

Cultural Daily

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Hot Button Topics: Off-Broadway Tackles Sex, Race, and Religion

David Sheward · Wednesday, October 21st, 2015

Theatrical conventions are shattered in three Off-Broadway productions as playwrights explore the hot button topics of race, gender, and religion. Two are contemporary (Robert O'Hara's *Barbecue* and Lucas Hnath's *The Christians*) and one is over three decades old (Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*), but the latter is still the boldest and most innovative. Churchill's works have always turned expectations on their heads. *Cloud Nine* was her first transatlantic hit, running Off-Broadway in a Tommy Tune-directed production for over two years after a London staging. The author plays with sexual stereotypes by having women play male parts and vice versa. She further stretches boundaries by having dead people enter the action and 100 years collapse into 25 without any of the characters' batting an eye. She has played other weird tricks in later plays such as *Top Girls*, *Fen*, and *Serious Money*.

Here her theme is sex—both the activity and the biological differences in the human species. In the first act, a Victorian family represses all kinds of urges in a colonial African outpost. In the second act, the same family is only a quarter century older in modern London, and though the restrictive chains have been lifted, they are still tormented by their carnal drives. Churchill offers no easy answers or observations, but compassionately charts the messy journeys of her confused Britons.



Sean Dugan, Izzie Steele, Chris Perfetti, Brooke Bloom, Clarke Thorell, and Lucy Owen in *Cloud Nine*.

Credit: Doug Hamilton

In James Macdonald's intimate revival for Atlantic Theatre Company, the audience is seated close to the cast on wooden benches in designer Dane Laffrey's in-the-round arena (and Gabriel Berry's costumes define the characters and their attitudes). It's a small, claustrophobic space and you can feel the heat along with the characters. Seven versatile performers brilliantly play a variety of sexes, races, and persuasions. Brooke Bloom is particularly moving as an effeminate boy and then his own mother discovering the joys of self-pleasure. Izzie Steele, a Carey Mulligan look-alike, sharply conveys the desperate longings of two lesbians of different eras and a fiercely independent widow. Clarke Thorell is delightfully aggressive as a proper, pompous father and then a nasty tomboy of a girl.



Heather Alicia Simms, Benja Kay Thomas, Kim Wayans and Marc Damon Johnson in *Barbecue*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Robert O'Hara also defies time and space in his examination of the impact of racism and homophobia in his plays such as *Insurrection: Holding History* and *Bootycandy*. In his newest work, *Barbecue* at the Public Theatre, he takes a leaf out of Churchill's book but bends and twists it in his own way. The play is set in a public park (like the second act of *Cloud Nine*) where a lower-middle-class family stages an intervention to get a drug-addicted sister to enter rehab. But is the family black or white? At first, we don't know for sure because alternate scenes feature both races. By switching from one to the other, O'Hara forces us to confront our prejudices. As the play progresses and additional layers of reality are added, our perspective shifts and the author makes us consider the distortions imposed by media and pop culture. Kent Gash's direction is wildly funny as are the performances by a company as boisterous as the *Cloud Nine* crew. Tamberla Perry and Samantha Soule are given the juiciest opportunities as two versions of the junkie sibling and they run with them. Kudos also to Paul Tazewell's clever costumes which subtly contrast the two families.

After sex and race, religion used to be the topic you were supposed to avoid in polite conversation. Lucas Hnath tackles this third rail of American discourse in his electrifying and scary *The Christians*.



Linda Powell, Andrew Garman, Larry Powell, and Philip Kerr in *The Christians*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Just after the debts for his megachurch have been paid off, Pastor Bob announces he no longer believes in literal damnation and that God is all-forgiving to non-Christians, non-believers and even Hitler. His congregation, his board of directors, and his wife slowly fall away as Bob continues to preach his personal vision which runs contrary to the fire-and-brimstone of his rival Joshua, a former associate now starting his own ministry.

Hnath delivers a hard-hitting work on the necessity of hell for some people to do good. Like Dr. Stockmann in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, Pastor Bob becomes an outcast for pursuing what he perceives as the best possible course for his community. But he's no unblemished saint, Hnath makes Bob a complex and flawed visionary and Joshua is no fire-breathing bigot, but a sincere advocate for his position. Andrew Garman and Larry Powell give multiple shadings to these two adversaries and Emily Donahoe is stunningly compelling as a questioning parishioner. Complete with a choir, organ, stain-glass windows, and microphones, the action becomes a full-on Sunday service (the accurate setting is again by Dane Lafferty), staged with insight and power by Les Waters.

Like the previous two plays, *The Christians* covers a difficult theme in an unexpected format, offering new insights and provoking audiences to think differently—the goal of engaged and engaging theater.

Cloud Nine: Oct. 5—Nov. 1. Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St., NYC. Tue., 7 p.m.; Wed.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: two hours and 40 mins. including intermission; \$65; (866) 811-4111 or www.atlantictheater.org.

Barbecue: Oct. 8—Nov. 1. Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Schedule varies. Running time: two hours including intermission; \$50; (212) 967-7555 or www.publictheater.org.

The Christians: Sept. 17—Oct. 25. Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue., Wed., 7

p.m.; Thu.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 2:30 p.m.; Sun., 7:30 p.m. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission; \$75-\$90; (212) 279-4200 or www.ticketcentral.com.

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