

Jeff Daniels' *Flint*: A drama about the former industrial city

Is it “all about the money” or all about race?

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Flint, a drama by Jeff Daniels about the afflicted Michigan city, is currently being performed at the Purple Rose Theatre in Chelsea, Michigan, some 60 miles west of Detroit. The play will run until March 10.

The Purple Rose Theatre Company, a nonprofit stage company, was founded by Daniels—who grew up in Chelsea—in 1991. Daniels, born in 1955, has been a prominent figure in the theater, film and television in the US for more than three decades. He is perhaps best known on screen for Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild* (1986), Ronald Maxwell's *Gettysburg* (1993), Gary Ross's *Pleasantville* (1998), Noah Baumbach's *The Squid and the Whale* (2005) and Danny Boyle's *Steve Jobs* (2015), among others.

Daniels has featured in two television series, *Newsroom* (2012-2014) and *Godless* (2017). He also starred in numerous theater production, on and off Broadway, among them Lanford Wilson's *Redwood Curtain* and *Fifth of July*, for which he was nominated for a Drama Desk Award for Best Supporting Actor, and A. R. Gurney's *The Golden Age*.

Including *Flint*, Daniels has written 17 plays for the Purple Rose Theatre, which, as its web site asserts, “retains its intimate feel with only 168 seats. Every seat is under twenty feet from the stage, so each patron's experience is an up-close encounter with live theatre.”

The theater and its company have many admirable qualities, including an orientation to new plays, often about American social life. The acting and directing are generally at a high level.

Daniels' *Flint* takes place over the course of one unusually warm September afternoon in 2014 in the kitchen of the house owned by Mitchell (Travis Lynch) and Olivia (Casaundra Freeman), a black couple. The other characters are another husband and wife, Eddie (David Bendena) and Karen (Rhiannon Ragland or Kristin Shields), who are white.

The action of the 75-minute drama occurs some five months after the impoverished city, once a center of automobile production, has begun drawing water from the polluted Flint River and thus poisoning its 100,000 residents. Although the water crisis is not at the center of the drama, the filthy, yellow liquid coming out of the kitchen faucet inevitably focuses the spectator's attention.

The two male characters in *Flint* are former General Motors workers. Eddie is one of numerous members of his extended family, including his father, grandfather and several uncles and cousins, to have worked for the auto company. Mitchell got his job because of Eddie's connections at GM. He worked for the company for 16 years. Now Eddie and Mitchell, like tens of thousands of other former autoworkers, face a bleak prospect.

Mitchell makes a little more than \$8 an hour at Walmart. Working less than 40 hours a week, he has no health insurance or other benefits. He aspires to become a floor supervisor, which would provide him with

benefits. Olivia brings in a small amount of money driving a church bus. Eddie is out of work. Karen, a former stripper, takes care of their children. The latter couple, we learn, are on the verge of losing their house to foreclosure.

Mitchell and “Liv,” who have a newborn, are getting on with things, without complaining too much. Mitchell prides himself on being a “provider,” whatever the circumstances. Liv is a warm, generous human being, deeply religious. Eddie and Karen, on the other hand, are not doing well. Eddie refuses, out of pride, to work at Walmart or accept any other low-paying job. He drinks too much. He and his wife have begun to fight bitterly. She tells him she no longer loves him and has begun thinking about getting her old job back. Their battles inevitably draw in their friends, Mitchell and Liv.

Daniels' play is not the first dramatic piece that has been created about Flint. There was the remarkable adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* performed in the gymnasium of a former school in Flint in June 2017. Then, the Lifetime television network broadcast a film last October, *Flint*, directed by Bruce Beresford. Other films and documentaries are supposedly in the works.

The fact that the plight of Flint's population has activated the imagination of dramatists, writers and directors is all to the good.

