

THEY

By Rosemary Frisino Toohey

WHY I LIKE IT: Drama editor Janet Colson writes:

Rosemary Frisino Toohey has created a powerful piece of theatre in THEY, a series of interwoven monologues delivered by four workers at the community focal point where race and class intersect - the local supermarket. Writing dynamic monologues with characters whose need to talk is reciprocated by an audience's desire to listen takes a special skill and playwright Rosemary Frisino Toohey nails it. The characters in her play speak like real people, and regardless of their perspectives, we get caught up in the conversation.

Toohey addresses an urgency of the present moment in her monologue driven play, packing a sucker punch with her characters' contrapuntal spoken-word attitudes towards race. It's particularly difficult to push past the comfort zone into the powder keg issue of racial relations, but this play meets the challenge head on. We see how a theatre piece, especially one as well-written as this one, can transcend the time and space continuum, allowing us to not only listen to people's words, but to hear them.

Five stars.

An excerpt from Carla:

Well, alright then. Since we're both, you know, the same, I guess I can say this. I'm not prejudiced or anything, but here's the way I see it. If they were all like Morgan Freeman, everything would be okay...

And Rena:

RENA

Look, bro, just because we're both brown skin don't think I'm gonna stand here and spill my guts to you. I need to know if this is going to get back to my boss...

Okay, I get it, it's a friggin' survey for college, but you're askin' me to tell you how I feel. Like, really? I got to think about this.

THEY

CHARACTERS

- CARLA: female, White, middle-aged, supermarket shopper.
RENA: female, Black, 20s, supermarket employee
JIM: male, White, late teens, supermarket employee.
LEON: male, Black, middle-aged, supermarket employee.

N.B. The play is a series of interrupted monologues with each character speaking to unseen questioners. Each is in a separate place onstage.

TIME The present.

SETTING A supermarket, minimally suggested, or the set might be just an empty stage.

THEY

(CARLA, RENA, JIM AND LEON all stand in separate spaces. Lights up on CARLA. She addresses an unseen questioner.)

CARLA

What do you want?...

Yeah, this is my regular place to food shop...

You're doing a survey for college? Well, I don't know if I've got time to answer any questions. I just ran in here to grab a few things for supper. What's it all about?...

Oh, good Lord, race in America, yeah, I've got an opinion. Doesn't everybody? And you want to hear what I really think?...

So, what you're telling me is, white students are talking to whites and the black students are talking to blacks, is that it?...

Well, alright then. Since we're both, you know, the same, I guess I can say this. I'm not prejudiced or anything, but here's the way I see it. If they were all like Morgan Freeman, everything would be okay...

Yes, Morgan Freeman, the actor. I mean, Morgan Freeman could come over and hang out with me anytime. Talk about class, talk about style. Same thing with Samuel L. Jackson. And of course, Denzel Washington. Denzel Washington could move in next door as far as I'm concerned. I told my husband Denzel Washington could move into our spare room if he wanted to. I would be fine with that. Absolutely fine. Him or Sidney Poitier. But you see, the rest of them, they're not like Sidney Poitier. That right there is the whole problem with race in America today.

(Lights crossfade to RENA, likewise addressing an unseen questioner.)

RENA

Look, bro, just because we're both brown skin don't think I'm gonna stand here and spill my guts to you. I need to know if this is going to get back to my boss...

Okay, I get it, it's a friggin' survey for college, but you're askin' me to tell you how I feel. Like, really? I got to think about this.

(Lights crossfade to JIM, addressing an unseen questioner.)

JIM

Well, I've been working as a stock boy here all summer...

I don't know, maybe I'll go to college one day, it's hard right now to see that. My dad's out of the picture. It's just me and my mom and there's not a lot of money...

Yeah, I heard about the way you're doing this, that the white kids are only talking to the whites and the blacks are only talking to the blacks. Thing is, I don't want to talk about it at all. It just don't feel right, okay? I mean, who really wants to talk about race?

(Lights crossfade to LEON, addressing an unseen questioner.)

LEON

I know you guys have been coming around the store and asking questions. I didn't know you were gonna hang out and catch the night shift too...

Okay, research, I got it. Well, the way I see it is, even when there was a black man in Washington---and he was a top-notch, intelligent guy, nobody can argue with that---but even with him in the oval office, it got worse. There was all that nit-picking with everything he did. The abuse that man had to take, why, they ought to be ashamed...

Hell, no, nobody, nobody in this country ever talked about a president of the United States the way they talked about Barack Obama. If it wasn't his name, it was where he was born, where he went to church. I swear they found fault with what the man ate for breakfast. I think it got under their skin, you know? Some of them just would not accept a black man in the White House.

