

RACE RELATIONS

take CENTER STAGE

Schools in the Big Ten tackle a play based on life after a destructive race riot

IN 1967, ONE OF THE DEADLIEST AND MOST DESTRUCTIVE RACE RIOTS in modern history took place in Detroit. Soon after this rioting, a group of upwardly mobile, like-minded families, including playwright Joanna McClelland Glass, attempted to maintain a fully racially integrated neighborhood within that devastated city. Her play based on the experience, eponymously named “Palmer Park,” premiered last year in Canada and until now has not been performed in the United States.

But thanks to an initiative of Dan Carter, director of Penn State’s School of Theatre, Glass’ experience will be shared across much of the country when schools in the Big Ten produce the play throughout the 2009–10 academic year.

Carter pitched the idea at an annual meeting of all the theatre chairs in the Big Ten, and it stuck. “The play is an example of the best kind of drama due to its mutually destructive forces, yet lack of villains,” he explained, noting the neighborhood’s attempt at integration ended up failing. “The playwright gives everyone their day in court. The people who bring it down are ultimately just looking out for their kids.”

The play focuses on the families whose children attend Hampton Elementary, a school that briefly maintained a ratio of 65 percent white

students to 35 percent black students. The parents successfully raise money for programs in art and music at the school, which leads to unrest among neighboring schools that are racially segregated—and struggling.

“For a ‘brief, shining moment’ in that community of 1,100 houses, we were able to maintain racial diversity both residentially and at the neighborhood school,” Glass has said. “My Palmer Park experience is all the more haunting because we clung to our ideas and our ideals so tenaciously And

finally, we failed.”

That experience, although heartbreaking, is part of the reason why Chaya Gordon-Bland is excited about directing the first of the Big Ten productions at Michigan State University, Oct. 27–Nov. 1. “Ms. Glass has a really important story to tell, and she tells it movingly, sensitively and intelligently. It is both a privilege and an important responsibility to direct this significant play.”

The other Big Ten universities are presenting both staged readings and full productions. Carter, who is directing Penn State’s production in April 2010, is leading the development of a repository of resources related to the play, such as photos and scenic elements, to be shared among the schools.

He said a collaboration among theatre departments in the Big Ten would not have happened 15 years ago. “Our relationship has evolved from a friendly rivalry to genuine collegiality,” he noted. “This initiative will help us to develop best practices for reaching the largest audience.”



Palmer Park, 2008; Dan Chameroy (left) as Martin Townsend and Nigel Shawn Williams as Fletcher Hazelton; Photo by David Hou; Courtesy of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival Archives

Until now, “Palmer Park” has been produced only at Canada’s Stratford Shakespeare Festival.



Hispanic immigrants in Reading and Berks County took to the streets as part of the 2006 “Day Without Immigrants” march.

A 7-YEAR-OLD BOY MAKES AN ARDUOUS JOURNEY from Ecuador to New York with strangers to join his father; he eventually earns a college scholarship and an MBA, and he now directs the Kutztown University Latino Business Resource Center in Kutztown, Pa. A girl moves with her family from Puerto Rico to Kansas, struggling with the language and cultural differences. She settles in Reading, earning a Ph.D. in urban and bilingual education from Temple University. And a man, born in New Jersey to Puerto Rican parents, becomes so devoted to his Reading community he runs for mayor, losing by only a small margin.

These are some of the 17 Hispanic life stories included in a new booklet—written by students of Dr. Laurie Grobman, Penn State Berks professor of English and women’s studies—that paints a picture of the Hispanic community in Berks County.

The Hispanic Center of Reading and Berks County, a linguistic and cultural skills community organization, is distributing the booklet throughout the county, where the Latino population has continued to grow over the last few decades. “It’s important for people to see the different cultures in our community,” said Ileana Torres-Young, director of social services at the center.

BERKS’ LATINO FLAVOR

This fall Grobman is building on the project by working with students on a more detailed and comprehensive history of Latinos in the area. Grobman aims to give students a research experience “in which they work with community members to expand their own understanding of the region, and at the same time give the region a better understanding of its history and culture.”

Grobman, who previously documented the African-American experience in Berks County (along with Penn State Berks senior lecturer in English Dr. Gary Kunkelman and his students), added that she makes race relations issues part of the syllabus. “I try to make sure all students understand what it means for a primarily white group of people to write a history of a minority group,” she said. “It needs to be addressed and acknowledged and not be the elephant in the room.”

WHAT’S NEW ONLINE: THE ART OF THE CINEMA

A BLENDED LEARNING VERSION of the Art of the Cinema—one of Penn State’s most popular courses, with enrollments of around 500 in resident instruction—is a new offering this fall from Penn State’s College of Communications and World Campus.

The effort is part of the Provost’s Blended Learning Initiative,

which aims to make large enrollment classes more accessible and interactive.

“Other popular culture types of courses have done quite well in the online version, and this course, with its multimedia content, has the potential for large enrollments,” said Dr. Matt Jordan, assistant professor of film/video & media studies.