Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

# New Apples and Les Blancs

David Sheward · Monday, July 6th, 2020

As the hiatus from live theater continues with no respite in sight until at least 2021, we draw what sustenance we can from Zoom plays, archival broadcasts, benefit readings, and *Hamilton* on Disney Plus. Richard Nelson's fictional Apple family is experiencing a similar sense of depravation and loss. In *And So We Come Forth,* the second piece about the middle-class clan in Rhinebeck, NY, since the coronavirus lockdown began, the four adult Apple siblings plus one romantic partner, sit down to a remote dinner and commiserate over the devastating effects of the pandemic. Each expresses a sense of emptiness and futility. Though not much happens and there is a minimum of activities such as game playing or political discussion which propelled action in the previous plays, this hour-long rumination on our fractured state between quarantine and normalcy resonates with sorrow and empathy.

Jay O. Sanders, Maryann Plunkett, Sally Murphy, Stephen Kunken, and Laila Robbins in *And So We Go Forth: The Apple Family: A Dinner on Zoom.*

We first encountered the Apples with *That Hopey, Changey Thing* presented Off-Broadway at the Public Theater in 2010. Each of the plays in the series—the latter three are *Sweet and Sad* (2011), *Sorry* (2012), and *Regular Singing* (2013)—take place on a significant day in American politics. The family quarrels over public life and private travails in naturalistic dialogue in the Chekhovian manner. Nelson extended his Rhinebeck panorama to two other families with plays about the Gabriels (three) and the Michaels (one). All of them made us feel as if we were eavesdropping. Once the COVID-19 pandemic forced us all into isolation, Nelson regathered much of the original cast for a play performed on Zoom—*What Do We Need to Talk About*—in late April.

Now in early July, as New Yorkers are beginning to slowly emerge from the cocoon of quarantine, the Apples are facing fresh crises and turning points. Newly divorced Richard (Jay O. Sanders, a grieving teddy bear) is buying a new house and is struck by an anecdote concerning the life work of a late friend of a friend nearly being tossed in a dumpster by alienated offspring. Barbara (Maryann Plunkett subtly nursing sorrow and grudges) resents her former students for requesting that she stop contacting them. Marian (Laila Robbins quietly exposing loneliness) sadly recounts realizing in her bathtub that she has not touched another human being in three months and that the highlights of her days are sprinkling the neighbor children with a water hose and a flirtation with a man walking his dog by her house. Jane (Sally Murphy skillfully combining anger and desperation) and her partner Tim (Stephen Kunken subtly displaying dismay and searching for solace) are struggling with cramped living quarters, a fussy canine and the possibility of Tim's teenage daughter and her displaced friend coming to live with them during the summer.

You could quarrel with the lack of plot and action. In the previous Zoom play, there was a lot of catching up to do and more direct social commentary. Here, the Apples ruminate and counsel each other and not much else "happens." The only real action is Richard and Barbara asking provocative, philosophical questions. The work is more like a short story than a play since there is so little forward movement. But Nelson's understated direction and the nuanced performances reveal multiple layers of these people and make us want to stay for many more meals. The title refers to the final lines in Dante's Inferno as the characters emerge from hell into a new world. Hopefully, we will hear more from the Apples as they enter the post-pandemic era.

Sian Phillips and Danny Sapani in *Les Blancs*.
Credit: Johan Persson

NT Live at Home has also provided another means of diversion with archival recorded performances from the National Theater. The latest production, a reworked version of Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs* from 2016 is especially relevant as the Black Lives Matter movement dominates the news. Hansberry achieved fame in 1959 with her brilliant *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first play by an African-American woman on Broadway. She had only one other work produced on the Main Stem in her tragically short lifetime—*The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, a comedy-drama about Greenwich Village intellectuals. *Les Blancs* was unfinished at the time of Hansberry's death at 34 from pancreatic cancer. Her ex-husband Robert Nemeroff adapted and completed the script, bringing it to a short-lived and ill-received Broadway run in 1970 starring James Earl Jones. The NT version was assembled by director Yael Farber along with Joi Gersham, Nemeroff's daughter and director of the Lorraine Hansberry Literary Trust, and dramaturge Drew Lichtenberg.

The play remains flawed with a talk-heavy script, underdeveloped characters and a melodramatic plot, but Farber's production is an electrifying spectacle, drawing on African music and customs, and brutally confronting Hansberry's thesis of European colonialism fostering misery and terrorism. A chorus of women provide starkly beautiful tribal music and the spectrally beautiful Sheila Atim as a ghostly embodiment of the beleaguered continent haunts the play like a vengeful wraith. Set in an unnamed African country occupied by British settlers, the play is a response to Jean Genet's *The Blacks*. Hansberry wanted to write a more realistic work than the French author's impressionist piece which saw its symbolic African characters through an exotic lens.

Hansberry's protagonist is the charismatic Tshembe Matoseh (a powerhouse Danny Sapani) who has returned to his native land for his father's funeral. The main setting is an impoverished hospital and mission (an evocative skeletal set by Soutra Gilmore) run by liberal whites whose well-meaning humanitarianism ultimately leads to further oppression of the people they seek to help. Tshembe's attempts to reconcile his European-influenced education with his African roots as well as the futile attempts of the many players to resolve the powder-keg situation form the plot.

Dany Sapani and Gary Beadle in *Les Blancs*.
Credit: Johan Persson

Hansberry's dialogue is eloquent and stimulating and just as relevant today as when it was written, but the many characters are more like talking perspectives rather than real individuals. Tshembe is the anguished African intellectual, not unlike Jospeh Asagai in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. His two brothers (a priest and a confused young man) represent different aspects of the African population's attitude to colonization while the white settlers, doctors and missionaries symbolize

European and American stances. There is a tantalizing view of Tshembe's younger biracial brother Eric, who may or may not be gay, but this part of his character is never developed (Hansberry herself was lesbian and *Sidney Brustein* had a gay male character.)

In addition to the intense Sapani, there is magnificent work from Sian Phillips as the compassionate but powerless missionary, Sidney Cole as a seemingly servile servant disguising his revolutionary ardor, and Clive Francis as the authoritarian military commander.

There is a harrowing parallel with our present moment when the authoritarian British major frankly states that one White life in worth more several Black ones and the other White characters more or less concur. That horrifying moment and many others in this visceral and gut-wrenching production illuminates the tragedy of Hansberry's short life. Her keen and compassionate intellect would have been the perfect voice to dissect our current clash of race, culture, and sexuality.

*An So We Come Forth: The Apple Family: A Dinner on Zoom*: Available on YouTube through Aug. 28.

*Les Blancs*: Available on NT Live at Home's YouTube channel until July 9.

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