



## 'DEFAMATION': TODD LOGAN'S DRAMA OF RACE, RELIGION, CLASS

By JUDY CHISS

Evanston playwright Todd Logan contributes a unique production to the popular courtroom drama genre with his new play, “Defamation.” This world premiere drama of a fiery encounter between an African American businesswoman suing a Jewish North Shore real estate developer opens on Oct. 29 with a limited run of six shows at three Evanston houses of worship. As trial and play unfold, the collision of race, religion, and class becomes prominent and at times as tangible as the characters themselves.

Jefferson Award nominee Rob Riley, who brought to life physicist Richard Feynman in the recent ‘QED,’ plays Judge Barnes. The drama opens with his stern opening remarks to the jury – that is, the audience, and closes 90 minutes later with his directions. And make no mistake, the audience will have some serious work to do to follow the intense proceedings and construct meaning from legal charges, the characters’ lives, and the challenging interactions between the seven onstage characters. Although the microscope is clearly focused on South Side African American plaintiff (Ms. Wade, played by Jacquie Coleman), and wealthy, successful Winnetka Jewish real estate developer (Arthur Golden, played by veteran actor Bernie Beck), the personas and lives of other characters also lend dramatic tension to the play.

Mr. Logan said the creative fodder for “Defamation” came from a growing awareness of how much race, class and religion tend to separate us, regardless of where we live. He said he was impacted by remarks made by Attorney General Eric Holder earlier this year, about how, despite President Obama’s election, there continues to be a serious racial divide in our country.

Mr. Logan said he refined his initial ideas for the script during a semester he spent mentoring a DePaul University graduate class in directing. He credits that experience as a catalyst for reworking and reshaping the play into its current form.

He also credits Olympia Dukakis, Academy Award-winning actress and director, who directed his 2008 “Botanic Garden,” with showing him how powerful authentic collaboration between actors, playwright, director and production crew can be.

“Defamation” benefits from the nuanced work of director Richard Shavzin, who is experienced and adept at probing characters and helping actors find the right emotional tone and pitch and who also frequently works with lawyers as a professional coach to litigators.

During the hour-and-a-half show, emotions and tensions slowly get ramped up and characters' defenses are increasingly stripped bare. Layers get peeled back like an onion as the adversarial lawyers uncover more of each witness' story.

The lawyer for Arthur Golden, played by Shariba Rivers, is both a high-priced big-firm lawyer and a savvy African American woman. The plaintiff's lawyer, played by the accomplished Steven Pringle, exudes a courtroom confidence that is visceral. Another witness (Demetria Thomas), helps to dial up the intensity in the way she shows measured emotion, restraint and well-calculated poise. The casting for "Defamation," done by the playwright and director, will not disappoint audiences. From the prolific and talented Bernie Beck to relative newcomer Shariba Rivers, this cast will give the "jury" a lot to think about. For folks who have never had a chance to serve on a jury, "Defamation" may be a compelling experience.

Todd Logan has chosen unusual venues for the six performances: two churches and a synagogue in Evanston. He said he likes that the issues of racism, classism and religious intolerance will be presented in environments where engagement with social justice is welcomed. A fitting ending to each evening's performance is a reception with cast and playwright.

"Defamation" will be shown variously at Sherman United Methodist Church, the Unitarian Church of Evanston and Beth Emet The Free Synagogue weekends through Nov. 7. Tickets can be purchased through [BrownPaperTickets](http://BrownPaperTickets.com) 1-800-838-3006 or at [BrownPaperTickets.com](http://BrownPaperTickets.com).