



## The Symmetry of the Theme

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Photo: Matthew Franklin Carter

**“No one goes to see a play to be preached at about social ills. We go because we want to see human stories and relationships, and recognize ourselves and our communities in them. I think this is one of the things that *Clybourne Park* does so well.” – Jay Briggs, Director**

Take a kid and let him grow up in Hendersonville, North Carolina. When his mind is ripe for moulding, you send him to the Flat Rock Playhouse and let the late, great YouTheatre Program begin his journey as an actor.

When his mind becomes as bright as his auburn hair, you ship him off to Elon University and let more theatrical seasoning permeate. From there, the cities of New York, Louisville, Seattle, Roanoke, and Los Angeles all get their shots in on him. The actor grows into a director. He earns a degree in theology. He marries. He has a child. Her hair is as bright as his and by first accounts, her mind, too. He does what an artist does to make a living. He works jobs...a ton of them...traveling across states to direct, teach, and sculpt minds.

And despite the journey and the exposure to this vast land, he settles back down in a city just a stone’s throw away from those hopeful days in Hendersonville. Maybe it has something to do with that little girl. Maybe it has something to do with a calling.

If you find Jay Briggs sitting in a theatre, you could turn off the lights on him and his auburn hair will no longer shine. That’s true. But there’s one thing that seems impossible to turn off...his brain. Any time that you are in his presence, you better be ready for thoughtful conversation. The kind of conversation that’s populated generations of front porches in the South as well as corner coffee shops in New York City. Conversations that dive equally deep whether the subject matter is his latest play, that morning’s podcast, or the killer double-play turned in last night’s ball game.

It takes a special kind of person to be able to ask meaningful questions, listen thoughtfully, and then turn around and use that new information to inform art...personal beliefs...daily work. A lot of people claim that they have the mind and ear for it, but the majority of us come up far short. Jay Briggs has that rare talent and it is this trait that has allowed him to enrich theaters from his hometown of Hendersonville all the way to the West Coast and back.

His impact on the theatre community of Greenville alone is significant. Consider that he's served as a teaching artist at The Warehouse Theatre and at the South Carolina Children's Theatre. He's been the Interim Director of Education at The Warehouse and is just beginning his tenure as Director of Education at Mill Town Players. He's directed in both those venues as well.

When The Warehouse Theatre decided to produce *Clybourne Park* in its 44th season, the theatre knew it would need someone who could balance both the humor and the serious nature of the plot. It needed a director who understood where Greenville was in the moment, but also how other cities like Los Angeles and Louisville breathe. It needed someone who had a genuine interest to tell a funny story, but also to be honest in its telling.

Jay Briggs was the obvious pick for Producing Artistic Director Mike Sablone. His answer to this question proves why. Jay Briggs was asked the following: This show being satire, often described as squirm-inducing in the summary of the play, really hits on two important but often difficult subjects...gentrification and race. How did you make sure during the rehearsal process to keep the intended comedy front and center?

Briggs' answer?

"This is a great question because it's one I've often had to ask myself during the course of our rehearsal process. You can ask Mike, but after he saw our first run through I asked him specifically if the first act was still funny. He reassured me that it was! The challenging thing about directing any comedy is that at a certain point it can become a bit technical. The jokes, bits, and line deliveries that were funny to you the first ten times you experienced them no longer catch you by surprise. So, much of it is finding a balance between keeping the material fresh for the actors and trusting your instincts that just because it no longer induces a belly laugh for you that doesn't mean it isn't funny. All of that is true of any comedy I might work on."

Briggs shuffles in his seat and continues his thought, "That said, *Clybourne Park* presents special kinds of challenges. It deals with weighty material...race, gentrification, suicide, marital strife. It could be easy to get bogged down in that stuff instead of shedding light on it through laughter, as the play intends to do. So, there are several things that we've done to combat that. First and foremost, we cast the show well. We've assembled a stellar cast of individuals who both appreciate the importance of the content of the play, but also instinctively bring comic perspective to the material. It's a blessing to be working with actors who can find the comic potential in dialogue, and bring to life things written between the lines, so to speak, in a comic way."

"Additionally, we've challenged ourselves to trust the text. Though I wouldn't say the show is full of jokes, per se, the situations it places its characters in are just inherently funny if we play them honestly. I think that word, honesty, has been key to our process. I told the actors at the first rehearsal that this isn't a play that can be executed with a wink and a nod to the audience. It isn't ironically self-aware. It's deadly serious, the stakes for all the characters are high. We aren't really laughing WITH the actors, we are laughing AT the characters. And, hopefully, if we've done the show well, we realize that we are laughing at them because that's safer than addressing what we see of ourselves in them. And then we are forced to deal with that."

When asked if there was a section of the script that proved to be a pivotal moment in the direction of the show, Briggs gives a slight pause. "Man, it's really hard to pick just one here. I think one of the things that I've loved about working on this show is that it really is a bit of a bottomless well. I think that every night we discover something new that helps us deepen our approach to these characters, their relationships, and the story as a whole. As sort of a general note, over the past week we've been dealing quite a bit with the contrast between the private and public moments that are written into the dialogue. We've sort of discovered that dynamic as an additional theme in the play. I think the anchoring theme is about change and how humans deal with it. But, there's also this connected current running through it about how we discuss things or behave in public versus how we do it in private."

Never one to dodge a question, he elaborates on a moment of recent discovery in the work.



“So, in Act One there is this running conflict between Bev and Russ where Bev wants Russ to open up about the demons he is trying to keep at bay, and Russ resents Bev’s open-lipped approach to their personal problems. The irony of the act is that it’s only when the heat really gets put on Russ that he ends up allowing his private self to unfold in an uncomfortably public setting. A similar thing takes place for Lindsey and Steve in Act Two. So, finding the symmetry of that theme in the both acts has really deepened our work in rehearsal of late.”

Briggs gets asked, “What about the often overlooked marital tensions that exist in the show?” As usual, he delivers a straight-forward, honest answer.

“This is absolutely an important aspect of the conflict in the show. I think the issues of segregation and gentrification get a bit more press because they are hot button social issues. But, I think part of the show’s brilliance is that it manages to address a lot of things beyond those social issues. This play is as much a domestic dramady as it is a piece of social criticism. So, yes, we have definitely discussed

those issues quite a bit in rehearsal. The beauty of the ensemble nature of the play is that it creates this web of relationships between the characters in each act. And significant threads in each of those webs are the ones that run between the partners. Ultimately, I don’t think you can do this play without spending a lot of time on those relationships. In both acts much of the social criticism emerges from the interactions between the married characters. For instance in Act One, the selling of the house is a product of Russ and Bev trying to put a bandaid on a marriage that is failing in large part due to their inability to truly reconcile a great tragedy that has occurred in their life. In many ways, we could view the selling of the house storyline as a subplot to the major arc of the act which is about whether Bev and Russ can piece their lives back together.”

“I think for the audience, whether the context is comic...as it is in much of the Act Two interactions between the couples...or more tragic, the marital relationships are what make the play accessible. No one goes to see a play to be preached at about social ills. We go because we want to see human stories and relationships, and recognize ourselves and our communities in them. I think this is one of the things that *Clybourne Park* does so well.”

Jay Briggs’ direction of *Clybourne Park* debuts September 22nd and runs until October 8th. His directing venture into the land of *A Tuna Christmas* with the Mill Town Players opens December 1st.