CLYBOURNE PARK

Written by Bruce Norris / Directed by Mark Cuddy

P.L.A.Y. (Performance = Literature + Art + You)
Student Matinee Series
2013-2014 Season
Dear Educators,

One of the lasting effects, for me, of working on a number of August Wilson's plays several seasons back is a greater appreciation for who and what has come before me. As a historian by training and a dramaturg by practice, I was always aware of the importance of precedence, but now I try to take a little more time to acknowledge the street or building named after a person, for example – he or she must have done something of some importance in order to earn such a distinction. It deserves, at the very least, my passing respect.

And so it is with neighborhoods, too. They were not always as they are now – they had a history. And another history before that. Such is the story with Clybourne Park, as one group of people gives way to another and the story of the area changes. These stories are all around us. Several years ago, I owned a house in the South Wedge area of Rochester. In living there for a decade, I came to understand that it had only recently emerged from a period of crime, blight, and depression, and was just beginning a new chapter in its long history. I am about to begin work as a dramaturg on a story set, in part, in the Corn Hill district and will, no doubt, learn more about the area than I could have ever imagined.

Your students, though they may argue otherwise, are steeped in history, whether they are surrounded by houses built in the 1800s or live in a brand-new subdivision. Every neighborhood is Clybourne Park in one way or another. We just need to make the effort to discover how and why.

Thank you for deciding to bring your students to see Clybourne Park. It will, we’re sure, be an experience that they’ll remember for a very long time.

Sincerely,

Eric Evans
Education Administrator
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“But that’s nice, isn’t it, in a way?
To know that we all have our place.” – Bev
About Clybourne Park

About: Clybourne Park, by Bruce Norris, premiered at Playwrights’ Horizons in 2010, earned the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Laurence Olivier Prize for Best New Play, and the 2012 Tony Award for Best Play.

Setting: Clybourne Park is a fictional neighborhood located in central Chicago. The first act is set in 1959, six years after the end of the Korean War. The second act is set in the same neighborhood, 50 years later in 2009, with a new generation of residents.

Synopsis: In 1959 white, middle-class Clybourne Park residents Russ and Bev, who lost their son Kenneth after his return home from the Korean War, are planning to sell their home when their neighbor, Karl, makes an unexpected visit to inform them that the family who is buying the house is black and that he is attempting to discourage the black family from moving into the neighborhood. In the same home, 50 years later, Clybourne Park has become a mostly black neighborhood. A white couple, Steve and Lindsey, are planning to buy the house, tear it down, and replace it with a new home, forcing a meeting to negotiate local housing regulations with Kevin and Lena, a black couple living in the area who have historic ties to the home.

Characters: “It was very important to me to depict the people in 1959 as people with good intentions. They’re not racists in the KKK way — they’re people who think that they’re doing the right thing to protect their neighborhood and their children and their real estate values. But that’s a form of self-interest that has, as its unfortunate byproduct, a really racist outcome.”

– Bruce Norris, Playwright

“We see two generations of white Americans struggle to square their self-images as decent, thoughtful people with the reality of their social and economic power over their African American servants, would-be friends, and potential neighbors. ‘Are our liberal ideals sustainable outside the safety of the middle-class, suburban bubble?’ Norris forces us to ask ourselves.”

– Beryl Satter, Historian

“One essential character in the play is the house itself. In 1959 this modest, three-bedroom bungalow is neat and well-maintained. By 2009, it exhibits an overall shabbiness with crumbling plaster and deteriorated doorways. What happened? We know that it shifted from white to black ownership. Can this alone explain the building’s demise?”

– Beryl Satter, Historian

“But you can’t live in a principle, can you? Gotta live in a house.”

– Karl
Bruce Norris began his career as an actor, but committed himself to playwriting in the late 1990s. Norris is cited as a playwright with a “penchant for sparking arguments” and a reputation for “prodding the uncomfortable truths that lie just beneath the surface of the self-aware, middle-class liberal” while writing “daring and irreverent plays.” Below, Norris shares his own thoughts about theatre and *Clybourne Park*.

