

'Clybourne Park' is a must see

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.



The biting racial comedy runs at the Guthrie through Aug. 4

Is it just me or are we on the precipice of a racial explosion?

With the 2008 election of President Barack Hussein Obama, many Americans – particularly white Americans – felt we had moved into a post-racial era in this country. But more than a few African-Americans, though elated, were also fearful. I remember hearing several respected elders warn, "it's going to get worse." The "it" they spoke of was racism. I hate to say it, but I'm starting to think they were right.

Just look at recent events.

The U.S. Supreme Court peeled back one of the key provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and Texas officials couldn't move quick enough to begin its attempt kill the black and brown vote. And of course there's Trayvon Martin, who was murdered armed with nothing more than iced tea and Skittles, and his admitted killer was acquitted by a jury with no African-Americans on the panel.

Yeah, we're sitting on a racial powder keg.

So when I went to check out the Tony Award winning play, "Clybourne Park" – a biting comedy about race in America at the Guthrie Theater – I didn't think there was too much to laugh about. These are serious times – not the time to be joking about race.

Or is it *exactly the time* to be joking about race?

"Clybourne Park" doesn't pussyfoot around the issues of race. If there's an elephant in this room, this elephant isn't tiptoeing around, that's for sure.

Set against the backdrop of a home in a Chicago neighborhood, "Clybourne Park" is a two act play with the first act taking place in 1959, when the neighborhood was all white and the first African-American family was about to move in and the second act is set in modern day, when the neighborhood has flipped and is being gentrified. The once pristine home has become dilapidated and a seemingly liberal white couple is preparing to rehab the property and move in. "Clybourne Park" is billed as a satirical response to the iconic book, "Raisin in the Sun."

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"Clybourne Park" is not for the easily offended ... then again maybe that's who would benefit the most.

In this age of political correctness, true, meaningful discussions on race and prejudices are hard to come by. Most conversations on race get so bogged down in correctness and trying not to offend that they never make it to the point of trying to understand one another.

That's where this play excels.

"Clybourne Park" is so outrageously offensive that it disarms the audience and causes playgoers to confront their prejudices head on. For instance, what do white women and tampons have in common? What's long and hard on a Black man?

Yep, those are direct joke set-up lines from the play. I can't even write the punch lines – one because there are young kids who may read this review, and two; because of the state of African-Americans, the "Black man" punch line may be hitting a bit too below the belt. Trust me, with each punch line the oxygen left the room because of a collective gasp.

I tried not to laugh. I tried to be offended – especially at the Black man joke – but I doubled over in laughter ... not at the punch line, but at the *real* joke. It's the joke behind the joke that the writer of "Clybourne" wants audiences to get.

See, the joke behind the joke is that prejudices continue to exist because no matter how "diverse" we are in America, we're really as segregated as ever. Don't believe me, pick any church on Sunday and try and prove me wrong.

That's the joke behind the joke that "Clybourne Park" exposes. Through over-the-top, biting humor this marvelous piece of work left me feeling inspired and hopeful that with a little (maybe a lot of) direct dialogue; maybe, just maybe we as Americans can truly live together in harmony.

Just maybe.