(Lights crossfade to RENA, as before.)

RENA

This is just a job. I don't plan on doing it forever. My dream was never to spend my days and nights behind the deli counter of a supermarket but here I am...

Well, I've only been here three weeks and it's a lot to learn, you know? All the different meats,

RENA (cont'd.)

and the salads and eighteen kinds of olives and like sixty-nine kinds of cheese. I mean, who eats all this? I don't. And we have to keep the cases clean and re-stock all the time and then the women who come in here drive me nuts...

Yeah, mostly they're white. They show up and they expect me to drop everything and wait on them. Like, what? They're catching a plane or something? I mean I get that they're customers but the boss is on me if I don't do all the other shit I'm supposed to do. And then they give me the look...

You know what I mean, bro...

Of course, they don't *say* anything, they're too "lady-like" to say it, but it's that look. That "Jump to it, you lazy black bitch, I haven't got all day."

(Lights crossfade to CARLA, as before.)

CARLA

But let me tell you about Maddie. Maddie Washington is the sweetest, nicest woman I ever met in my life. Or ever hope to meet. Hard-working, kind, gentle, clean, I mean immaculate. And loving? Oh, my word. Those months she spent taking care of my mother, that was a gift. Her manner, she was so caring, even when Mom was difficult or stubborn, as only my mother could be. I swear to god, the woman is a saint. Her skin may be black but Maddie Washington is lily-white inside. And that's the truth.

(Lights crossfade to JIM, as before.)

JIM

Well, sure, some of my buddies are black. It don't mean nothing. We all hang out together, know what I mean? But people in my family...

Well, like my Uncle Ben, for instance...

Yeah, I guess you could say he's a racist. He's always talking about that stuff, you know? The way he sees it, yeah, sure, blacks had it rough all those years. But it was a long time ago and now it's like we're supposed to make up for everything that didn't go their way. I don't know,

JIM (cont'd.)

I guess sometimes I kind of see his point. Whose fault is it? When is enough, enough? Am I to blame for what some slave trader did? All that stuff happened hundreds of years before I was even born. What's it got to do with me? I mean does that make any sense?

(Lights crossfade to LEON as before.)

LEON

Look, you know this as well as I do. When a brother screws up, you never hear the end of it. From Doctor King to Freddie Gray. I'm tellin' you, they dogged King right up to his death. And those white boys? They do drugs right and left and what do they get? A slap on the wrist is all. That whiteness covers up an awful lot of sins, know what I mean? But they catch some black kid doin' the same damn thing and that jail house door is slammin' shut behind him. And no parole. Now, how can anybody call that fair? Like right now, my sister's son is doin' time for this thing that happened at a club. He and his pals got into a fight with some white guys and this fireman ended up dead. I blame it all on too many guns. Stuff that used to get settled with fists, now it's a piece. But my question is, when my nephew gets out, what's he gonna be like? You can't tell me he's gonna be all good and nice and upstandin'. Man, that's not what you learn on the inside.

(Lights crossfade to RENA, as before.)

RENA

So, my plan right now is to do this for a while and save some money so I can get out of here. I don't tell that to everybody but look, I don't like it here. Too much bad shit goes down in the city. The worst of it is my brother. Now that he's gone, it just hurts. It really hurts. My Gram says it'll be the same anywhere I go. She says, any town, any city in this great red, white and blue country will be the exact same thing. You know, cops all over you like ants on a chocolate cake at a picnic...

My brother? He was only fifteen. Just a kid. 'Course, he didn't look like a kid. He was big for his age, six feet tall. And is that a crime? To be big at the age of fifteen? Seems like everything's a crime when a black kid does it.

(Lights crossfade to CARLA, as before.)

CARLA

Yes indeed, if they were all like Maddie Washington, we wouldn't have the problems we have. But the simple fact of the matter is, they're not. Like last week, I'm right here in this store and all I wanted was a half-pound of maple ham. So, this black girl is cleaning the display case and she's taking her good old time about it. Now, she could see me plain as day, big as life, but did she make a move to wait on me? No way. I mean I could have stood there growing in the linoleum 'till doomsday for all she cared...

No, I didn't tell the manager. I mean, what's the point? It's the same everywhere you go. Some of them just have, well, they have an attitude.

(Lights crossfade to JIM, as before.)

JIM

My uncles said they were going to move to Canada if Obama got elected. Well, he did and they didn't. But I can't help thinking about what they say. And yeah, they tell jokes all the time that are just, well, racist. Two of 'em are police officers but all my uncles are racist, if you get right down to it...

