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Clybourne Park *** 1/2 out of ****
Walter Kerr Theatre

The Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Clybourne Park* has just moved to Broadway and its new neighbors are not happy about it. Can you blame them? Surely, *Venus In Furs*, *One Man, Two Guvnors*, and *Other Desert Cities* -

- to name a few -- can't be happy that a show as razor-sharp, funny, and insightful as Bruce Norris's work took two years to make it to Broadway, just in time to spoil their Tony fun. If only *Tribes* and *Sons Of The Prophet* had jumped to Broadway as well, this would have been an historic year with one of the best lineups of new plays in history. As it is, *Clybourne Park* will be battling those shows and the acting catnip of *Peter And The Starcatcher* for all the top awards.

The story smartly uses the classic drama *A Raisin In The Sun* to tackle the enduring topic of race. The first act is set in 1959, when a husband and wife are packing up to move to the suburbs from Chicago. Pain simmers under the surface and the arrival of an affable priest finally unearths the fact that their war veteran son committed suicide in that same home. But the play really explodes when a neighbor arrives to reveal that the buyers of their home are black and what are they going to do about this? Act Two jumps 50 years into the future when a white couple is moving back into this now run-down home, brandishing plans for a McMansion on the tiny lot that will dwarf the other properties, thus raising the ire of their new neighbors.

Playwright Bruce Norris has been nurtured by the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago for more than a decade, with seven productions of his shows. Surely they can't all be this good, but since *Clybourne Park* is the first show of his I've seen, I'm eager to find out. The play comments on and illuminates all sorts of issues: race, class, gentrification, community, political correctness, and the decline and rebirth of cities, to name just a few. But these aren't hot buttons pressed for effect; they are deeply embedded in the characters and story. Still, I walked out of the show not discussing race but marveling over the subtleties and structure of the play itself. The home at *Clybourne Park* has seen better days, but Norris's play is as solidly constructed as they come. Lines from act one echo in act two, themes and ideas are deepened or turned on their head, characters are true to themselves but constantly surprising and it's all very, very funny in the intellectually stimulating way only the most daring of dramas can be.

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Frank Wood (*Sideman, Angels In America*) does some of his best, most understated work I've seen from him as Russ, the father crushed by his son's suicide. Like all the characters, he is a rich and complicated person. When a neighbor pressures him to renege on his agreement to sell, Frank resists, but not out of some noble sentiment over what's right. He just doesn't give a damn anymore about the people who treated his son like a leper after the young man was tarred with horrific war crimes. But he's equally adamant about forcing his wife Bev (Christina Kirk) to face the fact that their boy really did commit the atrocities he was charged with by the military. "He confessed!" Russ barks at her in a desperate attempt to shatter her fragile denial. Wood's insistence on not letting his neighbor Karl (Jeremy Shamos) say another word on the topic of the Negro family moving in (he simply repeats the word "no" over and over before the guy can get more than a word or two out) is just one of many comic highlights.

Shamos is a marvel as that seemingly reasonable neighbor, the one character that also appears in *A Raisin In The Sun*, where he tries to buy off the Youngers from moving into the all-white neighborhood. In the 2009 act, Shamos is the male half of the couple moving in that finds himself in a racist joke-off with Kevin (a superb Damon Gupton) when he begins to tell a joke about a white man going to prison and sharing a cell with a much larger black man. As Steve, Shamos insists the joke isn't racist, sparking an hilarious and pointed exchange that draws as many oohs of "you shouldn't have said that" as outright chuckles, which might be at his predicament or the other characters' reactions or -- who knows? -- at the jokes themselves.

Indeed, every cast member shines thanks to the dual roles they get to play in each act. Annie Parisse is very good as the deaf wife of the weasel of a neighbor Karl as well as the pregnant wife moving into the new home in 2009. In one of Norris's many smart gambits, we see how society has changed in how we talk about and deal with the deaf. But as anyone who has seen the tremendous play *Tribes* is aware, that's a far cry from being fully accepting and comfortable with it. Time and again, Norris demonstrates how the words we use may change but the fault lines of race and gender and (dis)ability remain. In the first act, only one character curses and it seems shocking to the rest, like tossing a stink bomb into church. In the second act, virtually everyone casually curses with abandon at the odd moment and no one blinks twice. Racial identity may have changed from colored to Negro to African American to black, but racist jokes that play on stereotypes endure.