"Art is the lie that tells the truth,” said Pablo Picasso. Discuss the meaning of this quotation as it pertains to *Clybourne Park*, which employs fictional characters to address real issues such as race, gender, class, and the intricacies of community.

| People ask how come I don’t write plays about, say, people in housing projects, and I say those are the people who go to the theatre. If you actually want to have a conversation with that audience, then you should address them directly. |
| I have no cogent manifesto. I just have a whole bunch of psychological kinks. Like the desire to unmask the lies about the American family. |
| We have certain responsibilities but we don’t have progress. I think every generation is one away from a holocaust. |
| Everyone holds their tongue, because we live in a society where speech is much more dangerous than action. All we’re talking about is that someone said, out loud, what we already knew or have been thinking. That’s a terrible thing in our weirdly polite society. No one knows that they should be embarrassed in the first actten everyone knows they should be embarrassed in the second act. |
| We have to let go of the idea that doing a play is somehow going to solve the issue of racism. I mean, a play doesn’t do anything. A play is just something to look at and it may give you cause to ponder. |

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| Why should I write something that is not germane to audiences’ lives? Theatre has always been an expensive middle-class pursuit. It is a precious, pretentious thing for precious, pretentious people. You drive in your expensive car to the theatre, get valet parked, and then watch a play about poor people. Why? |
| My ideal response is to have them come out of the theatre saying, ‘I don’t know what’s right anymore. I used to think I knew what was right, but I’m not sure that I do.” |
| There’s nothing better than coming into a room and feeling that something dangerous is happening. |
| I wanted to be able to express what I thought, rather than be the vehicle for the expression of someone else’s thoughts. I think that’s why I wanted to be a writer instead of an actor. |

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| Some change is inevitable, and we all support that, but it might be worth asking yourself who exactly is responsible for that change.” – Lena |

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| If I do my job correctly I should outrage people. So when people like something that I’ve done and pay for it, it’s very confusing to me. I don’t understand why they would be paying for it if I wrote it to upset them. |
| I think it is a play for white people. It’s a play about white people. It’s about the white race to race, about being the power elite. We don’t want to seem like we’re powerful. So, while the play is about white people, it’s even better if there are black people in the audience because it makes white people even more uncomfortable. |
| Audiences have this sort of childhood need to identify who their hero is in a story and to root for them, and one of my favorite things to do as a writer is to confound that impulse. |
| Everyone latches onto the idea that the place is about race, and I don’t really feel that race is its central topic. I feel that territoriality is. It’s a human impulse that, in the large scale, creates wars, and in the small scale, is what created a homeowners committee or community association. We fight over territory for incredibly personal, inexplicable, ungraspable, indefinable reasons. |

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| Is there a place for racially-based jokes in contemporary society? Can they be constructive, as a release valve for a tense situation, for example? Do they hinder conversations or can they be useful as well? |

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| *Above: Bruce Norris* | "Art is the lie that tells the truth," said Pablo Picasso. Discuss the meaning of this quotation as it pertains to *Clybourne Park*, which employs fictional characters to address real issues such as race, gender, class, and the intricacies of community. |
The Raisin Conversation

The Integration Climate of the 1950s

In the 1940s, attacks such as arson, bombing, and stoning against homes sold to black families in previously white neighborhoods reached highs similar to those of the early 1920s. Some historians hypothesize that working-class white families of this time thought African Americans were being given things, like nice homes or financial security, that they had worked for, which resulted in extreme responses. In any case, black families beginning to occupy white neighborhoods faced danger, fear, harassment, and destruction, often on a daily basis, as they attempted to secure a better life for themselves and their families. These situations, in conjunction with other major Civil Rights events of the 1950s, such as the murder of Emmett Till, Brown v. Board of Education, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Little Rock High School integration crisis, and the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., made for much turbulence in the years leading up to the sale of the Clybourne Park home to the Younger family.

