
The Arts

Play depicts memoirs of interracial S. Carolina couple

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All the elements of a blockbuster movie are in place in Michael Bettencourt's new script: forbidden romance, epic villains, dangerous secrets, and tragic betrayal. "A Question of Color" has the mythic feel of a film like "Dances with Wolves" and Bettencourt hasn't even done the rewrites yet.

Last weekend was the first time an audience had the opportunity to see the script. Seven powerful actors blasted emotion into the story of a black woman from the fields and a white man from the mountains who defied North Carolina's ban on interracial marriage and made a life for themselves in the early decades of the twentieth century.

In the audience at the Central Square Library was the courageous couple's great grand-daughter, Sara Beattie-Smith, whose memoir is the basis for Bettencourt's play. Bettencourt met Beattie-Smith through a mutual friend.

"It was one of those serendipitous things," he says. "We met, had coffee, and she gave me carte blanche to transform the memoir into a play." Bettencourt sent the script to Beattie-Smith scene by scene, as soon as he wrote one. What started out as a working relationship, he says, developed into friendship.

Bettencourt felt it was important to be faithful to the "spirit" of the book, he explains, meaning that "the structure of the memoir wouldn't work in a play...so I selected details from the book which would be stageworthy."

Bettencourt embellished some characters and added subtext for others. What works best in Bettencourt's play is the radiant courtship of Susan Morgan and John Wicks.

Beattie-Smith says the two "came together by chance. They were both orphans...brought together by loneliness and fear."

At play's start, John has come down from the mountains and found work chopping wood. He first sets eyes on Susan by the river where she is fishing. Susan is far more cognizant of the ways of the world than he is, so she rebuffs his attentions.

John is taken with her despite her defiant resistance. He persists and his charming, ingenuous manner intrigues her. Michelle Dowd makes Susan elegant and strong-willed, which a brightness in her eyes which belies her harsh words.

Christopher Chew as John is amused by her fiery independence and just a bit cocky in his self-confidence. Their small talk sparkles in Bettencourt's witty dialogue. Thomesa Bennett has fun with the quirky role of Aunt Becky, the feisty, eccentric black woman who takes the couple under her wing, even performing their marriage ceremony. Beattie-Smith's book is full of surprises.

John Wicks, for instance, takes his wife's surname when they marry, and he convinces the townsfolk that he is part Native-American and thereby not guilty of breaking Southern miscegenation laws (some of which, like South Carolina's, were on the books until 1998).

Where Beattie-Smith says she tried to dispel the assumption that all white people are racist by introducing sympathetic whites in the story (like the missionaries who helped Susan start a school). Bettencourt opts for absolutes in the play. All the white characters (except John) are stock villains, with a Mr. Goforth, as played by Bill Gardiner, providing comic relief as a flamboyant wife-hating scoundrel.

Edward McCluney, as Goforth's house manager, gave a wry, smugly disdainful performance as the resentful servant who despises his employer but thoroughly enjoys his position of authority over other blacks in the household. (In the book, Beattie-Smith uses the character of the house manager to explore intra-racial discrimination.)

Maureen Keiller gave a chilling performance as the scheming Mrs. Goforth, who by throwing in with a vengeful bootlegger, engineers John Morgan's downfall. G. Warren Steele had a grand time chewing up the scenery as the evil landowner who propositions John and reports him to the sheriff when John turns him down.

What was evidently a subtle hint of homosexuality in the book is now a grotesque scene in the play. Beattie-Smith says rewrites will bring back the subtlety. After all, this is merely a first draft. Judging from the audience response at the library, the compelling core of the story makes vivid drama. Can a movie deal be far behind?

Bettencourt discusses the process of adapting an original work on his website: <http://www.m-bettencourt.com>, and you can find the Beattie-Smith memoir at <http://www.sarchepress.com>