

Intiman opens fest with 'Stick Fly,' about loving the ones you're with

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Chantal DeGroat and Tyler Trerise are shown during a reading of "Stick Fly," Intiman Theatre's first major play of its 2016 festival. "She is me before I figured a couple of big pieces... [More](#) ▾

Lydia R. Diamond's play "Stick Fly" opens Intiman's season on May 24. The play is somewhat unusual, one of the actors says, because "the narrative of the upper middle class — 'bougie,' if you will — black family is not really told that frequently."

By [Dusty Somers](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

Nearly a decade after she began writing it, Lydia R. Diamond's play "Stick Fly," about tensions in an affluent black family, made it to Broadway. That fact didn't sink in right away.

"We were in, like, the first production meeting in New York [before] I realized I was having a Broadway show," said the Chicago-based Diamond. "It completely took me by surprise."

The next stop for "Stick Fly" is Intiman Theatre's 2016 summer festival, which is highlighting plays by black women, including Alice Childress and Adrienne Kennedy. "[Stick Fly](#)" [kicks off the festival](#) with a run at the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute, opening in previews on May 24.

THEATER PREVIEW

'Stick Fly'

by Lydia R. Diamond. May 24-June 19, Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute, 104 17th Ave. S, Seattle; \$20-\$40 (206-441-7178 or intiman.org).

Set in a lavish Martha's Vineyard vacation home, the play explores a family's dysfunction as two brothers bring home their girlfriends. Taylor, an entomologist whose study of the housefly gives the play its title, is the daughter of a highly regarded black intellectual, while Kimber is a little "melanin-challenged."

"Stick Fly" attracted mixed reviews during its three-month Broadway run. Charles Isherwood's comparison of the play to a soap opera [in The New York Times](#) was a half-compliment, while The New Yorker's Hilton Als pronounced it "[banal and](#)

tedious,” and got harsher from there.

Though its premise seems to riff on the meet-the-parents dynamic of “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner,” Diamond says the story’s genesis was more personal.

“I think I’ve evolved since then, but I found it fascinating that I could still be annoyed if I saw a white woman in the supermarket with her black husband,” she said. “I felt that that was a complicated and interesting contradiction.”

For director Justin Emeka, who directed his first play in 1995 at Langston Hughes, the play’s litany of conflicts surrounding race, class and familial betrayals presented a test — and an opportunity.

“The early challenge for me was trying to get the cast and all of us to embrace this family that from the outside can look a little crazy and look a little melodramatic,” he said. “The play is a lot about learning how to love flawed individuals.”

If a dysfunctional family with daddy issues, lurking secrets and contentious romances sounds like typical stage fodder, the milieu isn’t quite as familiar.

“I find that a lot of black plays and TV shows [present] a certain type of black story,” said Amara Granderson, who plays Cheryl, the daughter of the family’s housekeeper. “The narrative of the upper middle class — ‘bougie,’ if you will — black family is not really told that frequently.”

A common motif in black drama is financial struggle, said Granderson and Emeka. A story that doesn’t focus on material needs can allow for a different perspective on the characters’ relationships.

“It’s somewhat of a luxury to not have issues of sustenance be front and center,” Emeka said. “A lot of times our struggle to deal with each other gets trumped by our struggle to try to attain material success.”

Chantal DeGroat plays Taylor, the character that the playwright says most resembles herself. DeGroat sees some similarities too, both in the character’s relationship to her father and her volatile emotional state.

“She is me before I figured a couple of big pieces out about how to move through the world,” DeGroat said. “[She] has not dealt with a lot of her problems. She’s almost always ready to freak out.”

Emeka challenged his actors to think about their characters in the first person rather than the third person, which sometimes results in pain that feels plenty real, particularly in a play that deals with uncomfortable discussions about race and class.

“I feel like a lot of people assume that black people want to stand there and yell at everybody and tell them all about themselves and tell them all their truths ... but that is not necessarily the case,” DeGroat said. “It hurts. It hurts me, and if I’ve succeeded, I’ve kind of hurt the other [actor] a little, somewhere in there, and it doesn’t feel good. These issues don’t feel good.”

In the decade-plus since she wrote the play, Diamond has seen the conversation around race fluctuate, both because of the election of President Obama and the subsequent puncturing of the myth of a post-racial America — but some things haven’t changed.

“Through all of this, the play holds up because it’s just a family’s truth,” she said. “The race dynamics in the play spring out of just the dynamics of family and being black in America, and that doesn’t shift. Maybe the way white people talk about race changes, but the way black people experience race, whether [they’re] privileged or not, stays pretty much the same.”

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