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Off Broadway

Obama Effects Change On Stage

New spate of legit offerings tackle race in America

By GORDON COX

There's an ironically presented black minstrel show at the Vineyard Theater. There's a darkly comic wrestling match with retro racial stereotypes at the Public Theater. At Playwrights Horizons, white characters and black characters try to talk about race, and mostly fail.

See a pattern?

Legit productions about race in America are proliferating this season, with a handful opening in quick succession this spring at Off Broadway venues. It's a remarkable topical shift that coincides with the age of Obama -- and one that hasn't been played out to an equal degree in TV or film.

Creatives and programmers won't say the surge in the subject matter reps a conscious choice driven by the 2008 election and the issues it brought to the fore. But they do acknowledge that every now and then theater artists all seem to write about the same thing.

"It's like there's something in the air," says Tim Sanford of Playwrights Horizons, where Bruce Norris' race-themed play "Clybourne Park" is on the boards. "There's a common call of some kind."

It's not just Off Broadway. On the Main Stem, the commercial production of "Memphis" is a feel-good tuner about the early musical steps in what would become the civil-rights movement. And then there's David Mamet's latest play, called, bluntly, "Race."

Auds seem responsive to the subject matter. "The Scottsboro Boys," the musical at the Vineyard about the real-life 1931 case of nine black men falsely accused of rape, has proven popular enough that it extended its run even before its March 10 opening. At Playwrights Horizons, "Clybourne Park" -- set in the Chicago neighborhood as "A Raisin in the Sun" -- earned strong notices and is rumored to be under consideration for transfer, too.

"Memphis," while not a huge hit, has sold relatively steadily, pulling in about \$13.5 million since it began perfs in September, and "Race," about a wealthy white man accused of raping a black woman, has had some very strong weeks buoyed by the star power of topliner James Spader. The David Mamet play has grossed some \$7.8 million since it began perfs Nov. 17.

Race in America, of course, remains a complex subject, tackled in a long line of plays that runs the gamut from "Raisin" to "The Colored Museum" and includes every installment of August Wilson's landmark cycle of plays about African-American life in the 20th century. (The 1983 Wilson play "Fences" will be revived on Broadway this spring in a production toplined by Denzel Washington.)

And the subject remains a delicate one -- so much so that more than one of the playwrights asked to comment for this story demurred.

Based on conversations with people involved in the shows now running Off Broadway, it can be said that current events in general, and the Obama election in particular, didn't factor much into the genesis of these legit products. But all agree that the productions gain heightened resonance when seen through the prism of the current times.

"We're storytellers, not sociologists," says David Thompson, the book writer of "Scottsboro Boys," the John Kander-Fred Ebb musical at the Vineyard. "The show was never written with the goal of becoming part of a national conversation in the way that it has today. But in the past several years, that conversation is so much more urgent."

“Scottsboro” is one of the projects on which Kander and Ebb -- along with Thompson and director choreographer Susan Stroman -- were working when Ebb died in 2004. The surviving creatives returned to the project a few years ago, and the Vineyard, which worked with the team on the 1987 revival of “Flora, the Red Menace,” was enlisted to help develop it.

Thompson says he and his collaborators were drawn to the subject when they came across it while researching both “Flora” and the 1997 outing “Steel Pier,” which took place around the same time as “Scottsboro.” No torn-from-the-headlines impulse there.

But Douglas Aibel, a.d. at the Vineyard, notes that an aud’s perceptions of the show are still influenced by the topical events of the day, with the initial workshop beginning in the optimistic days immediately after the Obama election.

“I thought for a moment, ‘Gee, is this the right time for this piece?’” Aibel says. “But here we were, and the country is divided again. It felt like this was the moment, and we didn’t want to miss it.”

While “Scottsboro” looks at an influential historical incident in the nation’s history, “Clybourne” -- with a first act set in 1959 and a second in 2009 -- posits that little has changed over 50 years of dealing with race.

“It’s especially timely now, but people are really digging it because it’s also timeless,” Sanford says. “It’s an issue that’s never going to go away.”

At the Public, where “Neighbors” is now playing, exploring race has always been central to the theater’s mission of diversity, points out a.d. Oskar Eustis.

“Neighbors” follows an interracial couple in which the black husband imagines the new African-American neighbors as embodying a host of black stereotypes.

“What I feel artists of color are grappling with now is that, look, ethnic politics aren’t enough, but we’re not in a post-racial world, either,” Eustis says. “Race still matters, but it no longer defines. And lately that dialogue has moved back into the mainstream.”

Although few conscious choices were made to take advantage of contempo resonance, legiters agree that the same impulse to address issues of race on a political and social front has concurrently prompted similar confrontations onstage.

“I do feel there’s something in the zeitgeist that leads a subject to be explored,” Aibel says. “And this is a time when theater artists aren’t shying away from a hard look at America.”