

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Race Matters in Three Off-Broadway Productions

David Sheward · Wednesday, February 18th, 2015

Race matters, as Supreme Court Justice Sonya Sotomayor recently wrote. Some thought, with the election of a black president in 2008, all our prejudices would magically disappear and America would become a post-racial utopia. A trio of current Off-Broadway plays painfully and incisively documents the real state of relations between majority and minority groups in our polarized land and the world at large.

The most blatantly allegorical of the three is Chicago playwright Joel Drake Johnson's *Rasheeda Speaking*, presented by The New Group at the Signature Center. The seemingly placid reception area of a Windy City medical office becomes a battlefield of wills as the white surgeon Dr. Williams attempts to manipulate his easygoing Caucasian office manager Ilene into helping him get rid of her African-American co-worker Jaclyn. At first it seems as if the doctor is perfectly justified in wanting to terminate Jaclyn. She's difficult to work with, rude to patients and a hypochondriac, claiming the workplace is filled with toxins shooting out of her computer screen. But as we get to know the three combatants, our initial impressions are confounded. Ilene is not entirely the good-natured, friendly type she seemed and the poisonous fumes Jaclyn feared and we laughed about are actually the odors of subtle racism. Jaclyn is not an innocent victim, she is guilty of some of the charges leveled against her, but in a devastating monologue (which explains the title) about the new forms of prejudice she encounters on her daily bus ride, her case for fighting to keep her job is made abundantly clear.



Tonya Pinkins and Dianne Wiest in *Rasheeda Speaking*

Credit: Monique Carboni

Though Dr. Williams sets the action in motion, the fight is mainly between Jaclyn and Ilene. Johnson draws both characters with skill and detail, making them both symbols and flesh and blood. They come to blazing life in the powerhouse performances of multiple award-winners Tonya Pinkins and Dianne Wiest. Cynthia Nixon makes a smashing directorial debut, keeping the staging tight and fast.

Stephen Adly Guirgis' *Between Riverside and Crazy*, now at Second Stage after a previous run at the Atlantic Theater Company, is a lot messier than Johnson's tidy piece, but then so is reality. Unlike Johnson, Guirgis leaves plenty of loose ends as he did in previous vivid portraits of colorful New Yorkers who live on the edge such as *The Motherf***er with the Hat*, *Our Lady of 121st Street* and *Jesus Hopped the A Train*. Walter Washington, known to everyone as Pops or Dad, is

one of the author's most compelling creations. A retired African-American cop, Walter presides over a makeshift family in his rent-controlled Riverside Drive apartment (Kudos to Walt Spangler for designing the lived-in, revolving set.) He's alcoholic, demanding, selfish, and not above stretching the truth to get what he wants. But he's also kind and compassionate. Crises are piled one on top of another as the city pressures him to settle a lawsuit, his health is in jeopardy, he may be evicted, and his wayward son must face crucial life decisions.



The cast of *Between Riverside and Crazy*

Credit: Carol Rosegg

Riverside is sprawling, intense, funny and harrowing, directed with equal helpings of broad antics, sentiment, and sharp focused interaction between characters by Austin Pendleton. It deals with race but a lot more, specifically Walter's journey from self-imposed exile in his cushy apartment to coming to terms with his history. Veteran character actor Stephen McKinley Henderson, whose last major New York turn was a brief cameo in the Denzel Washington-starring revival of *A Raisin in the Sun*, is dazzlingly defiant as Walter. At once lovable and prickly, Henderson can turn from teddy bear to grizzly on a dime. It's an amazing lead performance in a journeyman career of fine supporting roles.

Though playwright David Greig and composer John Browne's *The Events*, now at New York Theater Workshop after a world tour, is set in Britain, it addresses many of the same issues raised by the two American plays considered here. Claire is a lesbian minister desperately trying to understand the senseless slaughter of members of her multicultural church choir by a racist gunman. This innovative staging by Ramin Gray employs a different local choir every night—The Village Light Opera Group was the group at the performance attended—and the play is enacted mostly by two actors, Neve McIntosh as Claire and Clifford Samuel as all the other characters including Claire's partner Katrina and the assassin. Greig offers no clear answers as to the assailant's motives but recreates the barrage of media images and ideas hitting Claire as she searches for reasons to an irrational act. "If he's mad, then I can blame nature," she declares. But there are no such easy solutions as Claire interviews politicians, journalists, and psychologists. The principal players along with the guest choir, accompanied by pianist Magnus Gilljam make a beautifully complicated symphony of conflicting emotions and ideas on our racially divided modern society as do the works of Johnson and Guirgis.

Rasheeda Speaking: Feb. 11—March 22. The New Group at the Pershing Square Signature Center, 416 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue.—Fri., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission; \$77-\$97. (212) 279-4200 or www.ticketcentral.org.

Between Riverside and Crazy: Feb. 11—March 22. Second Stage, 305 W. 43rd St., NYC. Tue., 7 p.m.; Wed.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours including intermission; \$64—\$125. (212) 246-4422 or www.2st.com.

The Events: Feb. 12—March 22. New York Theatre Workshop, Tue.—Sat., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission; \$75. (212) 279-4200 or www.ticketcentral.org.

This review previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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