The relationship between A Raisin in the Sun and Clybourne Park

“I saw A Raisin in the Sun as a film in 7th grade. Interestingly, our social studies teacher was showing it to a class of all-white students who lived in an independent school district that was formed specifically to prevent us from being bused to schools with black students. She was showing us a movie that basically, in the end, is really pointing a finger at us and saying, we are those people. So, I watch it at twelve years old and I could realize, even then, that I’m Karl Lindner – the white man who comes to ask the Youngers not to move into Clybourne Park. To see that when you’re a kid and to realize that you’re the villain has an impact. It percolated for many years and that’s how I ended up writing this play. I’ve always been fond of A Raisin in the Sun and I thought about how interesting it would be to tell the story from the point of view of the white neighborhood. And what’s particularly relevant is if you bring it full circle and ask how has that changed or evolved - or not - today.” – Bruce Norris

The Continuing Influence of A Raisin in the Sun

With A Raisin in the Sun, Lorraine Hansberry energized the conversation about how Americans live together across lines of race and difference. In recent years, several playwrights have sought engagement with Hansberry’s story – often through characters from A Raisin in the Sun – and illuminated the tensions and anxieties that still surround neighborhood integration. Although the plays—Kwame Kwei-Armah’s Beneatha’s Place, Robert O’Hara’s Etiquette of Vigilance, Gloria Bond Clunie’s Living Green, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ Neighbors, and Bruce Norris’s Clybourne Park—are distinct from one another in terms of style and perspective on their predecessor, they commonly feature characters who are forced to closely examine, and sometimes revise or abandon, their ideas concerning race and their notions of social and economic justice. Above all, the plays use the lenses of neighborliness, privacy, and community to engage the large question of America’s common purpose.

“Now, Russ: You know as well as I do that this is a progressive community.” – Karl
Confronting the Unfamiliar

In *Clybourne Park*, a number of provocative issues are addressed, including discrimination, community, stereotypes, and political correctness. Racism is not the only form of discrimination that flares in *Clybourne Park*. Though other means of discrimination are not quite as verbally “called out” in the script, classism, sexism, and ableism also come into question.

“Steve and Lindsey imagine they’re very close to Kevin and Lena,” commented playwright Bruce Norris. “They think, ‘We’re just the same: They are in our same age group, same professional level, and they seem politically like-minded.’ They make all these assumptions and yet, from Kevin and Lena’s point of view, there is no illusion that they are the same. The one person in the second act whom everyone agrees is not the same is Dan. The guy digs ditches for a living, so no one pays attention to him.” Dan belongs to a different class of people. Nobody mentions it, but his working-class status in a room full of middle-class people stands out.

In addition to racial and class differences, there are several other situations where these characters must confront someone unfamiliar or different from themselves—often while butting up against a stereotype or generalization of who that person is. Jim, a reverend, is of a religious order. Russ is dealing with deep, grasping grief and depression, Betsy is deaf, and Russ and Bev’s son Kenneth, a Korean War vet, struggled with depression, guilt, anxiety, and what we now know as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

According to the dramaturgical packet, “During the Korean War (1950-1953), the U.S.’s goal was to get the communists out of South Korea and prevent other countries from falling to communism. Though the war was relatively short, it was also exceptionally bloody and U.S. troops acted under a ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ policy against civilians. Also of note, racial integration efforts in the U.S. military began during the Korean War, where African Americans fought in integrated units for the first time.” When Korean War soldiers returned home, it wasn’t a clear victory in the minds of many people. The combat was not even officially recognized as a war until 1998. The horrors lived by these soldiers were, quite often, hardly acknowledged by the communities they returned to, and so veterans, who were already struggling emotionally, further struggled to integrate back into communities that never acknowledged or supported them.

In this way, the responsibility of a community to its members is a dominant component in *Clybourne Park*. Had the community treated Kenneth differently after his return from the war, would his story have had a different outcome? What responsibility did the Clybourne Park community neighborhood association have to support or isolate Russ and Bev in their selling decision, accept or dismiss the Younger family, or protect the values of Karl and Betsy, Russ and Bev, Kevin and Lena, or Lindsey and Steve?

