Toronto the Good: It needs to push harder in some very uncomfortable places

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Written by Andrew Moodie, directed by Philip Akin, at the Factory Theatre, Toronto, January 31 to March 1

Andrew Moodie's new play *Toronto the Good* opened at Toronto's Factory Theatre on January 31, offering audiences an intelligent, entertaining and lively evening of theatre.

In its details the play is firmly located among the streetcars and Tim Horton's coffee shops of Toronto. Mr. Moodie's observant eye for the daily irritations of urban existence will resonate with the residents of any contemporary city. A delightful sequence in which a harassed father tries to deal with getting the kids off to daycare and himself off to work will ring only too true for many parents.

But Mr. Moodie aims to do more than entertain. In the program notes he states that his work is intended "to inspire a dialogue that can become a catalyst for social change." Consequently the production confronts the challenge of matching political intent with artistic seriousness. As an interview with director Philip Akin in *Eye Weekly* of January 28 attests, the script underwent substantial changes during the rehearsal process in the quest to blend political statement with the demands of drama and character.

Winning the audience with his wry, ironic delivery, Xuan Fraser portrays Thomas Matthews, a successful Crown attorney, who happens to be black. He is assigned to the prosecution of a black youth charged with firearms offences, who has been pulled over by a white female police officer. Matthews resolves to prosecute the youth to the full extent of the law, despite his suspicion that racial profiling was a factor in the arrest. Political and personal issues arise, needless to say, involving race, the police, gun violence and society at large.

As the case progresses, tensions arise between Matthews and his Franco-Ontarian wife, played with affecting vulnerability by Stéphanie Broschart. Matthews begins to question his self-assured assumptions as he interacts with a kaleidoscopic gallery of contemporary Torontonians—including, among others, the teenage girl with attitude, the young IT guy who reinstalls your Outlook, the cop with the chip on her shoulder—all sharply observed and vividly portrayed by Miranda Edwards, Sandra Forsell and Marcel Stewart.

Brian Marler completes the cast, primarily in the role of Simon Phillip, the liberal-minded lawyer who defends the accused youth in the case Matthews is prosecuting. Phillip is a very likeable person (and Mr. Marler gives a very likeable performance). When it comes to issues like racial profiling and the social origins of crime, he shows a broader awareness and deeper moral outrage than his black adversary. And he does this while being sole caregiver for his kids during his wife's temporary absence.

And yet he also takes advantage of his wife's absence to pursue less commendable goals. He tries his best to remain charming and likeable through it all. And he almost succeeds until, in a split second of seemingly trivial frustration, the liberal mask slips and his sense of privilege and entitlement bares its fangs.

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We can anticipate a lot more liberal masks slipping as the economic crisis starts to bite.

Phillip is a fully-fleshed character, who takes on an often-unexpected life of his own. And yet the unexpected twists are firmly grounded in the logic of the character's social background and role. The result is an artistically successful blending of the personal and the political that provides moments of vivid and disturbing insight.

In the opinion of this reviewer, the play's other characters do not have quite the same richness. To some extent this is inevitable given the episodic structure of the narrative and the dazzling variety of characters portrayed by the ensemble. The actors certainly do a superb job of going beyond the text to invest every moment with individuality. No matter how minor the character, every word and gesture arises out of a carefully crafted inner life. Director Akin has forged a cohesive and committed ensemble, holding each actor to consistently high standards.

But the characters still seem more like "types"—albeit entertaining, endearing and well-drawn types—rather than fully-realized human beings, towards whom we have strong and passionate feelings, either for or against. In a play grappling consciously with contemporary political issues, artistic limitations often stem from political limitations. The play raises a number of potentially explosive topics but seems unwilling to push too far beyond the limits of conventional discourse on any of them.

Matthews, the successful Crown attorney, is attacked by a crusading journalist for his lack of affinity with his fellow blacks. Matthews broods over the journalist's remarks in a soul-searching monologue. More effectively, this lack of affinity is given dramatic expression when Matthews' attempt at camaraderie with a fellow employee falls embarrassingly flat. His primary conflict is surely not with the liberal defence lawyer, or with his wife, or even with the crusading journalist. His primary conflict is with his underprivileged black "brothers."

How deep is that conflict? How much does he despise them? Does he fear them? Do they look up to him and admire him as a positive role model? Does colour count for more than class? We never find out. The accused youth is removed from the action by an arbitrary incident, and the play struggles to find its way to a satisfactory ending.

Toronto earned its epithet "the Good" at the end of the 19th century thanks to the strict Protestant morality of its city elders, who regarded all places of amusement with suspicion and locked down everything that was not a church on Sundays. Toronto still has the lowest crime rate of all large Canadian cities and the highest ratio of police officers to population, one for every 495 residents.

Mayor David Miller is convinced that the city has a serious and growing gun violence problem. His report on March 19, 2008, to his executive committee on the city's gun violence strategy paints an ominous picture, supported by numbers drawn selectively from a Statistics Canada document entitled "Firearms and Violent Crime."

The "law and order" platform in Toronto, as elsewhere, largely serves political purposes: to divert attention from growing social inequality and poverty and to build a constituency for right-wing politics, often with an anti-immigrant or racist strain.

Nonetheless violent crime remains a permanent fact of life in the city's poorer neighbourhoods. Scores of lives, frequently black, are lost every year in senseless acts of violence. There is clearly a serious social fault line that needs to be explored. *Toronto the Good* is to be commended for wanting to take on the issue and to contribute to bringing about change. But it needed to push harder in some very uncomfortable places to fully live up to its aspirations.

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