



Published October 2000

Do the White Thing

Darren O'Donnell spotlights Canadian racism

BY SARAH B. HOOD

There's an episode of *Third Rock from the Sun* in which the aliens suddenly realize that when they first chose human shapes, they unthinkingly picked white bodies. Lots of Liberal guilt ensues and the conclusion features a kind of embarrassing gospel choir love-in, but in the meantime a few interesting questions get asked.

You don't expect primetime U.S. TV to get very far into questions like that. That's what we have not-for-profit theatre for. And that's where *White Mice* comes in. It's a play written and directed by the intelligent and inquisitive (and white) Toronto theatre artist Darren O'Donnell. He's been producing challengingly thought-provoking theatre for some years now; most recently he authored *Boxhead*, about the idea of having your head in a box. (It's not specifically a TV, although you could read it that way if you liked.)

White Mice is about two white mice who start to wonder about white. Why are they white? Who gets to be white? What does that mean for everybody who isn't white? Last summer's du Maurier World Stage picked up the show from its debut at The Theatre Centre on Queen Street West. Now it's opening the mainstage season at Theatre Passe Muraille. Since Darren O'Donnell was somewhere in Morocco at the time of writing, I spoke instead to Bruce Hunter, who has appeared with O'Donnell in both previous versions, and who will also be in the *Passe Muraille* production.

"We're human personifications of mice or mice personifications of humans," he explains. "These are white mice, and white mice don't exist in nature. They're engineered genetically. A member of the family because we're brothers we find out that he's dating a brown mouse and it opens up his mind to this and it throws his mind into a turmoil."

Although it's a two-man show, it's not just another wordy evening of intellectual wit. "There's a lot of physicality in it," says Hunter. "Without putting a name on it like cartoon,

we're mouse-like, physically, so we move around quite a bit, there's a lot of choreography and orchestrated sounds, and the music is very good."

DJ sounds and urban fashion make their way into the play partly because they suit O'Donnell's aesthetic, and partly because, as Hunter points out, "There's stuff in the play about taking the black culture's ideas and making money from it."

Somewhat in the manner of The Noam Chomsky Lectures, the disturbing theatrical analysis of global economic politics by Guillermo Verdecchia and Daniel Brooks, *White Mice* allows the content of the daily news to intrude into the theatrical reality. "There's a certain amount of facts that come out in the play about Canada, which figures it's a little bit outside that racist reality," says Hunter. "These are facts things that are in the paper statistics that just tell you the truth."

Hunter found himself personally challenged by an episode in the play that he won't describe, except to say that it refers to the Canadian flag. "There's part of it that I had a hard time with, but I was happy it was there because it's all a part of it," he says. "It was hard for me to swallow that Canada's part of this whole thing."

"It's kind of an in-your-face look at yourself who we are; here's the mirror," he continues, adding that "I don't think that only white people would like it and understand it I think that it has to be done. It certainly is a white perspective on it, but it's more about the human condition, and it's ugly and it's factual and it works on a lot of different levels."

White Mice runs at the Mainspace at Theatre Passe Muraille, from September 28 to October 15. For tickets call 416-504-PLAY (7529).

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