

THEATER REVIEW: 'Clybourne Park' a gem at Salem State University

Thursday

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By Keith Powers / Correspondent

If you go...

WHAT: Clybourne Park

WHERE: Callan Studio Theatre, 352 Lafayette St., Salem State University

WHEN: through March 5

TICKETS: \$15, \$10 students/seniors. Visit www.salemstatetickets.com or call 978 542-6365.

The relevance of many plays rests on how dated they seem. Passé language, shop-worn plots, outmoded social concerns — all these can render the intensity of a drama meaningless.

There are some plots that we might wish seemed dated. The fact that they aren't creates real, painful self-awareness.

The issues discussed in Bruce Norris's "Clybourne Park" are a perfect example. Norris's witty, supercharged double-setting comedy, a logical extension of another timeless work — Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" — brings to the fore America's endless, perplexing and

humiliating history of race relations.

Onstage now at Salem State University's Callan Studio Theatre, directed by Brianne Beatrice, Norris posits two Americas: the first, in 1959, as a black family buys a house in a white suburb. The second, in 2009, when a white couple buys the same house in the same neighborhood, now "historically" black after half a century.

Of course, little seems to change. It's a point Norris makes by using the same set of characters, bringing their personalities along but changing their roles in the narrative.

The Salem State players have created an expectation of deep preparedness and nuanced investigation in all of their recent presentations, and this production of "Clybourne Park" is no different. Seven actors each bring dual roles alive, firing off Norris's machine gun, overlapping dialogue with complete immersion in their awkward personas.

Nobody is likable in "Clybourne Park." In fact, the characters are so genuine, and so unabashedly blinded to their prejudices, the audience may end up not liking themselves because of it. They ring true, and it hurts.

We don't get to feel superior to the well-intentioned, misguided white housewife Bev (Jodi Buoncuore) from 1959 when she says, "We should get to know what they eat;" we might not say that now, but thanks to Bev's counterpart Kathy in 2009, we know we could utter something just as embarrassingly offensive right now.

Karl (polemically dense, robustly played by Chris Kandra) may be an unrepentant racist trying to keep the neighborhood white in 1959; as Steve in 2009, clumsily trying to justify razing an old house in his new neighborhood, he acts like he's superseded racism — but he's just as blatant.

The black couple (Francine/Lena: Claudia Cruz; Albert/Kevin: Adrian Peguero) fares slightly better in this assessment of America — but only slightly. They stagger under the weight of 1959 white ignorance, but with less straightforward discrimination in 2009, neither of them really raise the nature of the dialogue.

Each of the actors in this duality has great onstage moments, humorous or otherwise. Ted Silva took Russ to a deep level of pain, and swiveled around to make Dan into clownish relief. As Jim and then Tom, Robert Brennan was on the mark (when Jim says "Don't we say Negro now?" the whole problem gets summarized in one line).

Olivia Dumaine, pregnant throughout, played the deaf Betsy as a straight subject, then turned Lindsey into a sharp-witted foil. Kenneth's (Chris Noran) brief, final-scene appearance sets the play — and the audience — on its head.

Beatrice prepped the cast — and then let them work. Blocking and changes were organic, not drawing attention away from the animated interactions.

Norris has written an imaginative book, with fast-talking characters and cringe-worthy episodes piling on in crescendos. Many secondary inter-weavings make this play an even deeper experience, not simply a diatribe: the geographical nonsense; the trunk; the hidden secret of the house; the "other" discriminations — toward the disabled, Hispanics, Jews; the classic sets (Amber Primm); the soundtrack (Ryan Blaney).

Perhaps it's the simmering anger — white and black — that keeps racism alive. Perhaps it's the frustratingly perpetuated misconceptions. The fact that people are different from each other — that doesn't seem too hard to accept. "Clybourne Park" layers racism with humor, but while we laugh, we know it isn't going away.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](#); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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