

Slashing the Tires on the Welcome Wagon

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#) April 19, 2012 [The New York Times](#)

“Is this safe?” the man asks, as he guardedly takes a seat on a packing crate in the first act of “Clybourne Park,” Bruce Norris’s sharp-witted, sharp-toothed comedy of American uneasiness. Oh, foolish mortal. Of course it isn’t safe. You’re about to start talking about (can I say the word?) race. You might as well be running blindfolded through a minefield.

It’s been more than two years since “Clybourne Park” was [first staged](#) in New York, Off Broadway at Playwrights Horizons. In the interim, a lot has happened both to this play — which opened Thursday night on Broadway in a superlative production at the Walter Kerr Theater — and this country. The play has picked up a Pulitzer Prize and traveled [all over the place](#), including to London, where it won the Olivier Award. As for this country, well just think of what it’s heard since the winter of 2010: the divisive shouting over the killing of the African-American youth [Trayvon Martin](#); the horrified gasps over the charges that an American soldier massacred Afghan civilians; and the warm bath of applause that greeted [“The Help,”](#) a sentimental story of black domestic workers in the South.

Though those events were all in the future when “Clybourne Park” was written, this play addresses them all, or at least what they stand for. Usually, when a work is as topical as this one is, it has a limited shelf life. Yet returning to “Clybourne Park” — which features its original excellent cast and sure-footed director, Pam MacKinnon — I realized that this play probably will be topical for many years to come. That’s bad news for America, but good news for theatergoers, as “Clybourne Park” proves itself more vital and relevant than ever on a big Broadway stage.

The very structure of “Clybourne Park” posits the idea of a nation (and even a world) trapped in a societal purgatory of ineptitude and anxiety. The play’s first act is set in a recently sold middle-class house in Chicago in 1959; the second act takes place in the same house (which has been recently resold) in 2009. And **by the way that house in Clybourne Park (still a segregated neighborhood in the late 1950s) is the very one that the Younger family was set to move into at the end of “A Raisin in the Sun,” Lorraine Hansberry’s watershed drama from 1959.** In the two parts of “Clybourne Park” two other families are on the verge of moving. But Mr. Norris makes it stingingly clear that this is not the same as moving onward or upward.

That he efficiently dashes the cautious hopes raised by Hansberry in “Raisin” would seem to suggest that “Clybourne Park” is a downer. On the contrary, it’s far too funny and stimulating to be that. Like the tamer comedies of Yasmina Reza (particularly [“God of Carnage”](#)) “Clybourne Park” provides the eternal and undeniable satisfactions of watching supposedly civilized people behaving like territorial savages. But Mr. Norris cuts deeper than Ms. Reza, and he’s not nearly as whimsical or as polite. Black or white, male or female, every one of the characters in “Clybourne Park” is a jerk. (We can’t print what would be the real mot juste.) And I would argue that according to Mr. Norris being a jerk is the human condition. (Check out his earlier comedy, “The Pain and the Itch,” if you have any doubts.) That’s because his people exist in a state of constant irritation with one another. They’re lonely, so they need the company. But whenever they’re together, they chafe. What’s more, they all speak different languages, even within a single family. Which means that whenever they try to say the right thing, it’s going to sound dead wrong to somebody else.

Both sections of “Clybourne Park” (each acted by the same seven-member ensemble) begin in states of suppressed tension. In the first act Bev and Russ (Christina Kirk and Frank Wood, superb as people warped in different ways by loneliness) are just days away from leaving the place they have lived for many years. (Their living room has been designed with anthropological detail by Daniel Ostling, and Ilona Somogyi created the period-exact costumes.) They’ve known tragedy in that

home, and it's time to get away. They don't even know that it's an African-American family, the (unseen) Youngers, to whom they've sold the place. But the officious Karl (Jeremy Shamos, portraying the only character also in "Raisin"), who lives in the area with his wife, Betsy ([Annie Parisse](#)), does, and he is determined to stop the sale. (Betsy is deaf, which means she hears about as accurately as anybody else in this play.) This leads to the kind of verbal donnybrook in which people who dislike one another to begin with are saddled with a flammable subject. Jim, the sermonizing young minister (Brendan Griffin), extends the debate to include Francine (Crystal A. Dickinson), Bev's African-American maid, and her husband, Albert (Damon Gupton).

The second act finds the same house, 50 years later, about to be leveled, so a young professional couple (Ms. Parisse and Mr. Shamos) can build there. In the meantime, though, the neighborhood has known many changes. And a local (thoroughly middle-class) black couple (Ms. Dickinson and Mr. Gupton) have some objections to the newcomers' plans. Their disapproval is initially expressed tentatively and tactfully. But in "Clybourne Park" tact is the first and inevitable casualty of conversation. Mr. Norris uses some fairly hoary dramatic contrivances (like a trunk that's buried in one act and unearthed in the second) to connect this diptych. But the implicit parallels in speech and sensibility between then and now are brilliantly set up and thought through. Both acts feature ostensibly minor arguments about the names of foreign capitals that in both cases confirm how geocentric his characters truly are, no matter how well traveled. And whatever the decade, Mr. Norris has a merciless ear for the clichés to which desperate people resort when they don't know what they're saying. (Talking about falling into "the same euphemistic tap dance," as Mr. Shamos's second-act character puts it, is only one unfortunate example.)

Mr. Norris suggests, via a subplot about what happened to Bev and Russ's son (a solider in the Korean War), that the friction on display here doesn't stop at the walls of 406 Clybourne Street. War is the logical extension of the conflicts acted out in a single living room. "It's all right, nothing's broken," a character says after a scuffle in the first act. But of course something's broken; perhaps it's always been broken. And despite the sadly, patronizingly well-meaning Bev's hope that someday we might "all sit down together at one big table" and work things out, Mr. Norris isn't making any reassuring promises in this strong, ferociously smart play.