Of Betsy’s deafness, Norris says, “The first thing I’ll say is that deaf is funny. But it’s not the deaf woman herself that is funny, or her deafness that’s funny. It’s everyone around her and how they treat her and act towards her that’s funny. And it makes it clear how awful everyone is around race, that there is this false care taken towards her deafness. It shines a light on race, by contrast.”

Much of the comedy in *Clybourne Park* comes from the need to be politically correct, how political correctness changed between 1959 and 2009, and what happens when characters cross that line. How do we, as individuals and as a community, act and speak when political correctness stifles conversation and yet protects people? ♦

“Maybe we should learn what the other person eats ... if someday we could all sit down, at one big table, and ...” – Bev
“Pretty much every big city has some version of this.” – Bruce Norris

In *Clybourne Park*, we encounter two distinct versions of a Chicago neighborhood. In Act I, we are introduced to the area in 1959 as the country is experiencing a growing Civil Rights movement. The all-white neighborhood is comprised, according to Karl Lindner, of “hard-working people who don’t really have much but those little homes and a dream of the kind of community we want to raise our children in.” Following the Great Depression, two world wars and the Korean conflict, many Americans had similar dreams.

The Clybourne Park that we see in Act II would seem unrecognizable to its previous inhabitants. It is now 2009 and we witness a racially-mixed (but largely black) neighborhood that, while vibrant and steeped in middle-class values, has faced many years of decline and neglect, finding it at the tail end of a decade which saw the country embroiled in two wars and facing serious economic hardships. And yet, the residents of Clybourne Park maintain a faith in the prospect of better times for the area based, in part, on an influx of new and increasing affluent residents, many of them still developing an understanding of the neighborhood’s history.

LINDSEY: And I totally admit it, I’m the one who was resistant, especially with the school and everything, but once I stopped seeing the neighborhood the way it used to be, and could see what it is now, and its potential…

By the late 1950s, many urban neighborhoods began to experience unanticipated levels of integration, a development which caused many white Americans to question the outcome of these changes. In Act I, Karl articulates this point of view when he claims that he’s “not here to solve society’s problems. I’m simply telling you what will happen … first one [white] family will leave, then another, and another, and each time they do, the value of these properties will decline…” He is, he believes, merely attempting to protect the value of his home and the security it provides.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, many American cities, including Rochester, were largely vacated by white residents. This phenomenon, known as white flight, would result in these areas becoming largely inhabited by low-income African American and Latino populations, among others. White residents moved to suburban locations, leaving behind a surplus of inexpensive and often poorly-maintained properties. These neighborhoods experienced near-immediate (and often negative) effects in terms of safety, the quality of public education, difficulties in developing local businesses, and a disconnect with the cities’ services and amenities. The new residents, however, would resiliently develop their own sense of community and history with such integral cultural signifiers as food, language, and art.

LENA: I just have a lot of respect for people who went through those experiences and still managed to carve out a life for themselves and create a community despite a whole lot of obstacles.

Many urban areas would undergo gentrification, the process of homes or businesses in low-income areas being purchased inexpensively (often by real estate developers or speculators) and then rebuilt with modern conveniences and amenities in order to attract more affluent (and, in many cases, white) residents. While some residents of these neighborhoods welcome the positive aspects of change (a safer environment, for example, or more reliable government services, better schools, and a strong local business community), others express an uncertainty about what will come next, as a common result of gentrification is that long-time residents can no longer afford to live in the area. “What happens,” asks author Lance Freeman, “when commerce, the middle-class [and] globalization comes to these forlorn neighborhoods?”

Gentrification, claims writer Britt Julious, is “a concerted effort to make something entirely ‘new’. It is an identity change [like] a series of tattoos. Once they arrive, the change is nearly permanent.” The question for the residents of Clybourne Park is how to acknowledge the inevitability of these changes while maintaining their own identities in the process.

