

Review: Take brazen 'Cloud Nine' for what it is

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Watching University of Illinois at Springfield Theatre's new production of "Cloud Nine" Friday night, I kept expecting one of the characters to stand up and — in a right-proper British accent — shout, "Look at me, I'm a symbol!"

Of all the virtues of Caryl Churchill's play, subtlety is not often among them.

If this sounds like the beginning of a nasty review, it's not. It's just the way "Cloud Nine" is.

Churchill specifies all manner of bizarre casting.

The effeminate 9-year-old boy who's terrible at cricket and likes to play with dolls? Cast a woman.

An African servant who seems desperately to want to be assimilated into the white British family that employs him? Cast a white man in the role.

At first it seems to be a gimmick, hammering you over the head. But as the play reveals itself, the cross-casting shines a light in places you might not have thought to look.

"Cloud Nine" takes place in two acts: Act 1 is set in British colonial Africa, 1880; Act 2 is in London, 1980. Most of the characters from Act 1 return for Act 2, but they have only aged 25 years.

Chafing under the constraints of Victorian notions of proper behavior, most of the characters spend Act 1 plotting ways to sleep with each other in various combinations. Nothing seems taboo: men with other men's wives, men with men, women with women, and more.

So when Harry (played by Roger Boyd) kisses Betty (played by Dwight Langford), we get a hint of latent homosexuality. Betty runs from the room, prompting Harry to remove all doubt by turning to a male servant and asking, "Would you like to go in a barn and (expletive)?"

A significant chunk of the dialogue in "Cloud Nine" is not only unprintable, but I probably shouldn't even try to describe it. Some of the roughest language seems to be there simply for the shock value, but it's lost some of its power since the play was first performed in 1979.

Frank discussions about sexuality seem to have become more normal, and entertainers like Howard Stern and the "Girls Gone Wild" crew have significantly raised the bar on what's considered shocking.

But there are surprises, and taboos that are just as sturdy today as they were three decades ago.

The cast, composed mostly of UIS students, performed without inhibition, despite being put in what most people would consider awkward roles.

The punch lines flowed more and more smoothly as the night wore on, with several laugh-out-loud moments. Harry, contemplating how he could deal with his homosexuality, says, "I suppose getting married wouldn't be any worse than killing myself."

Additional performances are scheduled for 8 p.m. today, 2 p.m. Sunday and at 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Nov. 15, all in the Studio Theatre, on the campus of the University of Illinois at Springfield. Tickets are \$14 and are available in person at the Sangamon Auditorium ticket office, by phone at 206-6160 or online at www.uis.edu/theatre.

Post-show discussions will follow the performances tonight and Thursday.

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