Hell, no, I wouldn't want my buddies, Jay and the rest to hear the stuff my uncles say, but how am I supposed to fix it? I mean, they're my uncles. And it's not just them, it's Christ, just about everybody in my family has, you know, racist ideas. What am I supposed to do? Call them out on it? I mean, it's family. My Uncle Jack was put on leave from the police department because he accidentally shot this black kid when he was doing a drug bust. It was just an accident, you know? We were all worried about him but he's back on active duty now. I mean, he puts his life on the line every single day he goes to work. My mom says cops see the worst of humanity. That's why they think the way they do about blacks. But there's no changing it. That's never gonna happen.

(Lights crossfade to RENA, as before.)

RENA

My Aunt Maddie is always pointing out to me how things have changed since she was my age. She told me how it was years ago when she worked at a restaurant down at the shore... Oh, no. She couldn't be a waitress, not back then. Her job was to keep things going behind the scenes. Back in the day, everybody in the kitchen was black and the cooks couldn't read, so Aunt Maddie got the paper slips from the waitresses, all of who were white of course, and then she told the cooks what people wanted. When the orders were done, she'd put the plates up on the pass-through. Aunt Maddie says she absolutely knew that she was just as smart as those white girls out front, smarter even. But in the afternoon before the dinner rush, could she get out of that hot kitchen and go sit at a table and laugh and talk like they were doing? No way. No possible way. Not back then. They'd have canned her for sure if she poked her black nose out of that kitchen...

Oh, yeah, I know it's better now, but it seems like, Jesus, we still get the short end of the stick.

(Lights crossfade to LEON, as before.)

LEON

Change? Hell, yeah, you can't deny there's been change, a whole lot of change over the years. When my dad was a kid, he couldn't do anything. But we fought and we marched and we took the crap they kept dumping on us and we turned it around. We were banging our heads and our fists against that wall every goddamn day so it would be different for your generation, and it is. There's no denyin' that. Nowadays, there's no ridin' in the back of the bus, drinkin' from different fountains, sittin' in lousy classrooms with old books or no books...

No, I know it's not perfect but it's a lot better than it was, a hell of a lot better. Of course, you young people today don't have the patience to wait for things. That's why a lot of kids act like they do. I understand it, I get where they're comin' from.

(Lights crossfade to CARLA, as before.)

CARLA

When I was a kid, it was a totally white world. The school, the church, the library, the movies, the stores, everybody was white, with one exception, just one. The trash men were black. The guy driving the truck was white. But the guys throwing the cans in, they were all black. And they were the only black people I ever saw. When I grew up, I heard that the bishop who ran our church deliberately kept black families out of our school. Now, how could he do that and live with himself? He was a bishop. Was that right? Of course, it wasn't. But that's how it was.

(Lights crossfade to JIM, as before.)

JIM

A lot of the stuff on race with my family goes back to what happened to my cousin a couple years ago. Owen was a great guy. He was six years older than me and he was a firefighter. He was trained to run into burning buildings and shit with all that heavy stuff those guys have to wear. I don't think I could do that...

Well, what happened was, Owen was out at a bar one night with his buddies and they were having a few. What's the crime in that? After you work hard all day long, can't a guy go to a bar? Anyway, they're leavin' and then something happens. I don't know how it got started. But there was some kind of fight between Owen and his pals and these black guys and this dude pulls a gun. Next thing you know, Owen's in Shock Trauma on life support. Two days later, the doctors said there was no use. So, they pulled the plug and that was it. The end. I mean, you see that shit in movies but Christ, my cousin? He was only twenty-three years old...

Yeah, the guy who did it is locked up now, but so what? I'll never forget the funeral. Owen's casket on a firetruck and all these guys lined up in uniform. My aunt goes to his grave every holiday, every Christmas, his birthday, the anniversary of the day he went in the Fire Department. She can't get over it. I guess she never will. And of course, after that whole thing, nobody in my family has had anything good to say about blacks.

(Lights crossfade to LEON, as before.)

LEON

Lemme tell you about the other night. So, I'm leaving the store to go home, heading to the parking lot to grab my car and this white woman comes along in her car. She pulls up and stops for the light and what does she do? I'll give you three guesses and the first two don't count... Exactly right. Damn if she don't roll her window up. Now you tell me what makes her do that? I swear I didn't make a move toward her. Didn't say a word. I don't even think I looked at her. But we both know what it is. She's afraid I'm some bad-ass mugger. Like I'm gonna attack her, steal her wheels and roar off into the night. Or even worse. I'm going home from work. She thinks I got the energy to do all that? Of course, it's even worse if they're out walking. You know the old joke about why a chicken crosses the road? Hell, I can get a white chick to cross the road like that.

