

# DAILY NEWS

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## 'White': Picture of color bias in broad brush strokes

Playwrights have forever been fascinated by racial divides, and that topic takes on added resonance with Barack Obama in the White House.

Last week, Young Jean Lee's "The Shipment," a whip-smart and provocative addition to the American dialogue on race and identity, wrapped its run at The Kitchen.

Now J. T. Rogers' 2000 play "White People," presented by Starry Night Entertainment in its New York premiere, continues the conversation.

The observant but heavy-handed play exposes the three title not-quite-everyday characters' intense — and un-PC — feelings about people of color.

Alan Harris (Michael Shulman) is a mild-mannered Manhattan history professor who hates that his brightest student, a black girl, pops her gum and uses street slang. His feelings are aggravated because he and his pregnant wife were attacked by black thugs.

Martin Bahmueller (John Dossett) is a high-flying St. Louis lawyer who declares that people must dress and speak properly to succeed — no droopy drawers, gold teeth or Ebonics for this straight arrow. Lo and behold, his teenage son gets arrested for his part in a gang assault on a black girl.

And Mara Lynn Doddson (Rebecca Brooksher) is a working-class, Fayetteville, N.C., ex-homecoming queen who resents everyone

— her brain-damaged son's East Indian doctor, an Asian woman her husband cheated on her with and a black girl from high school who's surpassed her on the road to happiness.

Three people from different places. But in a savvy stroke, the author puts similar phrases and words in their mouths, creating a mutual bond. Everyone everywhere would be revealed as racist if they bared their souls.

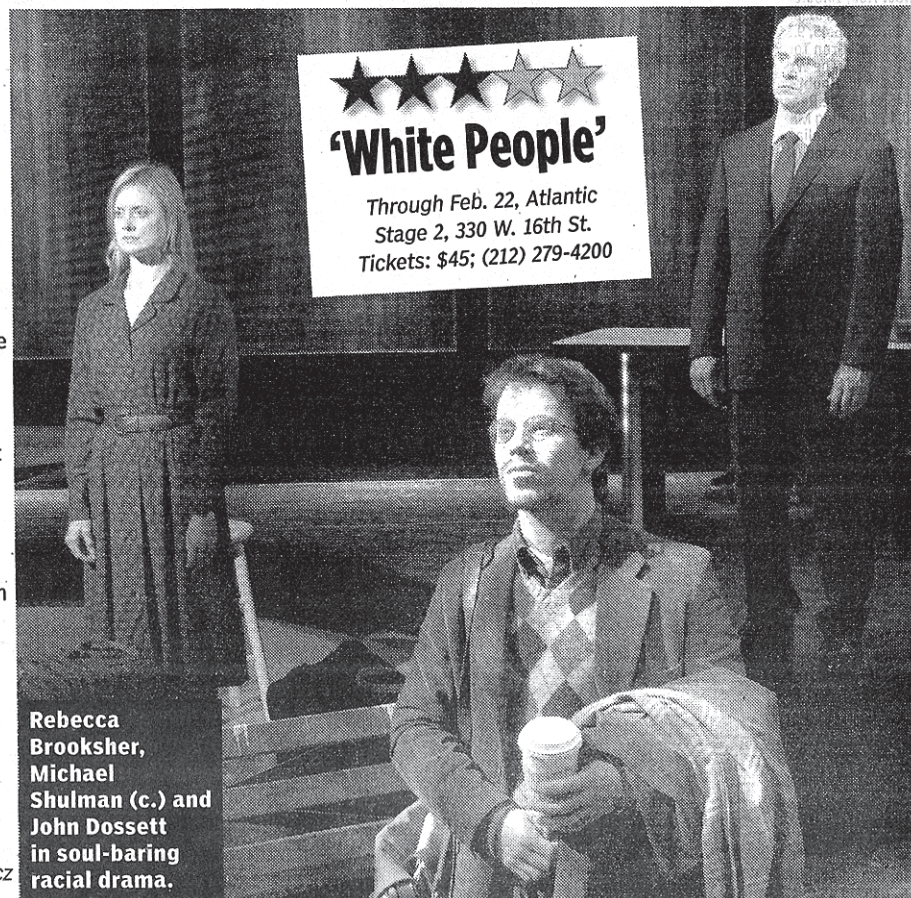
The trio takes turns baring exactly that in monologues spoken directly to the audience. This device cuts two ways. It's an instant bridge — providing a sort of "we're in this together" intimacy. But it also gets didactic — as if they're talking at us. To Rogers' credit as well as director Gus Reyes', the bulk of the play isn't preachy.

The cast give vivid performances, but the characters' situations are so fraught that the play's impact is blunted by overstatement. Rogers' play "The Overwhelming" suffered from similar overkill.

The Brooklyn playwright gets credit for taking on a don't-go-there subject in his play, whose setting is indicated in the program as "Now. Sunday."

As the intense Bahmueller notes, "It's a brand-new day, we've all turned the page. So why is it we still can't talk about this?"

It's a valid question, but the play doesn't offer a satisfying answer. *Joe Dziemianowicz*



Rebecca Brooksher, Michael Shulman (c.) and John Dossett in soul-baring racial drama.