

'Defamation' calls audience perceptions into question

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By CHRIS SILK

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"Defamation" isn't about defamation at all.

"It's a play about the audience and they don't even know it," author Todd Logan told me after Tuesday night's performance. A professional tour from Chicago presents the play through Saturday at the BIG ARTS Herb Strauss Theater on Sanibel.

"Defamation" opens — literally — in the middle of a trial. An African-American woman demands half a million dollars of a Jewish man. A routine business meeting, arranged by a mutual client, sours when an heirloom watch turns up missing. Fractures of race, class, culture and every possible social division spring to life inside 70 minutes.

In lieu of closing arguments, audiences vote on the outcome.

Sanibel audiences went, overwhelmingly, for plaintiff Regina Wade. Stacie Doublin, the actress who plays Wade, has won 99 of the past 122 shows, leaving Richard Shavzin's defendant, Mr. Golden, in the dust. Post-show discussions have been running more than a half-hour, with arms flying into the air, clamoring to speak. Tuesday was no different.

The show provokes.

"My sympathies are very much for the plaintiff," one white-haired woman said forcefully, before adding to no small smattering of applause. "I feel for you, baby!"

Others got more caught up in the theatrics, directing words like "obnoxious" at fantastically entertaining plaintiff's attorney, Jonathan Stutzman, or muttering "malpractice on both sides." Malcolm Rothman, whose gravely voice recalls every TV judge ever, asked the patron, "You are aware this is a work of fiction?"

"Defamation" is at once impossibly complex and incredibly simple. Anyone who's watched a few episodes of "Law & Order" can follow and be enthralled. Logan's story unspools with predictably unpredictable twists: bankruptcy, police reports, phone calls, racial epithets — but no dramatic confession.

He skips one crucial question: "Where the hell did the watch really go?" And no one ever thinks to ask.

"It's the magic of theater," Logan said. "It's that tableau. You've created a world where people already feel like they know everything about these people."

Thus, "Defamation" tosses its choice to the jury. There's no dead body. There's no smoking gun. There's no confession.

"I knew I couldn't have her confess," Logan said, talking about the final, most dramatic and harrowing scene of "Defamation."

Accomplished African-American actresses Kimm Beavers and Stacie Doublin go at it hammer and tongs on the witness stand. Beavers berates Doublin, screaming at her, accusing her of theft, of stealing Mr. Golden's watch in retaliation.

Doublin breaks down in tears, her leg twitching, clutching her sweater close. She's lost her business, her home? What else will she be forced to give up?

If in any moment a confession was to come, it would be that moment.

None comes.

One issue raised during the 45-minute talkback: Every Sanibel Island audience has been of a single race, although the play itself pits three African-American actresses against each other on stage. "Defamation" deftly exposes class and cultural fissures in every part of society.

"She might be sentimental toward Ms. Wade," Logan said of defendant's attorney Ms. Allen, "but she's there to do a job."

Logan purposefully wrote "Defamation" from the point of view "that everyone is telling the truth." He wanted to create dialogue about racial issues and, hopefully, increase the power of civil discourse.

"The play is an opportunity to address issues," Logan said. "The conversation starts when they get in the car."

The play continues through Saturday at BIG ARTS on Sanibel.

'Defamation'

What: African-American woman sues Jewish businessman for defamation

When: 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday, Saturday; 4 p.m. Saturday

Where: 2200 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel

Cost: \$42 for adults, \$5 student tickets

Information: BIG ARTS Marks Box Office at (239) 395-0900, Strauss Theater box office at (239) 472-6862 or bigarts.org

Something Else: 70 minutes, no intermission



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