

# 'Les Blancs': complex, powerful

Africa is a continent with great wealth and power that has not yet found a way to harness those resources to create good lives for most Africans. What will it take for



JOHN ANGELL GRANT

**THEATER REVIEWER**

Africa to accomplish this? Playwright Lorraine Hansberry took a shot at assessing this problem in her 1965 play "Les Blancs."

Stanford Summer Theater is currently running a thoughtful, moving and exciting production of the show on the Stanford campus — and the price is right. Although advance tickets are

\$20, admission at the door for this play is pay what you can.

"Les Blancs" is set in a fictional African colony in which the emotional and political tide is rising against its European settlers. When a white American reporter arrives to do a book on a rural, do-gooder European-staffed medical clinic, he meets three African brothers who take divergent paths in their

responses to Africa's dilemma. One brother is an Episcopalian priest,

**At a glance**

**What:** "Les Blancs" presented by Stanford Summer Theater  
**When:** Thursday through Sunday, 8 p.m., through Aug. 5  
**Where:** Pigott Theater, Memorial Auditorium, Stanford University campus  
**Tickets:** \$20 advance, pay what you can at the door



Photo courtesy of Stanford Summer Theater

Aleta Hayes and Anthony J. Haney star in playwright Lorraine Hansberry's "Les Blancs."

another a teenage alcoholic, and the third a European expatriate.

Director Harry J. Elam Jr.'s Stanford production effectively manages to avoid overemphasis on the political rhetoric, and instead follows the story through emotional close-ups on a variety of intimate relationships among various whites and blacks across the social spectrum. "Les Blancs" captures the complexity of this paradoxical world in a moving and unusual play.

It is a tense look at personal trauma during a time in which growing politi-

cal anarchy moves toward its tipping point, and everyone lights up politically, whether they want to or not.

But playwright Hansberry does not make simplistic or facile story choices. She puts her characters into the great contradictory dilemmas found in classical Greek drama, giving them full, rich emotional backgrounds and relationships, making the political conflicts deeper. In a world in which political turmoil and stability are vying, "Les Blancs" addresses vital questions for today.

For Hansberry, "Les Blancs" was in part her commentary on Frenchman Jean Genet's 1953 play "The Blacks," which she found offensive for the way

**LES BLANCS**, page 35

**LES BLANCS**

From page 32

it made blacks exotic and took them out of their historical context. Written in 1965 while she was dying of cancer, "Les Blancs" was her last play, completed after her death by her ex-husband Robert Nemiroff.

Interestingly, actor James Earl Jones played lead roles in the New York productions of both the Hansberry and Genet premieres. Hansberry is most famous for her first play, "A Raisin in the Sun."

Director Elam has elicited good performances from his local cast, including Anthony J. Haney, Daniel Chavez, Kieleil DeLeon and Courtney Walsh Phleger, to name just a few. The production opens with a fabulous African dance sequence, wonderfully performed by Aleta Hayes and other cast members, to Tumani Onabiyi's drum music.

These and other dance segments serve as transition segments between theatrical scenes, expressing in mime some of the energy and story subtexts of the African characters, and giving the

surrounding traditional scenes heightened dramatic power.

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★

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