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There goes the neighborhood

Polarizing effects of gentrification

By Kitty Kelley

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On one of the hottest summer nights in Washington, D.C., (104 degrees) I decided to stop watching the raging battle on Capitol Hill over the debt ceiling and head to Woolly Mammoth Theater to see "Clybourne Park," the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Bruce Norris.

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This play, written in admiration of Lorraine Hansberry's classic, "A Raisin in the Sun," is set in Chicago, which the playbill stated was once "America's most segregated city." In Hansberry's groundbreaking 1959 play, a Negro widow receives a \$10,000 check from her late husband's life insurance policy and surprises her family by making a down payment on a house located in a white community. The family is visited by a white representative of the community's neighborhood association offering to buy the house back at a higher price to prevent them from moving in. Walter Lee, the family's son and spokesman, tells the noxious representative that the family will move into their new home because his father "earned it for us brick by brick."

Critics and audiences praised the Hansberry play for its representation of black life in mid-20th century America, and for the message of hope inspired by the family who stayed together to face an uncertain future. She had written the play from her own experience when her family moved to a three-flat at 6140 S. Rhodes Ave., in Woodlawn in 1937. They had been stoned by angry white mobs, which prompted a lawsuit by the NAACP that led the U.S. Supreme Court to end racially discriminatory housing covenants in Chicago.

By the 21st century, Chicago changed enough to give the nation its first African-American president in Barack Obama, and his inauguration introduced a "post-racial" mindset that led many of us to believe our racial wars were finally over.

Not for a minute, said Norris, the Chicago playwright whose "Clybourne Park" picks up the Hansberry storyline 50 years later when the neighborhood is solidly black and a white couple wants to buy and renovate the Hansberry home. The black neighbors file a petition against the renovation that will make the house taller than the existing homes. Unspoken is the suspicion that it's more than height that is unsettling the neighborhood. Norris filled his play with all the bad manners and ignorant cliches of bigotry ("Some of my best friends are black") as he holds up a mirror for all of us tiptoeing across the minefield of post-racial America. What we see in the characters on stage as they clumsily try to camouflage their prejudices is pathetically appalling and uncomfortably funny.

Actually, I did not need to go to the theater to see the polarizing effects of gentrification. I could have crossed the river into Anacostia, a historically black area of the nation's capital, where, according to The Washington Post, you can see "For Sale" signs marked with graffiti saying "No Whites." So while the fictional Clybourne Park is situated in Chicago,

its issues are universal and touch all of us — blacks and whites in Washington, Brits and Pakistanis in London, Germans and Turks in Berlin — as we continue to struggle with racial tensions, especially when it affects our personal turf.

The metaphor of housing is as apt today as it was 50 years ago. For the path to the American dream — to status and stability — usually starts with home ownership. While two-thirds of Americans own their homes, there continues to be a huge home ownership gap in the country, primarily among blacks and Hispanics. This drain on our communities and our economy is not just a dream deferred for them but for everyone. As the late poet Langston Hughes wrote, "a deferred dream dries up like a raisin in the sun."

Kitty Kelley is a journalist and author who has written several unauthorized biographies of celebrities and politicians.

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