

Review: Black and white best friends find clever ways to outwit hate in History Theatre’s ‘Behind the Sun’

The fraught play leans into human connection as it confronts 1950s racial history.

 **By Rohan Preston**
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From left, Charla Marie Bailey, Darius Dotch, Jane Froiland and Scott Witebsky play best friends in "Behind the Sun," a new play by Stanley Kipper and Laura Drake. (Rick Spaulding)

Few things are as visceral as a man yelling at the top of his lungs as he becomes utterly disordered and unmoored.

In “Behind the Sun,” a new play at St. Paul’s History Theatre about a Black family outwitting and surviving a litany of racial barriers to own its home in south Minneapolis in 1956, the moment causes shivers.

It happens after Obie Kipper moves his family into an all-white neighborhood. The Kippers are met with an ugly welcome, including dog poo flung through the mail slot, bricks thrown through their windows and gunshots.

Frustrated and at the end of himself, Obie (Darius Dotch) screams back at these faceless, nameless figures in the dark that he’s stronger than them and that he will not break.

An autobiographical play by Stanley Kipper in collaboration with playwright Laura Drake, “Sun” has been simply and sometimes smartly staged by Richard Thompson in this premiere.

The action takes place in a world where rigid racial stratification is coming undone, helped along by people listening to the music on the radio even if songs by Black artists are quickly covered by white ones. Obie has moved to Minneapolis as part of a long escape from blatant bigotry in Hannibal, Mo., where he grew up, and the violence of Chicago, where he later lived.

In Minneapolis, he and his wife, Mary (Charla Marie Bailey), long to own a nice home to raise their son, Tyler (Joshaviah Kawala in a sincere, earnest turn). But there are social and institutional barriers, including redlining by banks and racism in the real estate industry represented by agent Merle Swanson (James Ramlet, digging into ugliness).

But with best friend Abe Kaplan (Scott Witebsky), who is Jewish, Obie hatches a scheme to achieve his dream that may land him, Mary, Abe and Abe’s wife, Angela (Jane Froiland), all in jail.

“Sun” is suffused with sociology and history, including references to catalytic figures from the civil rights era such as Rosa Parks, Emmett Till and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. In fact, the script occasionally becomes inertial and static, freighted by too much exposition and by the fact that the lighting design does not always distinguish between day and night. The slowing down of the action also isn’t helped by the fact that the family sits around their table a little too much.

The Kipper family is resilient and steadfast, and they also lean on their faith and cultural history to survive their surreal crucibles. But the biggest challenge with the play is that you can feel the creative team’s struggle to tone down the story and make it as palatable as possible, a struggle that ultimately dims the power of “Sun.”

Also, the play could use more humor and joy. There’s no way that these characters can deal with the absurdities they find themselves in without wry laughter.

Still, “Sun” is well acted. Dotch gives a dignified and powerful performance as Obie, embodying decency and strength. Those qualities are still necessary to humanize figures whose worth may be called into question during, say, police encounters.

Bailey, also, is sweet as the stable, reassuring wife and mother with a golden heart. And she has a soothing voice. Froiland’s Angela is not all that developed but she brings light and airiness to the role.

A relative newcomer to Minnesota’s theater scene, Witebsky is like a happy-go-lucky Adam Sandler as Abe.

“Sun” has some beautiful cultural elements that could be expanded. Obie’s forebears were keepers of the Mardi Gras flame, and the family has a staff, and some songs, that they carry still.

As I watched “Sun,” I kept wondering about a deeper exploration of Abe and Obie’s friendship. Their two families, one Jewish, the other Black, are deeply connected. In fact, in the middle of his family being attacked, Obie goes in search of Abe for help.

I wanted to know more about that bond, and how these good humans together overcome the hatred promulgated in darkness by their neighbors.


‘Behind the Sun’


Who: By Stanley Kipper and Laura Drake. Directed by Richard Thompson.

When: 7:30 p.m. Thu.-Sat., 2 p.m. Sun. Ends Oct. 13.

Where: History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul.

Tickets: \$25-\$64. 651-292-4323 or historytheatre.com.

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