Theatre in Review: *Separate and Equal* (59E59)

Adrian Baidoo, Ross Birdsong. Photo: Jeff Hanson.

In ***Separate and Equal***, a pickup basketball game becomes a proxy war in the fractured, fractious state of race relations in Birmingham, Alabama, 1951. **Seth Panitch**, who is responsible for both the script and its explosive staging, has come up with a taut, elegant way of dramatizing the social system designed to keep blacks apart from whites in the apartheid American South of the pre-Civil Rights era. Like the sport, it is fast, furious, and subject to constant reversals of fortune; underneath the action is an ugly, persistent animosity that yields a prickly, uncomfortable truth: No one, on either side, escapes the poisonous effects of institutionalized prejudice.

The setting is a court intended for the use of Birmingham's white youth, except for a few hours on Sunday, otherwise known locally as "n-----r day." Nevertheless, Calvin, a black college kid, and his two friends, the sardonic, cutting Emmett and the more easygoing Nathan, are hanging around the edges, itching to play, prevented only by the trouble that lies in store. Emmett, watching Calvin execute a few moves, says, sardonically, "Mister Big Brain don't know what day of the week it is." "That's alright," laughs Nathan, "There's a white calendar just waitin' for him in the trunk of the nearest Studebaker."

This trio is joined by three white youths, also looking to shoot a few hoops: the laconic Edgar; Jeff, a wiry, angry bully; and Wesley, a pudgy class-clown type. The black guys, having already been menaced by the local police, are wary of these intruders, but a kind of truce is worked out, with parallel games unfolding on opposite sides of the court. The two teams keep stepping on each other's toes, however, and -- fueled by restlessness, mutual hostility, and a general resistance to rules -- they are soon pitted in interracial competition. Everyone is reluctant to take part until Nathan says the magic words: "What are y'all -- *chicken*?"

From the first move, the game practically threatens to burst the boundary between actors and audience. Theater B at 59E59 has been converted by the production designer, **Matthew Reynolds**, into a flat-floor space with the audience on all four sides. Thanks to **Lawrence M. Jackson**'s strenuous, endlessly inventive choreography, the intense physical action -- accented by the jazz drums of Tom Wolfe's original music -- provides a persistent rhythm to the animosities driving the game. No basketball is used; instead, it is suggested by fluent mime action, with possession indicated by an actor clapping his hands. The "backboards" are video screens, so when a player "shoots" the invisible ball, it appears on the screen, allowing us to see if a point has been made. All of this works splendidly, and then some: Because Panitch has, in a nasty encounter between the black youths and local police, already established the consequences of breaking the town's racial rules, the game feels dangerously transgressive. The fact that it bristles with racial hostilities only adds to the sense of peril.

Panitch, who is skilled at ratcheting up tension, intersperses the action with vignettes that lay bare the tangled relationships among the players. Calvin's mother works as a maid for Edgar's mother; the boys once shared a budding friendship that was cut off by both women, for reasons having to do with a scandal that is an open secret in town. Emmett's rage is fueled by memories of his brother, a Korean War veteran, who came home to a ghastly fate. Wesley, whose mother is dead, lives unhappily with his father, an alcoholic lawyer who helps local blacks evade the corrupt arm of the law, getting little thanks from either side for his efforts. The situation on the court is unstable as spilled mercury: A moment of

sympathy between the teams can turn at the speed of a switchblade, fueled by taunts, like this one from Emmett: "Oh, I love me some baseball -- only time a black man can wave a stick at a white man and not get his neck broke!"

At the same time, the playwright makes clear the long-burning resentments of the white characters, dating back to the unhealed scars of the Civil War. Edgar, endorsing the existence of the Ku Klux Klan and its mission "to defend what's ours, to take back what's been stolen from us by thugs, by the government, by outsiders who don't know a damn thing about us." Or, as his mother instructs him, "Always remember -- If you're no better than a colored... who you better than?" Honed to a lean and suspenseful eighty-five minutes, *Separate and Equal* benefits from one of the most uniformly accomplished ensembles to be seen in New York in several months. Especially notable are **Adrian Baidoo** as Calvin, whose tolerance for the ways of his hometown is quickly running thin; **James Holloway** as Emmett, a towering vessel of fury; **Ross Birdsong** as Edgar, his genuinely decent instincts pulled in different directions by the influence of family and friends; **Steven Bond, Jr.**, as Jeff, whose casually cruel manner masks deeper insecurities; **Pamela Afesi** as Calvin's mother, Viola, her calculated smile barely hiding contempt for her employer; **Barbra Wengerd** as Edgar's mother, Annabelle, who sheathes her venom inside her honeyed manner; and **Will Badgett** as Two Snakes, an older black man who has perfected his Uncle Tom routine to keep a sadistic police lieutenant at bay. (The cop, well played by **Ted Barton**, is named Lt. Connor, a name that inescapably calls to mind Bull Connor, the Alabama official who so furiously opposed school integration.)

On the design side, Reynolds may be the ultimate multitasker, being responsible for scenery, lighting, sound, and -- with **Maya Champion** -- projections, all of which are solid achievements. (The imagery includes shots of plantation life in the nineteenth century, slaves in the cotton fields, a train station, a hot rod decorated with Confederate flags, and an electric fan, the last an allusion to a gratuitous power play by Annabelle to keep Viola in her place. **Tiffany M. Yeager**'s fine, period-accurate costumes are especially sharp in delineating the differences between the two women.

Occasionally, there are moments when *Separate and Equal*'s sleek concept feels overstuffed; the passage about the Klan, mentioned above, feels a bit like an educational insert, and I wasn't entirely persuaded by a scene in which the whites sing "Dixie" and are countered by the blacks offering a spiritual titled "Hold On." Most of the time, however, it works both as volatile drama and a devastatingly accurate assessment of racial wounds that still fester. The play is founded on a troubling paradox: The basketball game is ill-advised for anyone who wants to stay out of trouble, yet how else will these young men learn to understand each other? One watches in nervous anticipation, knowing that something terrible will happen. It's a tribute to Panitch's invention -- and the work of this fine company -- that when it finally does, it is thoroughly unexpected.**-- David Barbour**

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