“And fitting into a community is what it all comes down to.” – Karl
“Satire,” wrote Irish writer Jonathan Swift, “is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own.” The Oxford Dictionary describes satire as “the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.” And Clybourne Park, by Bruce Norris’ own design, is a satire - an examination of the ways that we talk about race and class and territoriality without actually using any of those words, the coded language that makes our points, but still leaves us enough coverage to claim that perhaps we'd been misunderstood. Clybourne Park, asserts Norris, is “as much about class as it is about race…poorer neighborhoods, be they white, black, brown or whatever, look different from rich neighborhoods. It's about money, not race – except indirectly.”

In Clybourne Park, neighbors debate the etymology of “Neopolitan”, the capital cities of various nations, and the finer points of a number of realty terms. But is that really what they're talking about? In Act I, several white residents question Francine, the Stoller's black maid, about the potential for her family to be comfortable in a predominantly white neighborhood.

KARL: I think that you'd agree, I'm assuming, that in the world, there exists certain differences. Agreed?

FRANCINE: What sort of differences?

KARL: That people live differently.

The conversation continues as the particulars of food preferences, church attendance, and recreation (“there is just something about the pastime of skiing that doesn’t appeal to the Negro community”) are all employed in an effort to convince the Stollers to cancel the sale of their house to a black family, ostensibly for the benefit of the black family. But is Karl – and the people he represents – truly interested in that family's well-being?

In Act II, Lena and Kevin, long-time residents of the largely African American neighborhood, express concern that Steve and Lindsey, the white couple who have just moved to the area, plan to replace their purchased house with one that is fifteen feet and three inches taller than any other structure in the area. Why would this be of such concern? Is it simply because the new house might violate neighborhood zoning regulations? Or is there another reason for the concern?

STEVE: The history of America is the history of private property.

LENA: That may be –

STEVE: Read de Tocqueville.

LENA: - though I rather doubt your grandparents were sold as private property.

In writing about Clybourne Park, The Washington Post's Peter Marks has reflected on “the way we eventually unmake ourselves through our words, no matter how hard we try to prettify them.” In Act I, the white characters exhibit, as Norris says, “a shocking degree of openness in making crass assertions about race,” while in Act II, we witness the characters going out of their way to avoid racial generalizations, even when those comments hint at exactly what they are trying to say. “Will we ever,” asks Marks, “figure out how to talk to each other confidently across the racial demilitarized zone?”

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The Satire of Clybourne Park

“What good does it do, if we perpetually fall into the same, predictable little euphemistic tap dance around the topic?” – Steve
The Fine Print of Private Property

According to the Center Theatre Group, “The central debate taking place in Clybourne Park involves private property rights. One couple is fighting for its right to do with their owned property as they please. The other couple is fighting for the preservation of the history and character of their community, which could be viewed as protection of the public’s interest.”

“In 2000, the city of Chicago began the process to create a plan that would help to accommodate both the long-term residents and the new development,” cites dramaturg Jenni Werner in Geva’s Clybourne Park dramaturgical packet. “One major requirement set by the plan was that new development would ‘respect the historic development character of subareas with regard to building scale, orientation, and setbacks.’ This included respecting the scale of adjacent properties.”

The private property in question in Clybourne Park is a Chicago Bungalow – specifically a 1.5 story, brick, leaded-glass window, semi-enclosed front veranda, roofline perpendicular to the street architectural style that was likely built between 1910 and 1940 when a huge demand for affordable housing in Chicago led to the creation of “Bungalow Belt.” Some of the terms the two couples, the lawyer, and the neighborhood association representative try to sort through in Act II include:

* Easement – the right to use someone else’s property without possessing it (i.e., a sidewalk)
* Frontage – the length of a plot of land or building measured along-side the road onto which it fronts.
* Facade – the front of a building, or any side of a building, facing a public way

As the play progresses, we come to realize that the characters’ discussions about the fine print of private property have very little to do with actual real estate, and much more to do with how a neighborhood’s personal and historic value, as well as an individual’s personal values, can affect a property’s value – monetary and otherwise.

