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Face To Face With Race

By C.B. Wismere



Danique Ashley and Aaron Kaplan in "Race." Photo by Richard Pettibone

The title of the play is not nuanced.

David Mamet's "Race" which runs at TheatreWorks New Milford through March 16th and will be the premiere presentation of Lloyd Baroody's ShowTown venture at the Seifert Theater in Salisbury on March 22 and 23, is a gritty, engaging and intense exploration of the topic. Mamet made certain that theatre goers got the point when he stressed that the "theme is race and the lies we tell each other on the subject."

And, so it is.

Director Francis A. Daley, a stalwart of the TheatreWorks organization, has gathered four exceptional actors, given them license to let their emotions drive their character development and, by presenting the play without intermission, has the audience metaphorically strap in for a dizzying ride.

The subject matter may not be easy or comfortable. The language may be raw and jarring. The twists and turns of the plot may require 90 minutes of focused engagement, but the pay-off is well worth the investment.

Aaron Kaplan appears as Jack Lawson, grizzled, cynical and driven attorney who, with his two associates, has been enlisted to defend Charles Strickland, a wealthy scion of the community presented with mesmerizing effect by veteran film, stage and television actor Will Jeffries. Strickland has been accused of rape, already burned through another law firm and is vehement in his denial of the charges. The fact that his alleged victim is an African-American woman has prompted him to enlist the support of Lawson and his two associates, both African-American themselves.

Kevin Knight as attorney Henry Brown is explosive in his opening diatribe directed at Strickland. His delivery is nimble, cutting and almost brutal ... qualities that are matched line for line by Kaplan's portrayal of his partner. As Lawson and Brown try to dissect the case in rapid-fire dialog, there is never a lull in their conversation. They badger, belittle and berate their client with ease and great effect.

It is the fourth member of the cast, Danique Ashley who, as Susan, is tasked with the calling, digging and discovery of information from police sources and hotel witnesses – all accomplished off-stage – who moves from supporting character to antagonist with such ease that when she rises to deliver her condemnation of the firm, the client and the case, the audience is forced to untangle the intrigue and leave the theater challenging their own sense of what is correct ... what is appropriate ... what is the truth?

This is challenging theater, and the fact that it is being presented in two locations by the same excellent company eliminates the “it’s too far” excuse and makes it an accessible, bracing and engaging opportunity not to be missed.

Tickets for the TheatreWorks New Milford run, ending March 16th can be obtained online at theatreworks.us. Tickets for the ShowTown performances in Salisbury on March 22 and 23 are available at showtown.org.

As communication about “Race” clearly states, the subject is for mature audiences and the language used may be challenging for some.

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