Brendan Griffin has perhaps the least interesting part as the priest in act one and a lawyer in act two, but he captures the diffidence of a man of the cloth caught up in personal turmoil he's unequipped and perhaps uninterested in dealing with. Having his very different character in act two be gay is yet another subtle touch about the changing times. (In the 1950s a gay man might have found refuge in becoming a priest rather than risking arrest and societal shame, of course.) I went back and forth on Christina Kirk's work in act one. She's hilariously droll as a lawyer for the couple moving in during act two, always one-upping the other characters on any topic at hand. But Bev in the first act is more sitcom-y surface than the brittle way she was presented in the London production. (One of the many strengths of the play is that it's clear new productions can bring out different facets of the work.) She's obviously hiding deep emotions that -- like the priest -- she's wholly incapable of dealing with. It's very funny work that at times won me over and other times might have been dialed back just a tad. But I loved how she let Bev stumble across easy but true sentiments that everyone else thoroughly ignored.

Crystal A Dickinson as the maid Francine in act one and Lena, the neighbor unhappy with plans for a McMansion on their block in act two gets the most satisfying spin. Dickinson indulges in a little eye-rolling over Bev's silliness and tiresome directions in the first part, an unlikely and dangerous tic for a maid. But that's the only misstep in an otherwise marvelous display of controlled fury as she struggles to maintain her composure and dignity (and job) while dealing with a constant stream of insulting



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assumptions, indifference (Bev can't even remember how many children Francine has), and faux friendship. (Watching her stiffen ever so slightly when Bev hugs her is marvelous.) When the men corner this maid and ask her opinion about what it would be like to move into this white neighborhood, watching Francine carefully choose her words as she tries to circumspectly say what they want to hear, avoid anything controversial, wiggle out of the entire predicament and yet not say something so toadying that she'll be ashamed of herself is yet another bravura moment for this show.

She is matched note for note by Damon Gupton, an actor (and orchestra conductor) I was mostly unfamiliar with. As often happens, the flashier parts like that of Shamos will probably get the most awards attention. But Gupton's subtle work as the husband of both the maid Francine and the unhappy neighbor Lena (who refers to that same job as being a domestic) is as good as anyone on stage. He gives Albert just the right note of being his own man, ready to help the white folks carry a heavy foot locker down the stairs even though he knows his wife objects and just wants to leave. Their prickly relationship is sketched in vivid, quick banter. Albert doesn't "yes'm" to the white people so much as be as polite as he would to anyone else. He quietly tries to edge out the door when the white folk begin to bicker but conveys the feeling that this is not a black man knowing his place but a black man comfortable with who he is but aware of the time he lives in.

Bev repeatedly tries to foist on Albert an ungainly chafing dish that she no longer wants and when Albert finally stops her with a firm but commanding no, it's as powerful as any moment in the show. "We don't want your stuff," Albert says and to Bev his refusal is shocking and confusing and somehow...well, she can't quite voice it but she senses it is telling of something deeper. This lost soul knows she's stepped on a land mine but has no idea why or how or what to do next. Both Dickinson and Gupton relish the freedom their characters enjoy in the second act without ever trying to soften the complex people these individuals are. Dickinson clearly lets Lena savor the one racist joke she lobs at the end of that furious exchange in act two. And Gupton makes the most of one of the funniest entrances a character might have.

It's a true ensemble matched in every particular by the seamless, marvelous work of director Pam MacKinnon that knows serious subjects do not have to come at the expense of entertainment. The sets by Daniel Ostling are especially wonderful in capturing the passage of time, joined neatly by the perfect costumes of Ilona Somogyi and the subtle lighting of Allen Lee Hughes. The sound design of John Gromada is appropriately invisible.

The marvel here is that I can imagine both different productions of the play (some more somber and scathing) and better ones. Perhaps the best production would mine further the pain of that son's death. The show ends with the young man in his military uniform, writing what we know to be a suicide note, which another character 50 years in the future is simultaneously reading. It's not a bad ending and had a certain resonance, but it wasn't wholly intertwined into what came before. That's a minor cavil about an excellent production of a great play. Every new home can use a little work but clearly the neighborhood just went up in value.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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