



Angela Lonnone as just one of the characters in Next Act's "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992" (PHOTO: Ross Zentner)

Next Act's "Twilight" may be the most don't miss play in city in decades.

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Photography: Ross Zentner

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It is left to a famous chef, a white woman named Alice Waters who is also fierce advocate for organic foods, to find the heart of any discussion of racial tension, both those discussions that happen and those that have not yet, but should.

She has just set a lovely dining room table with earthenware and linen napkins and sparkling silverware. As she moves about the table, fixing this and making that more neat, she talks to each of us.

"Do you know that eighty-five percent of kids in this country don't eat one meal with their family a day? I think, uh uh, I think we just forgot, um, you know, it just got thrown out, that idea of being around a table. And we don't know what got thrown out with it and, uh, there are a lot of things that happen around a table.

"And you don't like what's on the table and you don't li...and if you can't communicate with your family, you have to sit there in a way, and wait 'til that guy stops talking so that you go pass the bread to another or use a napkin or a fork or a knife."

That disintegrating gathering at the table is an apt metaphor for the blistering and incandescent production of "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992" running at Next Act Theatre under the gritty and fearless guidance of David Ceasarini, Artistic Director.

"Twilight" was created by the actor and playwright Anna Deavere Smith after the 1992 police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles, the acquittal of the officers charged and the subsequent riots.

There may have not been a more fascinating and important play staged in Milwaukee in years and may not be for the next decade.

Smith conducted and taped numerous interviews after the riots with participants, witnesses, victims and bystanders of the riots. The words in the play are taken verbatim from those interviews. The play features nearly 40 characters with various roles in the riot, played by six actors with no regard to gender, age, occupation and race. Each character is identified both in print and by photo on an upstage screen where we also see occasional video and still images of the King beating by white cops that started it all and the subsequent riot with equally startling video of Reginald Denny being beaten by black demonstrators.

We meet each character in monologue, some alone on a stage, others surrounded by one or more characters bearing silent witness to the words.

This is a play about words with no dialogue. The audience is given a role, to sit and listen and learn and feel what these people felt - at least a little bit. Some of the monologues are brief. Others more involved. All of them striking and indelible.

Some of these characters are mad and some are passive, some full of regret and others unwavering and defiant, some surprised and others not so, some sorrowful and others virtually unmoved, some full of denial and others full of guilt.

The six actors in this production are led by two of the greatest Milwaukee has, Marti Gobel and Angela Iannone.

Gobel, a black woman, plays, among other roles, a Korean man who was shot during the riot, the male president of the Los Angeles Police Commission and a former president of the Black Panther Party, Elaine Brown.

Iannone, a white woman, plays characters including a hyperactive black male attorney, the famed black opera singer Jessye Norman, and Josie Morales, a Latina who witnessed the King beating.

The four men, Rammel Chan (an Asian man), Andrew Muwonge (a black man), Andrew Perez (a Latino man) and Ryan Schabach (a white man) split the rest of the roles with an amazing clarity and the full force of belief. They play everything from former U. S. Sen. Bill Bradley to LA Police chief Daryl Gates, to Queen Malkah, a community activist, to Denny, the white truck driver who was beaten during the riots, to a police officer accused of beating King.

Perez plays Elvira Evers, a Panamanian who lived near the riots and was shot in the stomach while watching outside. She was eight months pregnant at the time, and her story is the miracle that was born out of the riots.

She did not know that she had been shot until neighbors saw the blood on her white dress. They rushed her to a hospital where doctors checked and still felt the heartbeat of the baby. In order to treat Evers, the doctors decided to take the baby via Caesarean section in their search for the bullet. Her story is as dramatically moving as any in the play. Her monologue after the successful birth of her baby is filled with emotion.

"I remember Dr. Thomas say you have a six pound-twelve-ounces little girl. He told me how much she weigh and her length and he say, um she born she had the bullet in her elbow but when remove, when we clean her up, we find find out that the bullet was still between two joints so we did operate on her and your daughter is fine and you are fine. ... If she didn't caught it in her arm, me, and her, would be dead. See. So it's like open your eyes! Watch what is goin' on!"

It is impossible to over recommend this play, especially for Milwaukee where the national spotlight on our racial difficulties is so intense. We are unable in this city to talk honestly about race. We are festive with every announcement of new retail center, sparkling office towers, high-rise apartments in our downtown. We celebrate our "progress."

And yet there is nothing celebratory about the fact that there is a huge population of people in this town, largely black, who do not feel like they are a part of this exciting rebirth of our city. They are on the outside, looking in. And that is why this play, as entertaining as it is, carries a level of importance that goes beyond theater. Live theater, continually staged by Ceccarini and Next Act, is the place - perhaps the only place - that this profound level of impact can be felt.

Maybe our new city motto should be, "Let the Artists Lead."

Let the artists lead us all to that empty table.

"Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992" runs through Feb. 21 and information on showtimes and tickets is available [here](http://www.nextact.org). (<http://www.nextact.org>)

Production Credits: Director, David Ceccarini; Scenic Design, Ron Weirick; Lighting Design, Aaron Sherkow; Costume Design, Elsa Hiltner; Properties Design, Heidi Salter and Shannon Sloan Spice; Sound and Video Design, David Ceccarini; Stage Manager, Jessica Connolly; Technical Director, Michael van Dreser.