Review: Calpurnia fiercely tackles everyday racism with tact and humour

Audrey Dwyer’s game changing play effortlessly captures the ways that complex legacies of oppression can function in everyday, contemporary Canadian domestic space.

By Tobias B. D. Wiggins
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Calpurnia by Audrey Dwyer, co-produced by Nightwood Theatre and Sulong Theatre.
Buddies in Bad Times, on till February 4th, PWYC - $35.

Calpurnia, a play by Toronto-based writer/director Audrey Dwyer, has been building a steady buzz. Already selling out almost all of its opening shows, it has quickly reached Nightwood’s highest selling performance in its 39-year history, with the actors receiving an electrified standing ovation with each curtain drop.

But all of this hype and excitement is especially impressive, considering the emotional tenor of its main themes, and the political work Dwyer is asking her audience to do.

The play is set in a contemporary upper middle class Black Jamaican-Canadian home, where Julie (Meghan Swaby) struggles to revise a draft of her radical screenplay of “To Kill a Mockingbird,” which reimagines the famous story, but from Calpurnia’s perspective. Her brother Mark (Matthew Brown) does not appreciate her critical reading of Calpurnia’s strife, and is not shy in letting her know that, as a rich 20 something living with her family in Forest Hill, she is “not Black enough” to write from the perspective of a Southern maid in the 1930s.

In living area next to the opulent modern kitchen (flawless set design by Anna Treusch), Julie fights with her laptop for inspiration while the Gordon family’s Filipina cook and housekeeper Precy (Carolyn Fe), continuously hovers and tidies the space around here. They have a clear closeness, especially given that after Ms. Gordon passed away Precy cared for the children. Yet despite their familial connection, Precy is still available in a hired domestic role, a tricky parallel with maid Calpurnia that Dwyer maneuvers with ambition.

The rivalry between brother and sister is punctuated by Mark’s white, spandex-toting yoga-ambassador girlfriend, Christine (Natasha Greenblatt), who while stretching and sipping hot lemon water with fresh mint, continually plays the peacemaker. Their father (Andrew Moodie), a kind and affluent judge, is perhaps overly supportive of his two children. He is in the process of setting up an elaborate dinner for Mark to meet James (Don Allison), the head of a distinguished law firm who he hopes his son will join.

It is at this ill-fated pristine dinner party that all of Julie’s frustrations, and creative impulses, come to a hilarious and disquieting head.

Dwyer explains that she began writing Calpurnia in 2012, and while “time passed as I wrote...Black men in Canada were being brutally murdered by the police...Trayvon Martin had been brutally killed. Sammy Yatim was also brutally killed.” Informed by a climate of increased visibility and conversations about overt racism and violence against people of colour, Dwyer has took up the difficult task of representing the intricacies of social injustice that we still don’t always see in the media.
And in actuality, these injustices are invisible by their very design. Everyday racism, or the way that our dominant ideology is founded in white culture, is a more subtle and naturalized form of social discrimination. Because of this naturalization, it can be a lot harder to address. This is especially relevant to a Canadian audience, for whom a national ethos of multiculturalism can lend to complacency, or an inability to identify more systemic, hidden forms of prejudice.

So through the resourceful use of humour and storytelling, the play does ask the audience to do some heavy lifting, not only to consider how racism informs the very foundation of everyday spaces like our homes and jobs, but also how racism is inseparable from other systems like classism or sexism - a concept Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw famously termed “intersectionality” in the 1980s.

For example, although clearly attuned to issues of social inequity, Julie’s inability to write the character of Calpurnia is informed by her own class location. Her frustrations and entitlement lead her to inappropriately question Precy at length, trying to derive an “authentic” insight into maid’s lived experience. And Lululemon-Christine, who is often hyperbolically white and privileged, is also sometimes able to speak most fluently about racism. Simultaneously, she has her worth measured in weddings and child rearing potentials by sexist houseguest James, the inflated lawyer, who eventually calls Julie a racist.

The plot is seriously layered! To be playful, I would say watching Calpurnia is a bit like social justice "Inception" - just when you think you hit a pretty deep level, heart pounding, you get dropped through another couple insights about systemic power. And although its about the “everydayness” of oppression, the play is also a clear commentary on how domestic conventions are steeped in broader legacies of racism, primarily through the creative use of the classic “To Kill A Mockingbird.”

These complicated dynamics certainly leave the audience a bit unsteady, and unsure about how to feel about each character. Perhaps this is one of the things that makes the play so uniquely humbling and real - none are perfect, and all are prone to struggle.

From Julie, who is unquestionably woke but still getting her sea legs, as she works hard to develop and refine her own political thought; to Mark who often denies obvious racism to survive as a lawyer; to Precy who, although disapproving, tolerates the family’s drama and provides an inordinate amount of emotional labour (a type of under-acknowledged, unpaid care work that is often expected of women) - each strives to somehow manage their social location (their race/class/gender etc) with honourable intentions, yet all are susceptible to political “failures.” The question of what is a political failure, however, Dwyer quite artfully leaves unanswered.

Calpurnia is therefore as much of a conversation starter as it is entertaining, which is a feat when broaching difficult issues like intersectionality. And because of this, there is no doubt that your own social location will impact your experience of the performance.

The set was cleverly designed so that the audience sat facing one another, with the all the action happening in between. I felt this was a tangible invitation for us to engage in dialogue, to see other people’s reaction, and to consider your own. Were they moved by the same issues as me? Do they feel angry, delighted, or ashamed? Are they laughing, and should I be? Watching Calpurnia as an ally, you might be inspired to have new conversations with those across from you; and as someone marginalized, you may get the opportunity to share a moment with a stranger, who has undoubtedly had that same experience.
Artfully told, with the softening qualities of comedy and the power of unspoken truths, Dwyer has crafted a theater experience that is compelling, provocative, and honestly, not to be missed.

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