

Review: Three sisters confront racism in 'Split in Three'



CHARLES RUNNELLS, CRUNNELLS@NEWS-PRESS.COM 3:10 p.m. EDT April 29, 2015



(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

The times, they are a-changin' in the Mississippi Delta.

But Nell and Nola don't need [Bob Dylan](#) to tell them that. They're living it.

Nola calls her hometown "the center of [Hades](#)." And there are plenty of police sirens, gunshots and blazing fires to prove it.

In Florida Rep's captivating new drama "Split in Three," the Mississippi Delta has become a war zone and the focus of national attention in 1969-1970. It's one of the last U.S. cities to resist combining black kids and white kids in the same schools, and its residents aren't giving in to integration without a bloody fight.

Poor, white sisters Nell and Nola are just trying to stay out of the fray in their threadbare, broken-down shack surrounded by what Nola calls "20 acres of dried-up land we never could grow anything on but dirt."

They have very different views about what's happening, though. The easily-swayed Nell (Rachel Burttram) parrots what she's heard from pastors and the radio: "We have to preserve our way of life!"

But the smart, tough-talking, hard-partying Nola ([Tyler Layton](#)) sees things differently. She welcomes the Supreme Court-mandated integration of Mississippi schools. And she scoffs at Nell's thoughtless "way of life" comment: "Nell can read a pamphlet!"

Things get complicated, though (MINOR SPOILER AHEAD). The sisters have been getting silent phone calls that they initially mistake for a heavy-breathing pervert. But soon they learn it's their long-lost half-sister (Robin LeMon) — who eventually shows up at their doorstep and turns out to be completely different from them.

She's well-off. She's well-educated. She's a Northerner.

And, oh yeah, she's also half-black.

That's when the plot really kicks in for "Split in Three," a world-premiere play that first appeared at Florida Rep's PlayLab playreading festival last year. And the results are haunting, funny, heartbreaking and deeply satisfying.

Director Justin Anderson nicely balances the show's humor and character development with a slowly building tension as the surrounding town devolves into chaos. And despite some intense dramatic moments, playwright Daryl Lisa Fazio doesn't let things get too heavy most of the time. She sprinkles her play with memorable characters, witty dialogue and plenty of humor — even when that humor is at the expense of racist, simple-minded sister Nell.

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Let's just say this: Nell doesn't take it well when the half-sister she dreams about turns out to be half-black. And some of the show's biggest laughs come from Nell's reactions to that unexpected development (not unexpected for audience members, though, if they saw the show's publicity photos).

All the actors do fine work here, and that is especially true of the core three in the show's title.

LeMon's Penny is buttoned-up and reserved from a lifetime straddling the white and black worlds and belonging to neither. But she's got a lot of anger and resentment bubbling under the surface, too. And she can't quite believe the hell she's dropped into in the Mississippi Delta. "What IS this place?" she wails at one point, collapsing in a pile as she's overwhelmed by the violence and hatred all around her.

As the trumpy, hilariously blunt Nola, Layton accomplishes a lot with a hard edge in her voice, a mischievous gleam in her eye and a less-than-ladylike body language. But underneath that armor — just like all three women here — she's wounded and damaged.

Burttram completes the trio with her complex, fragile Nell, who manages to be somewhat of an oxymoron: A likable racist. She always seems to be on the verge of crying, and she's so desperate to be a mom that she pines for her emotionally abusive ex-husband and desperately throws herself at a neighbor boy — who's too disgusted by her overt racism to let her mother him.

Rounding out the cast are neighbor Clifford (Christian Koller), representing the next generation open to change and horrified by the institutional racism in Mississippi; and Nola's humorously dumb love interest Tucker (Zolan Henderson), who at first comes off as a violent, racist cop but is really just trying to fit in with everyone else in the Delta.

I have one small complaint about "Split in Three." The play makes a lot about a phone call that causes Nola to scream and collapse in anguish. But when the big reveal happened late in Act 2, I didn't quite catch who died and why she meant so much to Nola. Maybe I just missed it, or maybe the information came at such a rush that I couldn't quite absorb it. Perhaps a few extra lines spent on the subject might have made things clearer.

Despite that minor problem, I still enjoyed this play a lot and kept thinking about it all night long.

Director Anderson and playwright Fazio have a lot to say about sisterhood, racism, identity, acceptance and the human capacity for love and change. But they're also out to entertain, too.

They certainly accomplished that and a lot more.

"Split in Three" stems from Florida Rep's new mission to stage one world-premiere play every year. And with quality material like this, I can't wait to see what the theater does next.

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If you go

•**What:** The world premiere of "Split In Three"

•**When:** Now through May 10. Performances are 8 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday with matinees at 2 p.m. Wednesdays, Sundays and select Saturdays.

•**Where:** Florida Repertory Theatre, 2267 First St., downtown [Fort Myers](#)

•**Tickets:** \$45-49

•**Info:** 332-4488 or [floridarep.org](#)

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