

Feeling Each Other's Pain



Black, Jews and suffering: Russell Waldman and Pamela Mitchell in a scene from "No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs."

by Ted Merwin
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When an African American ex-Marine named John Henry Redwood glimpsed a sign outside a small Southern town that read "No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs," it remained imprinted on his mind. As historian James Loewen wrote in "Sundown Towns," published in 2005, there were hundreds of such towns in the South throughout most of the 20th century, in which African Americans and other minorities were barred from living. But for Redwood, the sign triggered a painful revelation; it sparked him to write a play about the ways in which both blacks and Jews have been victimized in American society. Redwood's play, whose title is identical to the words of the sign, premiered in Philadelphia in 2001 before running Off Broadway and in theaters across the country. It is now being revived by Nicu's Spoon, the same company that staged Nick Grosso's "Kosher Harry" last fall.

The Brooklyn-born playwright died in 2003 after a career in which he acted in Broadway productions of "Guys and Dolls" and "The Piano Lesson," and also wrote another widely produced play, "The Old Settler," set in Harlem in 1943. He said that he took up playwriting because there were not enough roles for black actors.

Directed by Stephanie Barton-Farcas, the play is the tale of the Cheeks family, a black family in a small town in South Carolina in 1949. Mattie Cheeks (Pamela Mitchell) is the strong-willed mother; she is married to a humble grave-digger, Rawl (Patrick Mitchell), and the couple has two daughters (Aaliyah Miller and Skai Konyha) whom they valiantly strive to protect from the racism that surrounds them.

Their lives change after an Orthodox Jewish sociologist, Yaveni Aaronson (Russell Waldman) pays the family to be interviewed for his research on comparative black and Jewish suffering. The Jewish character seems modeled to some extent on the playwright, who earned a doctorate in religion. By the end of the play, both Yaveni and Mattie reveal terrible secrets about the effects of racism and anti-Semitism on their lives.

When the play ran originally in New York, Bruce Weber of The New York Times called the play's message "heavy-handed," but praised the liveliness of the characters, writing that "you will not often find a stage family where both the individual relationships and the overall dynamic are as vibrant and well defined as they are in this one."

In an interview with The Jewish Week, the director said that she sees the play as a "co-journey" of Mattie and Yaveni. The Jewish character "comes home to himself as a Jewish man through his friendship with the African-American woman who has been so horribly damaged," she noted. He and Mattie find each other because they recognize that each "has a secret and has been in pain."

Waldman, who is Jewish but not observant, said that he is modeling his portrayal of Yaveni on a close family friend who gave him his tallit and prayer book at his bar mitzvah. "These stories still have to be told," Waldman added. "Sometimes you have to put these things in people's faces and make them realize that they can change the prejudice and cruelty in the world."

"No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs" opens July 9 and runs through July 27 at the Spoon Theatre, 38 W. 38th St. Performances are Wednesday through Sunday evening at 8 p.m. For tickets, \$18, call the box office at (866) 811-4111 or visit spoontheatre.org.