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TWO SHIPS PASSING

You hurriedly turn into the driveway to escape the whizzing weekend traffic on Melrose Avenue, and you find yourself in the back yard of a storefront, which is like a reject from the 97 Cent stores. Then, in a square, whitewashed structure in the back you see an open window with a non-descript sign announcing Box Office, and you realize that this apparent afterthought of a building has been made into a theatre with a few dozen seats, a long, but shallow stage, and a few lights hanging from the rafters. The set is large - sort of bulky and old fashioned, attempting to depict a bar - supposedly an upscale lounge, which the program notes describe as being in a Boston Hotel circa 1962.

As the play opens, an elegant dark-skinned man sits in a booth waiting to be served, while the blonde waitress and balding bartender mumble quietly to each other. They are not going to serve him because this is the Boston of 1962, where integration was a platitude and the establishment was fiercely fighting to maintain the status quo. In the bartender's eyes, this man is clearly in the wrong place at the wrong time.

When Daniel Murphy enters, he yells at the bar tender, demanding that they serve the man, but instead settles for buying him a drink himself, which the waitress delivers with some hesitance. Murphy is a Jack Kennedy-esque man, complete with the Bostonian accent, who argues that the man in the booth is an African diplomat and has as much right to service as anyone else. We later discover that Doctor Maurice Shaba is also a professor in a local university and that he is about to marry Daniel Murphy's sister, making him a future member of a well placed Boston society family.

Leaving aside the fact that this was the era when Civil Rights were first churning their controversial engine, while the Administration gave its full support, and the country had other ideas, Author - Director Pete Riesenberg further complicates things by introducing two sisters who have been passing for White women most of their lives.

One is Loreen, Doctor Shaba's future bride and the other is Doris, Daniel Murphy's beautiful wife. Loreen is willing to "out" herself, has no problems with her background, and is obviously in love and looks forward to the marriage.

Doris wants no part of it, desperately fighting to maintain her secret past, and even though her husband knows, she is afraid and insecure to bring it out in the open.

For years their mother had raised them as White, going so far as to run away from their father, a humble Pullman Porter, and keeping the secret from all their friends and acquaintances. Now Gordon Ship has come to the wedding, and Loreen wants him to give her away at the wedding.

The conflict and tension aroused by this scenario often had the ethnically mixed audience at the edge of their seats. Claudia Mason as Doris Ship Murphy, takes a difficult role and makes it into a compelling study of a woman in a panicky crisis.

You want to vilify her for renouncing her father, her background and her culture, yet you truly understand how she might feel about losing an identity that she has nurtured all her life - an identity that was imposed by her mother since childhood and now is threatened by her sister.

William Stanford Davis as Gordon Ship, the father gives a sympathetic and warm portrayal of a father who seems somewhat intimidated by the society surrounding his daughters, who feels truly sorry for not having tried to be closer to the daughters, but is resigned to remain in the background rather than hurt his daughter. His "Pullman Porter" mentality keeps him in a subservient role, and he's not assertive enough to impose his feelings.

Barbara Koval plays Loreen, with a certain edge, giving the impression that some childhood sibling rivalry lurks deep within her liberal attitude, and "coming out" with her real background in the midst of a White high society group is more to settle a score than to reach for happiness.

Dan Murphy played by Sean Christian is the husband who knows what the right thing is, but prefers to keep peace with his wife Doris, and reluctantly backs off his liberal demands, while Doug Bellitto as John Murphy, Daniel's brother gives a surprising twist to his casual, semi-relaxed portrait.

Mrs Hooker is a society matron who has close ties with the sisters, but when faced with the truth, shows her true feelings and prejudices with obvious hostility. Marcia Loring does a great job with the role, while Amos Cowson is a dignified and conservative Dr. Shaba, keeping his cool under humiliations and insults as he tries to focus on his impending wedding. At the risk of being one more in a long line of observers, it has to be said that Cowson gives the role an air of propriety, not unlike Morgan Freeman might have done.

Jennifer Blake as Sandy the bar maid, and Thomas Michael Clemons as Jack the bartender fill their roles with proper

authenticity, while Ernie King portrays Lincoln the hotel waiter with quiet rage and proper decorum.

The Civil Rights struggle took many forms - some obviously visible, some violent, some even deadly, but this story focuses on a phase of the struggle that is brought to the most basic micro level - one person to another. It's not about speeches or marches or water hoses and dogs - it's about one man and one woman getting together, and another woman trying to deny them. In the end, some people get what they want, some don't and others settle. In that sense, things haven't changed all that much.

So why all the space devoted to the theatre venue early in the review? This is a remarkably well-done production, with superb acting and intelligent writing that explores the real conflict of integration, and acceptance. We had reviewed a play at the Ahmanson the day before, where the sets were automatically raised and lowered, slid in and out, the lighting was precise and the theatre ambiance was pristine. The play was excellent, as it should be, and the following day, we walk into the Pan Andreas, about as far removed from the Ahmanson as you can get, where three guys dressed in jump suits grunt and sweat to roll the clunky sets back and forth between scenes and actors use the doors to the back yard and the lobby to make their entrances. Yet, there was one common bond. The actors have the same commitment to their characters, the same sense of urgency to tell their story, and the same dedication to the pursuit of their craft.

How fortunate that this city offers so many variations of theatre for all the tastes, budgets and levels of patrons, and how great it is that no matter what the venue, the same kind of people are there, giving everything they have just to share a bit of themselves, even at their personal expense sometimes.

Some people would call them crazy. Those who know them better call them - - - actors.

The Pan Andreas Theatre is located at 5125 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles. Reservations and information at: (323) 467-7237

(Jose Ruiz)