(snaps his fingers)

All I have to do is stroll toward her. Yeah, a white woman sees a black guy bearing down on her and man, she is running to the other side of the street, traffic be damned. What the hell do they see when they look at me?

(Lights crossfade to RENA, as before.)

RENA

Of course, if I up and move, I'll miss my Gram, but she's about the only one. I mean since my brother died it's like, there's nothing left, you know?...

His name was Todd. He was a sweet kid. I mean you just knew he was gonna turn out to be somebody special if he'd had the chance...

He was out in front of the house washing a car. He loved cars, Todd did, and he was taking care of this guy's car. It was like a little business for him, you know? And then down the street some fucked-up drug shit is happenin' and the cops come and next thing you know, Todd's lying there on the street, still holding the hose with the water pouring out of it, but his t-shirt is all bloody...

No, it was a cop that shot him but, you know how it is. Everybody's sorry but what the fuck. We're all like targets in a shootin' gallery here.

(Lights crossfade to CARLA, as before.)

CARLA

I'll tell you about a scary thing that happened right here in this store a while ago. There's this older woman who works at the checkout. She's mid-sixties, white hair, and she's always smiling, making jokes, you know, real friendly. Anyway, one day I'm in her line and she's chattin' it up with the man ahead of me. He says he wants to retire, but he can't because he's got to pay for health care and he mentions Obama. And then, this nice, little, old lady pretends to hold a shotgun and she says "You know, people take shots at everybody else nowadays. Why didn't they take a shot at him?" Well, I was struck dumb. I mean, did I really just hear this sweet old grandmother say they should have shot the president? That woman has to be old enough to remember JFK's assassination. I don't understand that, I just don't...

Oh, sure. Her and the guy she's talking with and me, all of us were white. Does that make it okay to joke about something like that?

(Lights crossfade to JIM, and as he speaks, lights slowly up on all.)

JIM

It's like I'm in two different worlds. There's this weird shit I hear when I'm with my family and then there's what goes on when I'm with the guys. I mean, my uncles and my aunts, they don't know my buddies. They don't know what they're like. How do you make sense out of it, you know?

RENA

So, I guess before it was all crap and now, what? There's a little less crap? And I'm supposed to go, hallelujah, ain't it great! Yeah, well, don't hold your breath.

CARLA

Like I said, if they were all like Morgan Freeman and Maddie Washington, this country would be a different place. But still, making jokes about shooting the president? That's just not right.

LEON

Look, I got to get back to work, but I'll tell you something. I think you have to look at the world through these eyes, through the eyes of an old black man to get what it's really like. Yeah, we've got the laws now, we've got the rules that say we're all even. It's all written down. But that's not it. It's what's *not* written down, what's inside, what's in people's minds, that's it. That's the toughest thing to change.

(Lights slowly down)

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *Five years ago, Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old Baltimore man, died of spinal injuries after he was arrested by the police. When that happened, my city, Baltimore, blew up. There were riots, cars burned, buildings torched. No lives were lost, but it was scary and sobering and sad. It was an awful reminder of how things were after Dr. Martin Luther King was killed. His assassination also prompted riots here. Hundreds were injured and six people died. Despite the passage of nearly 50 years between one event and the other, it seemed as if we were in the same place. Had we really learned nothing? Was racism just as virulent? THEY emerged from these ramblings.*

My favorite playwrights? William Inge, Caryl Churchill, Herb Gardner, as well as Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman. I write a lot of comedy...

THEY has had 2 readings, both in Baltimore. One at a library as part of a group of plays on racism, and a second by Rapid Lemon Productions.

AUTHOR BIO: Rosemary FrisinoToohey has had nearly 300 productions of her plays around the world. She's produced on 4 continents and in 40 US states. In London she won top honors as Audience Favorite in the British Theatre Challenge and in New York she won the Next Generation Playwriting Contest. She tied as Gold Medal Winner in the Italian American Theatre of Chicago's First Playwright Competition, and she's won the Baltimore Playwrights Festival three times. Nine of her comedies are published and three of her dramas have been honored with Artist grants from the Maryland State Arts Council. She is currently penning the book, music and lyrics of her

second musical. FrisinoToohey is a member of The Dramatists Guild of America and SAG/AFTRA. There's more at www.frisinotoohey.com