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Theater Review

Next Act's 'Twilight' a powerful exploration of race in America



Ross Zentner
Marti Gobel portrays multiple characters in Next Act's "Twilight."

By Mike Fischer, Special to the Journal Sentinel

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Ross Zentner
Rammel Chan portrays multiple characters in Next Act's "Twilight."

One of the best conversations on race that I've ever heard — anywhere — is unfolding right now at **Next Act Theatre**. It's a piece that anyone who cares about the future of Milwaukee should see.

As its title suggests, Anna Deavere Smith's "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992" revolves around the brutal beating of Rodney King, as well as the mayhem that ensued after the police officers responsible were initially acquitted.

And yes: That means that before this 150-minute journey (including intermission) has run its course, you'll relive the still-shocking video in which the police flail at King, while also watching white truck driver Reginald Denny pulled from the cab of his truck and beaten within an inch of his life.

But what makes "Twilight" unforgettable is the range covered by its 37 voices, embodied by six magnificent, utterly fearless actors under the direction of David Cecesarini and Jonathan Smoots.

Those actors channel the actual words of the characters they play, as transcribed by Smith from the hundreds of interviews she did in the immediate aftermath of these events. Before the night is through, we'll visit with characters ranging from one of the cops put on trial and one of the white jurors who acquitted him to King's aunt and one of the angry young men who beat Denny.

Still more impressive than this wide spectrum of voices is the range demonstrated by this multiracial cast of four men and two women, who frequently inhabit characters of different races and genders than they themselves are — movingly negotiating racial and gender boundaries in ways their characters can't always do.

Some illustrative examples:

The many roles inhabited by Marti Gobel not only include eloquent onetime Black Panther leader Elaine Brown, but a broken Korean man who'd been shot during the rioting, a vapid white socialite and an expansive onetime president of the L.A. Police Commission.

Ryan Schabach's many roles include both Denny and one of his black attackers. Angela Iannone's roles include a black diva, a hard-charging black lawyer, a poor Latino looter and a Latina witness to the King beating.

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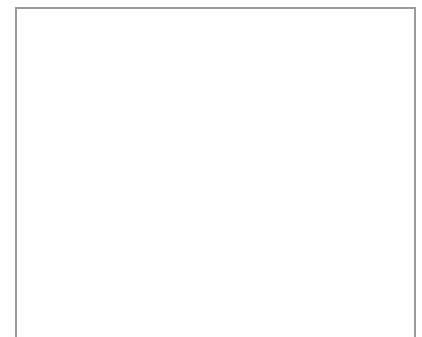
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In the program, Gobel, Schabach and Iannone are identified generically by race and gender as, respectively, "African-American woman," "white man" and "white woman." Ditto the remaining three cast members: Rammel Chan (Asian man), Andrew Muwonge (African-American man) and Andrew Perez (Latino man).

Such markers are, after all, integral to who they — and we — are. But even as it relives one of our darkest hours, "Twilight" dares to suggest that we might also be still more, if we'd but dare to dream ourselves into others' lives. Don't miss this courageous, game-changing opportunity to do so.

IF YOU GO

"Twilight" continues through Feb. 21 at Next Act Theatre, 255 S. Water St. For tickets, visit nextact.org. Read more about this production at TapMilwaukee.com.

TAKEAWAYS

Transcending Boundaries: In her introduction to the book version of "Twilight," which includes transcripts of conversations that aren't part of the play (as well as additional transcribed material from some of the characters who do appear in the play), Smith notes that "few people speak a language about race that is not their own. If more of us could actually speak from another point of view, like speaking another language, we could accelerate the flow of ideas." "After all," Smith says later, "identity is in some ways a process toward character. It is not character itself. It is not fixed. Our race dialogue desperately needs this more complex language."

When Smith has performed this piece, she has inhabited every role herself; it's reputedly a tour-de-force. But I can't imagine better honoring her inspiring words, here, than Cecsarini and Smoots have done in drawing on six actors, each of whom continually practices what Smith promises as they play characters of different genders and races.

In less accomplished and dedicated hands, this approach might seem gimmicky. Not here, where there's scrupulous and respectful attention given to everything from accents (no dialect coach is credited, so I can only assume that the work here involves a collaboration between directors and ensemble) to clothing (costume designer Elsa Hiltner does a bang-up job, dressing characters in ways that never command undue attention while nevertheless clearly marking who they are; the word that comes to mind is "integrity," of the highest order).

