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Theatre Review



Inside Racial Prejudice, Both Blatant and Subtle

The country has finally elected a black president yet remains a very long way from resolving its issues about prejudice, as “White

THEATER REVIEW

ANDY
WEBSTER

People,” by the playwright J. T. Rogers, demonstrates. Mr. Rogers tries to impart insights into the mindset of the diminishing national majority, and though he falls short of his ambitions, he makes an impact.

The three characters, all white, alternate in sharing histories. Alan (Michael Shulman), a Manhattan professor, admires the determination of New York’s Dutch colonizers even as he acknowledges their persecution of Jews and Quakers. At the same time, he is exhilarated, almost smitten, by Felicia, a black student. But when he and his pregnant wife are mugged by black teenagers, he confronts his own intolerance.

Mara Lynn (Rebecca Brooksher), a mother in Fayetteville, N.C., wrestles with memories of her cheerleader past; the faded athletic glories of her husband, Earl, now a delivery-truck driver; and the struggles of her young, epileptic son. Frustrated, she vents her wrath on an Indian physician.

Martin (John Dossett) is a

“White People” continues through Feb. 22 at the Atlantic Stage 2, 330 West 16th Street, Chelsea; (212) 279-4200, ticketcentral.com.

White People

Atlantic Stage 2

driven St. Louis lawyer who married for his wife’s blue-blood genes and bemoans what he sees as the decline of the English language and popular music. His disdain for his black secretary — and black culture in general — is pronounced, and yet he is dumbfounded when his son becomes a violent skinhead.

The play succeeds best in displaying how people can unwittingly exhibit bigotry even when they mean well. The actors, directed by Gus Reyes, are impressive, especially Ms. Brooksher, whose anger conceals a fragile helplessness.

With his hard-nosed potshots, Mr. Dossett earns big (and uncomfortable) laughs. Mr. Shulman — all earnest, agonized self-questioning — has the last word. In perfect tandem with the performers are Elizabeth Rhodes’s gently artful sound design and Les Dickert’s evocative lighting.

The production has its seams. Do we need another good ol’ boy named Earl? Mr. Dossett’s Martin hails from Brooklyn but lacks an accent. The climaxes feel strained. And the play’s provocations, at their worst, stem from a disquieting, almost overweening sympathy for the characters. Fortunately, when prejudice boils over, hope prevails. But barely.