



THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD: (left to right) Damon Gupton, Annie Parisse, Crystal A. Dickinson, & Jeremy Shamos in *Clybourne Park*. Photo: Nathan Johnson



Theater Review

Clybourne Park: Races & cultures clash in portrait of changes in suburbia over 50 years

CLYBOURNE PARK

Written by Bruce Norris

Directed by Paul McKinnon

Walter Kerr Theatre

219 West 48th Street

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By David NouNou

Clybourne Park makes you long for the simple days (1959) when you saw a house you wanted to buy and did if you had the money. This was a time when one did not have to deal with agents, lawyers, zoning, and all the headaches and problems that arise when purchasing a property. Sure, it mattered who moved into the neighborhood because the property values went down if the “wrong people” moved into a pristine, lily-white neighborhood in the pre-civil rights era in America.

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However, playwright Bruce Norris has provided a provocative twist to this urbanization/gentrification tale of buying and selling of a house during a 50-year span. In 1959, the house, owned by a white family, is being sold to an African-American family and we witness the discomfort it causes the people still living in that community. Act II reverses the role of selling the same house some 50 years later back to a white family moving into the area, which has changed over the decades to an African-American neighborhood on the verge of being gentrified.

This house, like most homes that have survived the wrecking ball, has a history attached to it. It is the eighth character of this show. It has a life of its own, and like any home, it takes the personality and lifestyle of the people who inhabited it. For surely anybody who purchases a home is not only buying a house, but the ghosts of the previous owners as well.

Act I is simple. Russ (the always wonderful Frank Wood), and Bev (Christina Kirk), are selling their home to an African-American family against the advice of Karl, Russ' Rotary club friend, the brilliant (Jeremy Shamos), who is married to the deaf and pregnant Betsy (Annie Parisse), all of whom play different characters in Act II but are somehow related to the characters in Act I. Frank and Bev are moving out of their home and community due to an unfortunate incident that occurred in their home, which they want to get away from.

Act II becomes more convoluted, not only in the selling process, but in the "PC" political environment in which we currently live, where anything that is said can be taken out of context and could be construed as racist, sexist, or any "ist" one speaks about, can be used against you. The mayhem starts when a white couple wants to buy that same house and make changes to it, like adding a clay swimming pool from the African-American family who purchased it 50 years ago. Now, there is even more history attached to the house and this roils the narrative waters even more.

Everyone in the play has a dual role, and it is an ensemble piece, so there is no real lead. However, the standout performance of the night is Jeremy Shamos, who delivers a Tony-worthy performance (supporting actor) in his roles as the bigoted Karl in Act I; and the free-speaking Steve in Act II. He is just wonderful and, until one reads the Playbill, one does not realize he is playing both parts to perfection. He is that good. Frank Wood is a consummate actor and is always good. Annie Parisse and Christina Kirk play their parts, especially in Act II, with stereotypical character sincerity. The other three actors, Crystal A. Dickson, Brendan Griffin, and Damon Gupton, are not fleshed out as well. They just are not nearly as strong as the others.

Clybourne Park is a show that doles out equal amounts of harsh dramatic reality, while it is swathed in intelligent comedy simultaneously. This is not an easy feat to accomplish, but Mr. Norris does it to perfection.

Edited by Scott Harrah

Published April 19, 2012

Reviewed at press preview performance on April 18, 2012

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