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San Francisco Chronicle

Bay Area theater asks the tough questions about race

By Lily Janiak | September 4, 2016 | Updated: September 4, 2016 7:26pm

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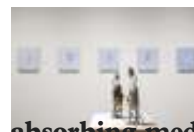


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IMAGE 2 OF 5

Rotimi Agbabiaka (left) works with director Edris Cooper-Anifowoshe while rehearsing “Type/Caste.”

Across the Bay Area this season, theaters are admonishing their white audiences to check their privilege — to become aware of their racial advantages both extraordinary and banal, especially with regard to Black Lives Matter.

And that admonishment is coming from playwrights of every race.

“Type/Caste,” Rotimi Agbabiaka’s solo show at Brava Theater Center, goes beneath the surface of what looks like a thriving career for a Bay Area actor — he’s worked at “Beach Blanket Babylon,” Cal Shakes, SF Mime Troupe, Just Theater and Magic Theatre — to expose the prejudice he’s faced in show business as a queer, black man from Nigeria. It concludes, triumphantly, with his decision to write and perform his own show — the very

show audiences are seeing.

“White Guy on the Bus,” by white Philadelphia playwright Bruce Graham and now onstage at the Flight Deck, follows Ray (Steve Rexrode), a white man who meets Shatique (Michelle Taylor), a black woman, on the bus and asks her aid with a sinister, but understandable, deed. He only makes an offer — he doesn’t coerce her —

but the mere fact of his vast advantage means he might as well be blackmailing her. How can she say no when he knows about the specific hell of her poverty and has the means to alleviate it?

It’s not just these two plays that indict white privilege as of late. There’s Crowded Fire’s coming production of “The Shipment,” by Korean American playwright Young Jean Lee; Berkeley Rep’s “The Last Tiger in Haiti,” by Jeff Augustin, who grew up in a Haitian community in Miami; and the three productions of “Othello” — from Ubuntu Theater Project, Cal Shakes and Marin Shakespeare Company — this summer and fall.

“Type/Caste” and “White Guy on the Bus,” which both begin performances on Thursday, Sept. 15, seek to shake their audiences out of racial complacency by building different kinds of sympathy.

In “White Guy on the Bus,” the white characters are at once despicable and sympathetic. Roz (Maureen Theresa Williams), Ray’s wife, relishes being politically incorrect, making remarks like, “How many corporations have a black guy at the head of the table? Not nearly as many as they show on TV, that’s for sure.” It’s the kind of comment that feels at once refreshing for its candor yet still mired in privilege and bias.

“When you look at plays about race, I find most of them — they’re predictable,” Graham says by phone. “The minorities or the women or the gay characters, whatever repression we’re talking about, are always kind of noble. The white male is the evil overseer. And it’s

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not that easy. I wish it was. If it was, we could solve the problem.”

The complexity of Graham’s characters is what first drew director Max Minton, who’s also an actor, to the script. He remembers thinking, upon first reading it, “I want to play Ray! He’s such an amazing character. No, I want to play Roz!”

That relatability becomes a powerful tool later in the script; if white audiences can connect to Ray when he’s relatively benign, perhaps they can also see a little of themselves in the way Ray “has access, because he’s white and rich, to all the levers he has to pull in order to make things happen the way he wants it to happen, up to and including life and death,” as Minton puts it.

For Agbabiaka, a big part of what makes “Type/Caste” so effective in the first place is that it’s theater, as opposed to a report on racism. “There’s so much discussion about diversity in theater,” he says in an interview before a rehearsal. “You see articles get posted, and think pieces, and conference after conference about it, and it’s wonderful that’s happening, but one of the beautiful things about art, about theater, is that it allows us to share an experience, to empathize, to feel — not just to know intellectually.”

This is in spite of the fact that Agbabiaka got the idea for “Type/Caste” in part by writing a series of articles titled “Acting While Black” for Theatre Bay Area magazine, in which he interviewed many local artists about “the specific challenges and joys” of being a black performer.

The idea, of course, also came from his own experience. In particular, he remembers meeting a casting agent in grad school at Illinois State University; she was helping students identify their type, a crucial process for any actor. “When I first looked at you,” he remembers her saying, looking him right in the eye, “I thought, ‘gangster.’”

A line like that makes it into a casting scene in the show, but perhaps the most hilarious, and chilling, one comes from the mouth of the character of young, white and presumably hip director: “#AllRolesMatter.”

The work of Agbabiaka, Graham and others on Bay Area stages this season effectively

offers a multipronged rebuke to that sentiment.

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Type/Caste: Sept. 15-Oct. 1. \$15-\$20. Brava Theater Center, 2781 24th St., S.F.

www.brava.org

White Guy on the Bus: Sept. 15-24. \$25-\$30. Flight Deck, 1540 Broadway, Oakland.

www.aluminous.org



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