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The stereotypes we keep

"Clybourne Park" looks at race in a Chicago suburb

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NOVEMBER 21, 2019

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Matty Layne Glasgow

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6:00 PM

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

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Pundamonium



BEAU MEYER

The first act takes place in 1959 when Bev (Eddie Wondra, above) is getting ready to move with help from domestic worker Francine (Jasmine Kiah).

It's bold, real and wildly uncomfortable — the basic ingredients of a play created to spark debate. The Pulitzer- and Tony Award-winning *Clybourne Park*, playing at UW-Madison's Mitchell Theatre through Nov. 24, starts on a chipper note, with characters blithely debating origins of ice cream while dropping subtle hints of cultural ignorance. But it erupts into

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7:00 PM

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poisonous verbal sparring and screaming matches about racism, prejudice and fear. It's a heavy performance to watch, let alone perform.

But UW-Madison's theater department is doing the play proud.

Inspired by Lorraine Hansberry's famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Clybourne Park* was written by Bruce Norris in 2010. The play has experienced some backlash from African American communities for perpetuating negative stereotypes, as well as some legal concerns from the Hansberry estate, which Norris didn't contact before writing the play. Despite those issues, *Clybourne Park* is, without a doubt, a gut-wrenching piece of theater.

The play's first act takes place in 1959, the same date *A Raisin in the Sun* was first written. Russ (Sam Wood) and Bev (Eddie Wondra) — a white married couple — are living in suburban Chicago, getting ready to move to a new home as an African American domestic worker Francine (Jasmine Kiah) helps with the packing. Reverend Jim (Jared Paullin) tries to council Russ through the grief of losing his son, and he is followed by neighbors Karl (Ethan Nimmer) and Betsy (Laura Bessenecker), who express concern about the house being bought by a “colored family.” Russ' temper lets loose like a hurricane.

Things only get worse when Francine's husband, Albert (Brion Whyte), tries to intervene.

Fast forward 50 years to the play's second act, where married couple Lindsey (Bessenecker) and Steve (Nimmer) are trying to buy the same house in Clybourne Park. They have received a petition from the neighborhood, which is now a predominantly non-white community, expressing concern about the couple's proposed plan to remodel and expand the house. As tensions rise between neighbors in a flurry of disturbing racial jokes, secrets about the death of Russ' son, 50 years ago, start to be uncovered.

With no restriction on the use of hateful language on stage, *Clybourne Park* scrapes and digs down to racism's moldy roots. The play shows that, even after five decades, stereotypes are

deeply rooted and merciless language is still used as a weapon in the name of self-preservation.

This play is meant to make audiences as angry as they are shocked, and these seven cast members are perfectly suited to the task.

Wood's red-faced rage, Kiah's sharp and searing punchlines, and Wondra's portrayal of an annoyingly neutral party give this play an incredible depth and weight that linger like a bad dream, even after the standing ovation.

STAGE UNIVERSITY THEATRE THEATER



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That Sam Wood is an Awesome Actor.

David Matteson 70 days ago | [REPLY](#)

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