

Flint, a play at the University of Michigan: Stuck, unfortunately, in the quagmire of racial politics

Joanne Laurier
10 April 2019

As the WSWWS recently noted, with the fifth anniversary of the Flint, Michigan water crisis approaching, nothing in the terminally decayed industrial city has “returned to normal.”

The population continues to live with the consequences of the decision by the authorities in April 2014 to switch the city’s water supply to the highly toxic Flint River, causing lead and other contaminants to leach into the drinking water. None of those who presided over the poisoning of Flint’s 100,000 residents, including leading state Republican and Democratic politicians, have been charged, let alone prosecuted, for their crimes.

Flint is a new play currently being performed, until April 14, by the University of Michigan’s Department of Theatre and Drama in Ann Arbor. The piece, written by José Casas and directed by Dexter J. Singleton, is a response to the horrendous water crisis.

The ongoing disaster in Flint has generated shock and outrage worldwide. It has been the subject of numerous plays and both fiction and documentary films, as well as popular songs. More apparently are still to come, including a documentary featuring Alec Baldwin.

Taking on a major social calamity, as the current theater production at the University of Michigan has done, is to the credit of those involved, but how deeply and accurately the Flint crisis is understood and presented remains the big question. The current political and ideological climate on university campuses dominated by racial and gender politics is a major part of the equation—and the problem—in this case.

Casas, an assistant professor at the University of Michigan who also leads the Playwriting minor in the Department of Theatre and Drama, created his play out of dozens of interviews he conducted in Flint.

The drama takes the form primarily of monologues spoken by a series of characters generally identified by occupation, such as “boxer,” “nurse,” “cashier,” “attorney,” “barber,” “actress” and “demolition man.”

Some salient facts come through in *Flint* about the recent history of the city, including a few glimpses of life in a devastated social environment.

The strongest vignette involves a satirical dig at the Swiss-owned multinational Nestlé, which pumps hundreds of thousands of gallons a day from Michigan aquifers that it then bottles and sells. Nestlé has been paying \$200 for the privilege of extracting some 210 million gallons of water a year in Michigan, while the average Flint family pays approximately \$125 to \$200 a month for tainted water. The actors re-enact Flint’s African American mayor Karen Weaver obsequiously thanking the giant food and beverage company.

(As a side note, in 2018, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality approved the request by Nestlé to increase the amount of water it takes from the state despite receiving *80,945 comments against* and *75 in favor*. The most prominent themes in the comments were, according to a media report, “corporate greed versus people and the environment; two, water is not for profit; and three, worries about privatizing water.”)

Flint also reveals the scandalous fact that proof of citizenship is required to obtain the bottled water dispensed to the beleaguered city’s residents. One character responds to claims by ICE that it does not target people in a humanitarian crisis—“Bullshit!”

There are a few other notable moments. One segment points out that in October 2014 General Motors, due to the serious corrosion of its parts, switched its water supply from the Flint River—which it had long used as a dumping ground for pollutants—back to the Detroit water system. Meanwhile, *human beings* were supposed to go on drinking and bathing in the filthy water. “It’s a goddamn crime,” exclaims one character, that the city has been “exploited for profit.”

A parade of politicians have made opportunistic appearances: Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Barack Obama—“What have they done?” asks the cast. There is a video clip of then-president Obama’s trip to Flint in May 2016, during which he took a sip of water and cavalierly joked: “If you are my age, or older, or maybe even a little bit younger, you got some lead in your system when you were growing up. You did. I am sure that somewhere, when I was two years old, I was taking a chip of paint, tasting it, and I got some lead.”

These positive elements in *Flint*, however, overshadowed by the play's slant toward racial politics and the overall claim that Flint has been poisoned because it is a majority black city. "It's not just about the water" is the tagline of the play. What the playwright apparently means, above all, is: "It's about race."