The Changing Landscape of Real Estate in Rochester

As explained in the Clyboure Park dramaturgical packet, “The African American population of Rochester tripled between 1954 and 1964 (right around the time that Act I takes place in Clybourne Park), with no changes in public housing policies. At the time of the race riots in the mid-1960s, most blacks held low-pay and low-skill jobs and lived in substandard housing. Rochester was the last city in the state of New York to implement a public housing program.” The 2010 census (right around the time that Act II takes place in Clybourne Park), tells us that Rochester’s population was 43.7% white and 41.7% black.

Rochester, like many other cities in the United States, paralleled many of the changes faced by the Clybourne Park neighborhood, both in Act I and Act II. Not unlike the white flight experienced by the Clybourne Park community in Act I, one local example includes the Irondequoit Mall (today’s Medley Center). It faced a downturn in the 1990s, shortly after its construction, when the mall became a popular hangout for other ethnic and racial groups, and white customers who frequented the shopping center began to express concern about the safety of the area. Now, the mall is all but abandoned. As the Clyborne Park neighborhood transitions in Act II, we can look to our own East Avenue neighborhood for a comparison. Not long ago, rent for a 1-bedroom apartment on East Avenue soared from approximately $400 to $900 per month, in part because of the area’s relative proximity to a changing downtown landscape which featured an increase in businesses, restaurants, and entertainment.

“There’s just a lot of pride, and a lot of memories in these houses, and for some of us, that connection still has value.” – Lena
“The house undergoes a significant change between Act I and Act II,” said Clybourne Park scenic and costume designer Skip Mercier. “I didn’t want the house in Act II to be so destroyed that it’s unrecognizable, that it loses all appeal and we don’t know why Lindsey and Steve want it. We should still be able to see its worth and its beauty. It should tug at our hearts so we think, ‘Please don’t tear this house down and replace it with something new.’” While we are certainly still able to recognize the house in Act II as the same house in Act I, fifty years worth of change and deterioration needs to occur in one fifteen-minute intermission. Some theatres use a turntable that simply rotates the set, so you can have an Act I house and an Act II house, back to back. At Geva, because Clybourne Park is a co-production with Cleveland Play House and therefore needs to fit on two unique stages, we’ve opted for a different route. Here’s how the Clybourne home will age fifty years in fifteen minutes:

“And you know, the thing is, communities change.” – Lindsey
Post-Show Discussion Questions
To download stimulating post-show discussion, individual reflection, and writing prompt questions to share with your students after their visit to see *Clybourne Park* at Geva, please visit this URL: [http://www.gevatheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Clybourne-Park-Post-Show-Discussion-Questions.pdf](http://www.gevatheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Clybourne-Park-Post-Show-Discussion-Questions.pdf)

Resources

**Books**
*There Goes the ‘Hood* by Lance Freeman
*Root Shock: How tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It* by Mindy Thompson Fullilove, M.D.
*A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry
*Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* by Paul Kivel
*Reimagining A Raisin in the Sun: Four New Plays* edited by Rebecca Rugg and Harvey Young
*Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* by Beryl Satter
*The House on Clybourne Street* by Beryl Satter
*There Goes the Neighborhood: Racial, Ethnic and Class tension in Four Chicago Neighborhoods and Their Meaning for America* by William Julius Wilson and Richard P. Taub

**Other Sources Used**
Geva Theatre Center *Clybourne Park* Dramaturgical Packet, compiled by Jenni Werner (list of Works Cited included at the back of the document)
2010 Rochester Census
Wikipedia – information regarding:
* The 1964 Rochester Race Riots
* Rochester New York Cityscape
* Rochester New York Demographics
* The Korean War
* *Clybourne Park*
* Bruce Norris

Student Guides:
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“So - are you the racist?” – Kevin
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