

THEATER REVIEW

April 29, 2006 | Philip Brandes, Special to The Times

A ditzzy suburban teen travels back in time to a slave plantation. Her idealistic brother is so consumed by white guilt that he turns black. And a gender-bent mammy from the 1880s materializes in their living room to teach the entire family an unforgettable lesson in race relations.

Racial sensitivity is just the launching pad for a long list of politically correct platitudes mercilessly skewered in Hilly Hicks Jr.'s hilariously subversive comedy, "A Hole in the Dark." Foodies, animal-rights activists, feminists, the disabled and even smokers get no quarter in this absurdist portrait of a suburban white family confronting its long-buried black roots.

Performed with pitch-perfect timing and insight by a first-rate Blank Theatre Company ensemble, this staging from the director and producers of "The Book of Liz" would be sure to offend, if it weren't so darn funny and so inescapably on target.

Jodi Carlisle's impeccable comic skills set the bar high from the outset as the obsessive lily-white housewife, Miranda Rosehue. Puffing furtively on a cigarette and catching sight of the audience with the frozen panic of an apprehended criminal, she quickly launches into a sidesplitting monologue about preparing a gourmet consolation lunch (with veal!) for the black family next door, who recently lost a painful lawsuit over a lucrative building contract. Miranda's cooking efforts get no sympathy from her cranky husband, Desmond (Michael Adler), who turns out to have been the victorious plaintiff in the dispute and still feels his neighbor cheated by playing the race card. Miranda tells Desmond his rival can't just give up being black like a person gives up drinking -- "It's much more addictive than that."

After a cruel mishap, their time-traveling daughter, Beatrix (Corryn Cummins), meets Yippee! (Leonard Roberts, another standout), the black concubine of the Rosehues' lecherous plantation-owner ancestor (Carlisle, in an equally accomplished second role). "It must be so convenient to work from home," Beatrix gushes in a luminous distillation of white cluelessness.

At the other extreme is the crusading rebel daughter (Robyn Cohen, who effectively doubles as a domineering plantation matriarch), who condemns every political infraction before clamping shut her lips in anorexic protest. The revelation of the Rosehues' mixed bloodline by the conscience-stricken son (played at various times by Roberts and Josh D. Green), plunges the family into moral free fall.

Amid all the fun, Darin Anthony's assured staging never lets us forget that Hicks' deceptively witty script uses satire to lure us into a very dark hole that still tears at our national psyche.

'A Hole in the Dark'

Where: 2nd Stage Theatre, 6500 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 7:30 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Ends: May 28

Price: \$22 to \$28

Contact: (323) 661-9827

Running time: 2 hours, 5 minutes