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By A.J. Mell

accompanied by a young black Harvard student (Michael Alcide) who has never heard of Satchel Paige and doesn't know from baseball. To their chagrin, they discover that the afterlife is segregated — much like the Baseball Hall of Fame, which initially consigned Paige to a separate wing.

The wily, mischievous Paige is a more engaging character than sober sides Gibson, though Newman's play is the less satisfying of the two — partly because his intention is more overtly educational and partly because the whole waiting-room-in-purgatory business is corn straight off the cob. That doesn't prevent *Satchel* from being an entertaining and good-humored piece, enlivened by the performances of Seawright and Casandra Niambi Steele as two whoopin' and hollerin' ex-hookers who have earned their angel's wings.

Presented by Woodie King Jr.'s New Federal Theatre in association with Castillo Theatre at Henry Street Settlement's Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand St., NYC. Jan. 31-Feb. 24. Wed.-Fri., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., 3 and 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. (212) 279-4200 or [www.ticketcentral.com](http://www.ticketcentral.com). Casting by Lawrence Evans.