

A whiter shade of play...

THEATRE

Susannah Clapp

Spinning into Butter Theatre
Upstairs Royal Court, London
SW1

You don't have to be Greg Dyke to spot that the British theatre is a very white place. White directors, white writers, white actors (that's changing a bit), white critics. And a white audience. The first night of Rebecca Gilman's drama about racism on an American campus was a case in point. There was one black face in the auditorium. That face belonged to a writer, commissioned to review the play by the BBC: Margaret Busby described with comic weariness how at sensitive moments she felt other members of the

audience 'checking her out'.

Which puts a peculiar spin on *Spinning into Butter*. This is a play – with an all-white cast – about a group of white people who constantly talk about, rather than to, the black people with whom they work. It takes its title from the now-infamous children's story about Little Black Sambo, who watched the tigers that were about to gobble him up chasing each other until they liquidised into a puddle of butter – which L.B. Sambo consumed.

The tigers here are the all-white teaching staff of a Vermont college, dismayed but divided by the news that one of their African-American students has been



Spinning into Butter. Photograph by Neil Libbert

receiving racist hate-mail. The eager young dean – excellent Emma Fielding, who conveys just the right mixture of perkiness, solemnity and twitchiness – calls in the police. Her colleagues want to use the row as an occasion for debate and self-aggrandisement.

Their jargon-laden posi-

tion – 'It could be a real learning experience' – is always suspect: David Horowich supplies a very funny performance as an academic dripping with self-regard. Everything is set for a clash between politically correct blethering and forthright action.

And then comes the rub.

In a major, unclearly motivated speech, the young dean – perhaps in search of absolution – declares herself a guilty mass of prejudice: she left her previous college because she wanted to be in a whiter place; she thinks Toni Morrison's books 'suck'; she avoids sitting next to black men on the subway, especially if they're 'wearing big puffy coats'. This admission extracts from an ex-lover the confession that he does the same. She responds: 'Everyone does.'

At its Chicago premiere, *Spinning into Butter* was compared to *Oleanna*, David Mamet's explosive play about sexual harassment. Gilman – who's unusual in her ability to flesh out her ideas in plots – doesn't pack an equal punch, but she fires a good few shots across the bows of liberal opinion. You can argue that she's delivered only half a play here: no one is going to think that the other faculty members are other than punchbags; no one is going to believe that the dean's views are an all-inclusive truth. You can argue that John Stevenson's design – an enclosed, contextless office – is too limited. But *Spinning into Butter* does make you want to argue – which is more than most plays do. Not least because those words 'everyone does' expose something about the theatre. That it is confidently addressed to an all-white audience.

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Spinning Observer Clapp

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