As noted above, the Purple Rose has many admirable qualities. Daniels has a commendable, intriguing history as an actor. It is to his credit that he took up the situation in Flint as a subject for a drama. It is also to the credit of the actor-playwright that he has placed working-class figures, former autoworkers, at the center of his new play. The play has a number of authentic elements and Daniels has an undeniable comic gift.

In general, there are various admirable things about *Flint*, including the obvious commitment and seriousness of the performers and director Guy Sanville, who has been artistic director at the theater for 20 years.

What's not admirable, however, are the ideas and themes that almost surreptitiously come to the fore in *Flint* and decisively dominate its final moments. Those are quite bad.

Like many others on the American liberal left, Daniels more or less concludes that the key to the Flint crisis lies in race. Without giving everything away, the drama suggests that it was only because the decaying industrial community had become poor and black that made the water disaster possible. What's more, *Flint* informs us, once such a crisis erupts, white workers like Eddie will revert to their true, bigoted selves.

This is very weak, intellectually lazy and simply wrong.

The poisoning of Flint took place as the result of the actions of a handful of bankers, financial swindlers and companies in the water business, aided by corrupt politicians. They were determined to make millions of dollars at the expense of the well-being of Flint's residents.

Flint expresses in a particularly graphic and brutal fashion the present

state of American capitalism. The birthplace of General Motors, and the scene of titanic industrial battles in the 1930s, the city, which remains nearly 40 percent white, has been devastated by decades of plant closures and the gutting of social services. Life has become a nightmare for wide layers of its residents, victims of the ruthless, vampire-like American financial oligarchy.

Daniels avoids social and political concreteness in his play. This is deliberate, and detrimental. According to MichiganRadio.org, Daniels said he “couldn’t write a documentary as investigations are still ongoing. ‘I look at Flint, in my home state, and I don’t have a clue as to who did what, who knew what, when. There are people investigating that I’ll be interested to see when the report hits the desk,’ Daniels said.”

This is unserious. It doesn’t require a final accounting, which will never come from official sources anyway, to know that a slew of politicians, white and black, Republican and Democratic, from the governor on down, are criminally responsible. That money-hungry banks and other financial institutions are culpable. That General Motors, which exploited the city’s workers and then abandoned them to poverty and misery, is guilty a thousand times over.

“It’s not a political play,” asserts actress Rhiannon Ragland, obviously echoing the playwright, in an interview. “Yeah,” explains director Guy Sanville, “it’s not a documentary about the Flint water crisis. The water crisis is in there, but it’s not about that. It’s about how we got to where we are, and water is kind of a metaphor.”

But why isn’t it a “political play,” since the subject matter is fully “political”? Why this inclination to let everyone involved off the hook, from GM and the auto companies to Gov. Snyder to the United Auto Workers union, which has collaborated in the destruction of Flint for decades?

The devastation of the city is above all a question of the vast social chasm in America and the rapacity of its rulers. No one need suggest that race plays no role. There are certainly racists (and fascists) in the American political establishment, and in the general population for that matter. However, many key players in the Flint water crisis were black, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has pointed out: “Prominent at the ceremony on April 25, 2014 when the button was pushed to make the switch was [Flint] Emergency Manager Darnell Earley and Flint Public Works Director Howard Croft, both of whom are African-American.”

And if race is the driving force in this sort of social disaster, what is one to make of the present crisis in Martin County in eastern Kentucky, for example, where the 13,000 residents have been warned they may not have access to clean, safe water for a decade? According to the 2000 census, the population of Martin County was 99.25 percent white.

To a certain extent, *Flint* wants to have its cake and eat it too. At one point, in fact, the characters conclude, more or less in unison, that “It’s all about the money.” But then, a few minutes later, the play goes off the deep end with Eddie’s histrionic confession of his profound racial prejudice.

Again, according to MichiganRadio.org, “Jeff Daniels says he was originally going to write a comedy when he sat down to work on his newest play *Flint*. But then Trump happened. And Charlottesville. So Daniels started to think about the precursors that might explain what made those things possible. Events like the shooting of Michael Brown. And the protests in Ferguson. And the Flint water crisis.”

