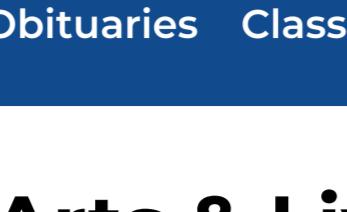


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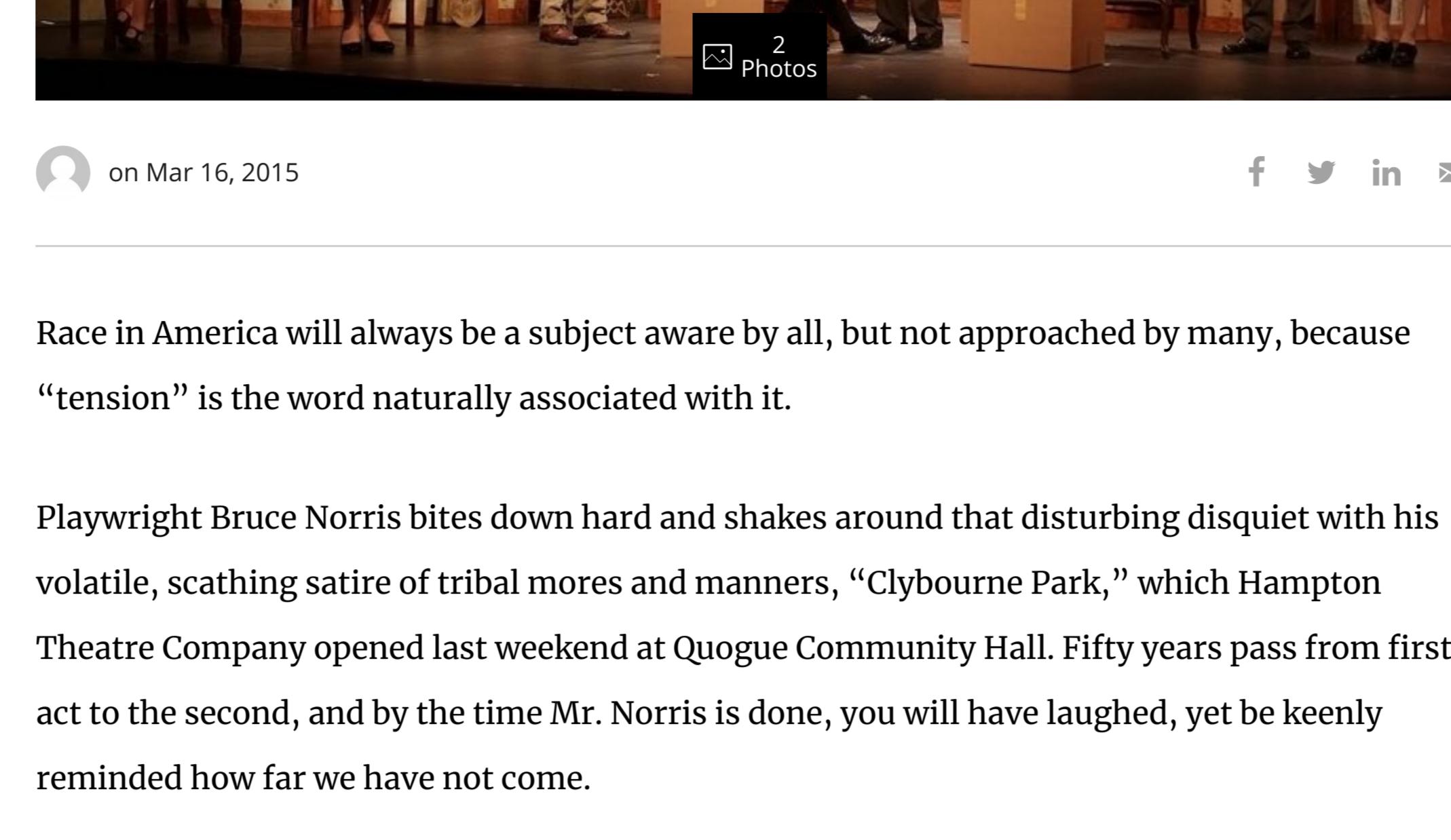
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Arts & Living

Scathing Satire 'Clybourne Park' Exposes Racial Fault Lines



on Mar 16, 2015

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Race in America will always be a subject aware by all, but not approached by many, because "tension" is the word naturally associated with it.

Playwright Bruce Norris bites down hard and shakes around that disturbing disquiet with his volatile, scathing satire of tribal mores and manners, "Clybourne Park," which Hampton Theatre Company opened last weekend at Quogue Community Hall. Fifty years pass from first act to the second, and by the time Mr. Norris is done, you will have laughed, yet be keenly reminded how far we have not come.

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At this moment in America, the play is more relevant than ever, as nightly the news has been of black men dying at the hands of white cops and, in one case, a neighborhood vigilante. A video of Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity members at the University of Oklahoma singing a racist chant is repeated over and over again. The Department of Justice revealed white cops and city officials in Ferguson, Missouri, sent each other jokey emails celebrating bigotry.