A New Conversation: As Smith rightly says, we'd have much better conversations if we'd all learn some new languages. As "Twilight" draws toward its close, we get a sense of what this means; characters who had spoken to us individually began dialoguing across their distance from one other.

There's a particularly good exchange between Gobel's Elaine Brown and Muwonge's charismatic Paul Parker — black chair of the committee to free Reginald Denny's assailants — about how to best effect change. It's smart and it's also funny (Gobel often is, in her various roles) — reminding us, as this piece continually does, that one of the things missing from our conversation about race is humor.

I'm not referring to stupid and demeaning racist jokes, but rather to our ability to laugh together at ourselves and our shortcomings, as we'll better be able to do if we learn to trust each other enough to be honest about what we don't know and understand, regarding what remains the single most important — and least discussed — topic in America. Our discussions about race are often uptight, dishonest and stiffly correct. "Twilight" consistently gives us something that's messier, harder and ever so much better. **It made me want to stay and talk into the night with cast and audience about what we'd just experienced together.**

The Voices We Don't Hear: As I've suggested above, part of what makes Smith's piece so special is how many voices it gathers and how many perspectives they represent; as a journalist, I also appreciate her obvious talent as an interviewer, resulting in frank admissions of prejudice and of struggles to overcome it. And given that what happened in L.A. is often wrongly cast in black-and-white terms, it's particularly noteworthy that we hear from numerous Korean and Latino characters (Chan's late turn as a onetime Korean grocer and **Perez's work as a Latino artist both stand out**, because of how honest and conflicted these characters are regarding their own prejudice)

For all that, there's one group that's absent from "Twilight": the undocumented immigrants who, in the aftermath of the 1992 rioting, were targeted by the Los Angeles Police Department. The LAPD notoriously violated longstanding policy by cooperating with the Immigration and Naturalization Service to arrest and turn over illegal immigrants suspected of riot-related crimes — even though this would mean their probable deportation. It's little wonder that even Smith couldn't reach or include such voices; those who might otherwise have been willing to speak with her had far more to lose.

The Principle of Hope: Just as this all-encompassing piece includes humor, so too does it make room for hope. **One of the night's best stories is told by Perez, as a pregnant Latina cashier who is shot during the riots; during the ensuing ordeal, she recalls that what kept her calm is being able to hear her baby's heartbeat. In a world of violence and death, she affirms the value of life; while regaling us with a story that has to be seen and heard to be believed.**

I feel that way about many of this evening's vignettes, during which people who have every reason to hate nevertheless find a way to love. One of them — I'll let you discover who for yourself — envisions owning a house someday that will include a "happy room," honoring all the good things he experienced and learned from what he endured.

Make no mistake. This can be a tough play; there's nothing remotely sentimental about the moments I'm describing. And there are many characters that never get to the place that this character does. But I can't think of a single character in "Twilight" who — however prejudiced, angry or lost — doesn't reveal at least a glimmer of hope in the possibility of connection and understanding. You'll like some characters more than others. But you'll be hard-pressed to label anyone an out-and-out villain. This play doesn't preach a party line. It practices profound empathy, with regard to all of its subjects.

World-Class Theater: Chris Jones, theater critic for the Chicago Tribune and one of the best theater critics in the country, chose American Theater Company's world-premiere production of "The Project(s)" — an exploration of the triangulation between housing policy, urban poverty and race in Chicago that was based on more than 100 interviews — as the best play he saw in Chicago in 2015. Ditto for me, for reasons that come through in [my enthusiastic review](#) of "The Project(s)" last May.

After returning to Milwaukee, it was Cecsarini who I first wrote to discuss this play, which "Twilight" is like in so



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many ways. We've come to associate work like this with Next Act; we're lucky we have an artistic director and a theater company willing to take the risks involved in taking it on.

Call "Twilight" an issues play, if you must; that's not inaccurate. But like "The Project(s)" — rated best of the best in a city that's itself the best theater town in America — such labels should never disguise or reduce what you'll see for yourself if you come see it: "Twilight" is also a great play, involving fully realized characters who will linger in your mind, long after the lights come down.

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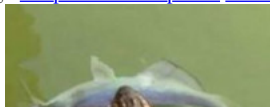
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