



## **REVIEW: Warehouse Theatre Delivers Again in Tantalizing ‘Clybourne Park’**

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Jaryl Draper, J. Richard Nash and Miranda Barnett co-star in “Clybourne Park.”

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**BY SANDY STAGGS  
DRAMA CRITIC**

For its 44<sup>th</sup> season opener, The Warehouse Theatre unleashes a timely and tantalizing work that transcends the issues of racism and community in a most clever, poignant and bountiful manner.

While not the first theatre in our area to present Bruce Norris’ Pulitzer and Tony-winning “Clybourne Park” – Hendersonville Community Theatre staged it last year – The Warehouse production is the first professional outing and is enhanced by this stellar cast and acutely-orchestrated direction.

Directly connected to Lorraine Hansberry’s “A Raisin in the Sun,” Norris brilliantly sets the action in 1959 as the current owners prepare to vacate their house in an all-white Chicago suburban neighborhood that Hansberry’s protagonists, the Youngers, are purchasing.

Clearly, something is precarious within the home that Russ (J. Richard Nash) and Bev (Miranda Barnett) are selling below market value. Russ languishes in his pajamas with a National Geographic magazine and a half-gallon of Bing Crosby Neapolitan ice cream, while the concerned Bev, a wondrously giddy and fine-tuned Barnett in her first post-maternity appearance since her triumphant turn in “Les Liaisons Dangereuses” last year, nervously opines on the derivation of “Neapolitan.”

This symbolic tri-color flavor and the subsequent rambling and seemingly innocuous discussion about world cities, the terms for their inhabitants and their sense of place, is no accident.

Nash and Barnett (clad in a “Leave It to Beaver”-era floral dress, apron and doo) handily achieve credible dynamics and the comfortable chemistry of a middle-aged couple that have been married for over two decades and grieving their only son’s death, which Norris unveils slowly over the first act beginning with a visit by their clergyman Jim (a humble, charming Jaryl Draper).

Rebuffing Jim’s attempts to counsel him, Nash embarks on an electric, clenched-fist performance that escalates further with the toxic mix of neighbor and fellow Rotarian Karl Lindner (Brock Koonce in terrific period thick-rimmed glasses), the same character in “A Raisin in the Sun” that tries to bribe the Youngers into abandoning their plans to buy this house, who drops by with his deaf and very pregnant wife Betsy (Jennifer Webb) to implore Russ to stop the sale.

And it’s Koonce’s powerful and bombastic intensity as a racist hothead that cements the play’s central thematic lineage in “Clybourne Park” – that a “colored” family moving in will be an affront to the quality of life in the neighborhood and, ultimately, diminish property values.

Koonce also delivers the one line that left the opening night audience aghast when he puts Francine (Malikah McHerrin-Cobb), the meek African-American housekeeper who tries stay out of and rise above the fray with her husband (Shea Stephens), in the hot seat. OUCH!

Flash-forward 50 years to 2009, Lady Gaga’s “Pokerface” and another outstanding Shannon Robert scenic design that shows the same house dilapidated and on the verge of being razed. This is all accomplished during the 20-minute intermission with a complex transformation reminiscent of “The Producers” and “Grey Gardens: The Musical.”

“Clybourne Park” is now an impoverished and marginalized African-American community that is being gentrified one house at a time. Whole Foods has supplanted the locally-owned market, white people are moving back in and property values are climbing.

With the same cast in different roles, Norris constructs many parallels to the first act here: an opening diatribe about geography and other cultures, familial threads to the previous characters and events, etc.

While Barnett (a sure-footed but bored lawyer), Draper (a gay lawyer) and Nash (a bumbling contractor) have a few comedic moments, this segment belongs to the other two couples in an all-out “God of Carnage” confrontation.

Koonce and Webb (who both return to the Warehouse stage after last season’s “All My Sons” which has comparable dramatic levity) are now a 21<sup>st</sup> century couple, Steve and Lindsey, who have bought the house with plans to tear it down and build an oversized structure, much to the chagrin of Kevin and Lena (Stephens and McHerrin-Cobb), who have ties to this home and represent the preservation housing board.

Koonce again plays the asshole and does so well, somehow managing to offend everyone in the room – including his pregnant wife – with his tasteless jokes and denigration of the neighborhood. And though in act one Webb mostly signs and “speaks” briefly in a manner ever-so-respectfully to the hearing-impaired community, she gets a chance to show off her acting chops in the latter half and practically has a full-blown nervous breakdown when confronted with Steve’s complete absence of empathy and learning of a disturbing incident that occurred in the house some five decades ago.

But the activist voice in this portion rises through the not-so-subtle McHerrin-Cobb, who patiently and adroitly hammers home the play’s message of the systematic marginalization of a community in favor of economic interests. And she is at her apex when her character handily shoots down Lindsey’s attempts at proving her political correctness in declarations such as “Half of my friends are black” and “I dated a black guy.”

The second act is not as tragic or emotionally-laden as the first, but the razor-sharp arguments ring loud and clear, particularly when the balance of power shifts to the African-American couple.

Director Jay Briggs, who was just named the head of Education at the Mill Town Players and helmed last season’s insane sci-fi comedy “Important Hats of the Twentieth Century,” handles the material with care and sensitivity, even in the portions of overlapping dialogue à la Robert Altman. And noticeably in the modern storyline, he maintains the opposing parties at a safe spatial distance, rarely allowing his actors to cross that line.

A mainstay of American theatre and a groundbreaking drama, “A Raisin in the Sun” was the first play written by a black woman to be produced on Broadway, as well as the first with a black director (Lloyd Richards). And it’s surprising that this powerful play is written by a Caucasian actor/playwright.

The “Clybourne Park” creative team also includes Stage Manager Louise M. Ochart, Lighting Designer Montana Kern, Costume Designer Kendra Johnson, Sound Designer David Sims, Technical Director Jonathan Bull, Props Master Shannon Rossi, Assistant Director Prentiss Standridge, Assistant Stage Manager Sims Hall, and Associate Scenic Designer Taylor C. Jensen.

*“Clybourne Park” continues Thursdays-Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m. through Oct. 8 at The Warehouse Theatre, 37 Augusta St. in Greenville. For tickets, call (864) 235-6948 or visit <http://www.WarehouseTheatre.com>.*