Against this backdrop, how do the racial fault lines exposed over housing—the subject of Mr. Norris's highly acclaimed satire—stack up?

Just fine, actually. Only when blacks and whites learn to know each other and live together will the prejudices and fears abate.

The play opens in 1959, somewhere in Chicago on Clybourne Park, where a middle-aged white couple, Russ (a superb Matthew Conlon) and Bev (Anette Michelle Sanders)—bickering, haunted, eager to move on—are packing up and moving from their longtime home, a set of beige evoking a comfortable, cozy residence. Their "colored" maid Francine (Juanita Frederick) is, as expect, subservient.

Then, a group of helpful friends barge in: Jim (Ben Schnickel), a diffident local minister; Albert (Shonn McCloud), Francine's unfailingly polite husband; and, most importantly, the animated Karl (Joe Pallister) and his deaf and very pregnant wife, Betsy (Rebecca Edana).

Things really come to life when Karl's actual mission becomes apparent. As a representative of the neighborhood association, he is there to stop the sale to a Negro family with three children. There goes the neighborhood!

In a white shirt and a short tie, Mr. Pallister is pretty damn perfect and convincing as that good man who only wants what's best for everyone, and that is a neighborhood that stays lily white.

Fast-forward 50 years. In the second act, Mr. Pallister is Steve. With his wife, Lindsey (also Ms. Edana), they are the hip white couple that wants to buy the same house from Act I, just to tear it down and build a new one that will be bigger.

They are at the same old place reviewing the renovation plans with lawyer-real estate types, portrayed by Ms. Sanders and Mr. Schnickel, and a black couple in the neighborhood, Ms. Frederick and Mr. McCloud again, who have concerns about the house being torn down and what kind of structure will replace it. In fact, what they are really concerned about is the gentrification of their solidly middle-class black neighborhood.

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The conversation starts out well enough, but soon all hell breaks loose as racist jokes and chants pile up like battery charges in a war of words. The play is funny, but that kind of uncomfortable funny that hits close to the bone. People talk, or yell, and interrupt each other while mostly trying to be "nice." Or at least what could pass as reasonable. Including any of the lines here would be offensive, and they wouldn't be amusing to any but a bedrock bigot.

The characters are caricatures, but that is why they work so well, embodying the learned phrases, evasions and prejudices of 50 years ago—and still today in what no one really thinks of as a post-racial world, no matter how pleasant the thought might be.

Was I reminded of the fear of "white flight" that gripped the suburbs of Detroit in the 1950s and 1960s when I lived there? Oh, yes. My hometown of Dearborn, Michigan, was a famously racist hot spot.

It was the only place north of the Mason-Dixon line George Wallace campaigned during his quixotic presidential bid. It was the site of the only Freedom March in the North, which I watched from the steps of City Hall, as both reporter and supporter. It was where the longtime mayor's campaign slogan was a racist double entendre: "Keep Dearborn Clean."

I left in 1964 and was not sorry to go.

Director Sarah Hunnewell chose well with this play, not an obvious one for the largely white audiences of the Hamptons, even though it won the major awards in the United States—a Pulitzer and a Tony—and England, where it picked up the Laurence Olivier Award, the British equivalent of a Tony. The ensemble cast did the material justice; everyone's excellent, bringing to life the concealed prejudices while—in the second act at least—trying to pretend they aren't there.

The 1950s clothes and décor by Teresa LeBrun and Diana Marbury evoke the mood and times, but what's that misplaced Gucci bag doing on the table? Bev would never have been able to afford it, and knock-offs weren't around yet. It may be the right vintage, but it's as noticeable as neon.

"Clybourne Park" was on Broadway the same time as "Race," the David Mamet play I saw; I made the wrong choice. Mr. Norris's satire will get under your skin, and stay there.

Ms. Hunnewell and the capable troupe, under her direction, amply made up for my mistake.

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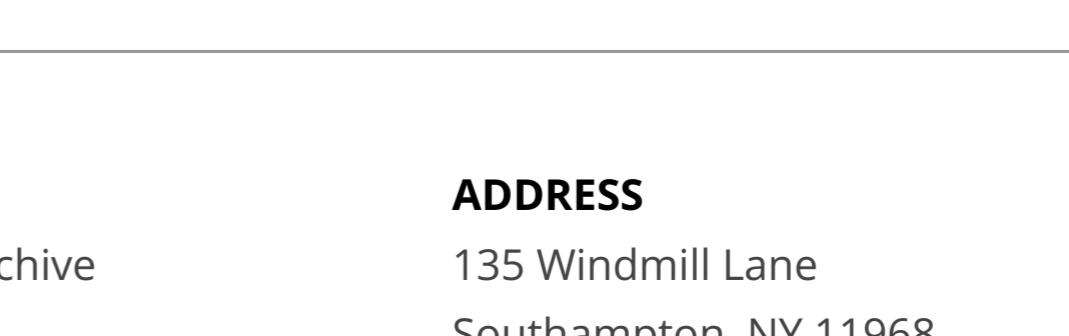
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