In a brief prologue, in which the four characters introduce themselves, Eddie presents himself as “the guy you forgot about.” Donald Trump of course fraudulently postured as the candidate of the “forgotten man” during the election campaign and later as president.

Daniels and company in their various public statements express sympathy, in the playwright’s words, for the “good, hard-working people [who] scream for fairness in an unfair world,” or, as Sanville puts it, for the “several generations” of “men and women [who] made good lives

there,” who “created the middle class of America, building automobiles and everything that went into them.”

“‘But what I care about are the people. And that’s what drama can do, that’s what a play can do,’ Daniels said. ‘We’re supposed to go on an expedition into the human condition.’”

“He said his characters’ stories, like the white manufacturing worker, have been largely ignored.”

It’s a little schizophrenic. The playwright and director express compassion for Flint workers and “the white manufacturing worker” in particular, but the play itself doesn’t spare much sympathy for Eddie. According to Sanville, in another comment, Eddie “needs someone to blame other than himself” for his financial and marital woes. He would be absolutely right to do so! The autoworkers in Flint are not responsible for the vast suffering that has been inflicted on the city. This reviewer felt that Eddie’s outrage throughout much of the play was entirely justified. Why should he work for \$8 an hour? Then, at the final moment, to associate that outrage with racism (and Trump, by implication) is artistically and intellectually dishonest.

This is the default setting, sadly, of the American liberal or “leftist” and his or her identity politics.

There are dramatic consequences here. Eddie, according to his wife, holds the view that it was the “infestation” of Flint by African Americans that led to the city’s downfall. Are there people who hold such views? Probably, although Flint is a racially mixed city, whose working people by all accounts have been brought together by the crisis, not driven apart into warring ethnic factions.

But, in any event, an individual holding such extreme views would be on the fringe of Flint society, would probably, in fact, have left the city and would certainly not even go through the motions of having a black couple as his and his wife’s best friends! The central plot device doesn’t hold water and the playwright doesn’t work hard enough to see that it does.

It is not clear what perspective *Flint* holds out. It’s one thing not to make judgments or offer facile, short-term solutions, it’s another to end on a note of resignation and religiosity, as this play does, with Olivia singing about Jesus. This rather trite conclusion simply seems like a case of taking the line of least resistance, which is rarely a good idea.

That artists and intellectuals have such a skeptical and hostile attitude toward “the white manufacturing worker” is a historical and social problem, bound up with their own class position and outlook, as well as the ability of the ruling elite, the Democratic Party and the trade unions to suppress the class struggle in recent decades.

In one of his most memorable acting performances to date, in *Gettysburg*, Jeff Daniels portrayed Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, the college professor from Maine who joined the Union Army in the Civil War and eventually reached the rank of brigadier general. He received the Medal of Honor for his famous efforts at Little Round Top during the crucial Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863.

Whether the film version of Chamberlain’s activities is entirely accurate or somewhat idealized, Daniels’ delivery of the Union officer’s address to the men of the disbanded 2nd Maine regiment who had resigned in protest is riveting. Instead of berating or threatening the rebellious soldiers, he appeals to their reason and their best sentiments.

Chamberlain/Daniels says in part: “This is a different kind of army. If you look back through history, you will see men fighting for pay, for women, for some other kind of loot. They fight for land, power, because a king leads them or—or just because they like killing. But we are here for something new. This has not happened much in the history of the world. We are an army out to set other men free.

“America should be free ground—all of it. Not divided by a line between slave state and free—all the way, from here to the Pacific Ocean. No man has to bow. No man born to royalty. Here, we judge you by what you do,

not by who your father was. Here, you can be something. Here, is the place to build a home.”

The Maine soldiers receive Chamberlain’s words warmly and resume the fight. Given a resolute leadership and perspective, which in our era means a socialist leadership and perspective, why would wide layers of the American population, in Flint and elsewhere, not respond today in a similarly rational, principled and democratic manner?



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