The opening monologue, for instance, ends with a character taunting the audience: "I am the n***** that everybody wants to hate," while the "professor" subsequently introduces the concept of "structural racism." In one of the most noxious sequences, the "attorney" absurdly claims that neighboring Oakland County is a "red Republican county" and that Flint's former emergency manager, Darnell Early—who played a role in the Flint crisis—might well be the fall guy because he is black.

A video clip of performers in black-face decades ago becomes the justification for the assertion that "the legacy of Flint is dripped in racial inequality." A performer asks, "Would this crisis have been able to take place in Birmingham or Ann Arbor?"—both upscale and largely white cities in Michigan. One might just as well ask: would it have happened in an affluent African American community either?

The Michigan-centric play, first of all, ignores communities such as Martin County, Kentucky, whose citizens—99 percent white—faced a water crisis in February 2018 as egregious as that in Flint. Or take Massena, New York, along the St. Lawrence River, which General Motors left with a pollution problem more serious than Flint's and which is 97 percent white—and a town with 30 percent of the population living below the poverty line.

In any case, Flint has a mixed population of 54 percent black and 40 percent white.

One of the most provocatively racist monologues is the concluding one in which an actress shouts, with supposed irony, at the audience: "I'm a black woman with hysteria!" The real irony is that, indeed, the character is hysterical—and supremely sorry for herself.

What the playwright and production obstinately will not do is indict the profit system as the guilty party in the crimes committed against Flint's population.

In fact, the city epitomizes the decline of American capitalism and the auto industry in particular. It was the birthplace of General Motors in 1908, a reality that shaped and continues to shape life in Flint. The city has been demolished due to GM's insatiable greed for profit, the auto barons' shortsightedness and brutality, and their outright hatred of the working class population, the site of the historic sit-down strikes in 1936-37 (which Casas does not so much as mention).

Flint's condition is a tragic product of the unplanned, irrational profit system. The motto of American corporations has been: make as much money as possible and then steal away like a thief in the night, leaving the resulting mess for the working population to clean up. It was General Motors and American big business, not "racist politics," as one actress

asserts, that "turned the city upside down."

The play contends that Flint has historically always been racist, that racism is lodged in the city's DNA. This is slanderous nonsense. The city is above all recognized for its place in the history of the class struggle, not racial conflict. The legendary Flint sit-down was long known as "the strike heard around the world." The semi-revolutionary uprising, which led to Flint workers becoming some of the highest-paid in the US, was led by socialists and left-wing militants of different races and ethnicities. The most politically conscious workers understood that the ruling class and both its major parties would employ violence to defend the property and profits of GM and the rest of corporate America.

The claim that racism played a significant role in the current water crisis is advanced without providing the slightest evidence. What proof is there that the poisoning of the city's water affected black residents more than white ones? As for the supposed racist bias of those responsible for switching the city to Flint River water without proper treatment or facilities in place, many of the key players were black. As the WSWs explained, "Prominent at the ceremony on April 25, 2014 when the button was pushed to make the switch was Emergency Manager Darnell Earley and Flint Public Works Director Howard Croft, both of whom are African-American."

Self-absorption and racialism are poor premises for art, which demands extraordinary frankness and a sharply critical eye. The predominant stilted and stereotyped racist politics in the University of Michigan's *Flint* does not provide a serious basis for genuine dramatic interchange. Nearly any honest representation of everyday conversation and interaction in the city, with its intensely heterogeneous and diverse populace, would disrupt its claims.

The series of monologues, when they are not racist diatribes, are painfully undramatic. In fact, the most sustained dialogue occurs in a dream sequence that includes a fragment from Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* !

Flint radiates far too much self-pity, offering too many "poor me" soliloquies. Unfortunately, the play is a missed opportunity. It does not so much as hint at the need for solidarity, for uniting the oppressed, black, white and immigrant. Instead of exposing a toxic water and social crisis, more than anything else, it ends up exposing a toxic identity politics atmosphere.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact