

# A Walk Through The Park

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## John Jeter's review of the WHT's production of *Clybourne Park*

Deconstruct Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park* all you want. Critics with brows higher than mine have drilled plenty into the script: "The first act conveys provocative fill-in-the-blank, and the not-as-good second act delves into even more profound fill-in-the-blank."

Sure, go ahead and dissect down to when the lamp almost breaks—because everything in our high-anxiety lives is almost broken. Or examine when the June Cleaver-housewife character tries to buy her African-American help's affection with a chafing dish—because we're all ineptly superior. Or scrutinize "the skiing Negroes" comment—because fill-in-the-blank.

Of course the [script](#) sizzles; you don't win a 2011 Pulitzer Prize and then a Tony Award for a second-rate comedy-satire-drama. Which leaves us to discuss [The Warehouse Theatre](#)'s brilliant handling of brilliant material.

In WHT's 44th season opener, the seven cast members work double-hard: each performs not one but two roles.

The first act takes place in 1959. Russ and Bev are moving out of their longtime home at 406 Clybourne St. in Chicago, which happens to be the same address of Lorraine Hansberry's seminal 1959 *A Raisin in the Sun*. It seems the address's white couple sold the home (inadvertently?) to—gasp!—a colored family.

Act II moves up 20 years, to Obama-era 2009, with the same actors in reversed roles. Steve and Lindsey, a white couple, are moving into the house, which now happens to be in a black neighborhood. They discuss gutting it, while a black couple looks on, none too thrilled with the planned overbuilding gentrification.

Along the way, we're treated to fine subplots, etc. etc., and plenty of zinging clichés, so let's focus instead on the acting: the Woody Allen-esque stammering; the Aaron Sorkin-fast crosstalk; the perfectly timed eye roll; body language that screams snark; the offensive defensiveness of the white man who, in 1959, is "only" protecting his family when he *screams!* about incoming Negroes destroying his neighborhood.

Brock Koonce works magic with Karl and Steve. A stalwart of the Greenville boards, Koonce own his first-act Karl, a black-rimmed-glasses, thin-tie, 1950s-era race-aholic who also happens to be Hansberry's Karl Lindner. In Act II, Koonce deftly handles Steve, who also over-talks himself into squirmy, if hysterical, social injustice. While critics and fans find Karl/Steve color-obsessed douchebags, Koonce somehow makes them ... sympathetic characters. In Act I, Karl simply reflects a pre-Civil Rights white man we would prefer to forget. In Act II, Steve's an urban white guy we'd prefer not to know. Koonce skillfully shows us that Karl/Steve was/is, at times, *us*.

Another standout is the stunning Jennifer Webb. In her WHT debut, she's Betsy and Lindsey. In Act I, Betsy is pregnant and deaf, and Webb's convincing hearing-challenged person who can still talk somehow provides a light touch amid the devastating satire. In Act II, her Lindsey, who isn't deaf but is pregnant, is a formidable big-city professional. Webb's heavy-lifting in roles that could be dismissed as lightweight shows that she's working hard to make tough situations look effortless. That's the essence of talent.

The same holds for the two African-American players. While Malikah McHerrin-Cobb and Shea Stephens display terrific acting chops, Norris gives their characters the fewest lines.

Which brings to mind something I'll bet Norris never considered: White people rage at each other about black people all the time, sometimes to fatal effect. For example, The Civil War cost 650,000 lives, the vast majority of them white. Last August, a white supremacist ran over and killed a white counter-protester in Charlottesville. Apparently, black lives *do* matter because white people are willing to slaughter each other over them.

Here, McHerrin-Cobb and Stephens, in a just-right simmer, watch their castmates eviscerate each other. In Act I, each actor beautifully portrays the caught-in-the-middle Youngers, Francine, the help, and her hardworking husband, Albert, who are also from Hansberry's *Raisin*. In Act II, they each deliver a just-right turn responding—because that's pretty much all they can do—to their counterparts' increasingly muddled political correctness and over-earnest, "I have black friends, too" defensiveness.

Then, you have the house itself, the main character, in fact.

During a 20-minute intermission, stagehands flip WHT veteran scenic designer Shannon Roberts' brilliant *All in the Family*-detailed '50s-era house into a gutted, contemporary victim of gentrifying hubris. Her outstanding set performs at the same depth the characters do, requiring our attention to every element.

In its totality, the Warehouse experience is immersive, incisive, and crucial for anyone who cares about today's America. Even if you're not into theater, take a night to turn off your phone and spend a couple of hours laughing at just how ignorantly messed up we are when it comes to how perniciously shallow we are.

Oh, and you get to watch other people—immensely talented artists—do it for us.

***John Jeter for fête magazine***

*Clybourne Park* runs through Oct. 8. For tickets and information, visit: <http://warehousetheatre.com/clybourne-park/>, call now at 864.235.6948 or [info@warehousetheatre.com](mailto:info@warehousetheatre.com).

Header photo by Andrea Johnson.