

Race to New Milford's production of 'Race'

BY JOANNE GRECO ROCHMAN REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

ShowTown NOTE: There is an additional weekend run of this play in Salisbury, CT on March 22-23 being produced by ShowTown. See www.showtown.org for tickets.

Henry (a black lawyer): Do you know what you can say? To a black man. On the subject of race?

Charles (a rich white man accused of raping a black woman): "Nothing."

Henry: That is correct.

Playwright David Mamet wastes no time in throwing the New Milford Theatre audience (mostly white) into the middle of today's politically correct and racially charged American conflicts. Race is the main issue, but Mamet tosses in sex, gender, social standing, power, illegal immigrants, and wealth into the mix.

Charles has already been rejected by the best attorney in town Nicky Greenstein. Jack, Henry's white partner and founder of the law firm, claims that Greenstein is not stupid. "He's one smart Jew." Since he didn't take Charles' case, the lawyers question why they should. It would seem to be a losing cause.

Expect anything that is pertinent today to be a part of Mamet's profoundly provocative play – "Race". Susan, the smart new lawyer hired by Jack to join the company is a petite black woman. As the two partners debate on whether or not to take on Charles, they send Susan into the outer room to keep Charles busy. Because of what seems to be a simple mistake made by Susan, they suddenly and unhappily find themselves as the official attorneys for Charles.

As they begin to examine the evidence, a mystery unfolds that just might prove to win the case. However, all is not what it seems to be. Charles is so contrite. He wants to make a statement to the press. He convincingly claims to be innocent of rape and maintains that he loves the black woman with whom he has been having a relationship. The sex has always been consensual. Nonetheless, he feels guilty just because he is a white man.

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Playing hot shot attorney Jack Lawson, Aaron Kaplan is a perfect Mamet actor – full of fire and fury. He has performed in many of Mamet’s plays including “Speed the Plow,” “Glengary Glen Ross,” and “American Buffalo.” Kevin Knight playing Henry Brown makes his TheatreWorks debut. It is memorable because his performance is smooth, genuine, and confident. He also strikes a strong theatre presence.

Will Jeffries as Charles Strickland delivers quite an emotional performance. A retired professional actor with a long career on stage, television, and film, his characterization is quite believable. Danique Ashley as Susan is a theater major at Western Connecticut State University. Her stunningly understated performance will leave you dumbfounded and questioning everything you ever thought about race.

Director Francis A. Daley has put his finger on Mamet’s pulse and kept the talented cast pumping out curse words, split second decisions, and rough and ready action without skipping a beat. Daley’s sense of timing is exemplary here. Leif Smith’s set design is spot on as the inner sanctum of a lawyer’s office and Peter Petrino’s lighting design accents the stage handsomely.

Mamet’s language tends to be vulgar, so those theater goers who frown upon it be forewarned. I did miss the staccato Mamet talk that was part of the playwright’s unique style that made him so memorable, but this production is so powerful that it is almost impossible to leave the theater quickly. People stood in ovation, but then chatted with people around them discussing the volatility of

the play. Lines stating that all black people hate white people and that white folks are "scared" will haunt theatergoers long after their drive home. Mamet knows just what buttons to push to get the blood boiling whether you are white or black.

Jack (to client): Cultivate the appearance of contrition.

Charles: I didn't do anything.

Henry: You're white.

Charles: Is that a crime?

Henry: In this instance.

Joanne Greco Rochman is an active member in The American Theatre Critics

How Good: 5 Scale – 1-5 with 5 a rave