



Not So Ordinary People:

Theater Group Nicu's Spoon Recasts an American Classic

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by Jessica Marmor

A story about the unraveling of a Midwestern family after tragedy strikes, Judith Guest's 1976 bestselling book "Ordinary People" shows that even in the suburban heartland, life falls apart and ordinary people can turn out to be extraordinary. In Guest's novel, the eldest son drowns in a boating accident, setting off suicidal feelings in his younger brother, Conrad, and emotional withdrawal in his mother. His father, meanwhile, strains to keep the family together.

In the current off-off-Broadway production of "Ordinary People" (adapted for the stage by Nancy Gilsenan Hersage in 1983), theater group Nicu's Spoon literally recasts the story: billed as a "multiracial adaptation," the play features a white actor in the role of the conciliatory father, an Asian actress in the role of the distant mother and a Southeast Asian actor as the desolate younger son.

For those who remember the WASP family at the center of Guest's book and Robert Redford's Oscar-winning film adaptation, the mixed-race family in this production may come as a surprise; did a white man and Japanese woman bear a Pakistani son? Was Conrad adopted? What ordinary Midwestern family looks like this?

But Nicu's Spoon isn't interested in ordinary families or ordinary people. Since its founding in 2001, Nicu's Spoon has sought to cast talented actors of color in roles conventionally cast with white actors, such as the family in "Ordinary People." Determined to push the bounds of casting norms even in New York's progressive theater community, founder Stephanie Barton-Farcas has nothing but contempt for the many directors and producers who, she says, turn away brilliant actors for "not looking right." This happens less often in New York City than in other places, but still enough to "royally tick her off."

Nicu's Spoon was named for a deaf and disabled orphan Barton-Farcas met in Romania. Nicu spent hours bouncing sunlight off a spoon, and convinced Barton-Farcas that nothing in life is impossible. If Nicu's Spoon had a company line, it would probably be that: anything's possible in life and in the theater, including a multiracial family in the WASP-y suburbs of the Midwest.

"Suburbia," the company's last production, was one of the rare instances in which Barton-Farcas let the script dictate the casting (the play portrays white teenagers picking on two Arabic deli owners). In plays that focus on racial conflict, multiracial casting can be confusing and inappropriate, she says. But, outside of those plays, directors still shy away from adventurous casting simply because they are scared – of turning off audiences, upsetting social mores and doing something radically different and new.

"An assumption is made about what is going to happen to that elusive group of people called the audience," said Sharon Jensen, an advocate for the inclusion of minority actors in theater and executive director of the Non-Traditional Casting Project. "That is often just a resistance on the part

of the person in the power position to go forward with new ideas.”

The author of “Ordinary People” is the first to acknowledge that the characters in her novel are not ordinary to begin with – they are wealthy, they live in the suburbs, as readers regularly make a point of telling her. But, to Guest, the ordinary in the title refers to the characters’ emotions and to their problems and relationships: “People have the same kinds of feelings no matter where they live or who they are,” she said. She had no involvement in the Nicu’s Spoon production, but said she appreciates how the company is “shaking up” the whole picture of “Ordinary People” with a multiracial cast and thereby commenting on the story’s universality.

The universal themes in this intimate family drama are exactly what attracted director JoEllen Notte to the story. “I loved that it was just a play about people and the way they all deal with this tremendous loss,” she said. “Because we are a country right now that is full of so many people dealing with loss.”

Notte tried not to be influenced by the book, which she read at age 14, or the movie, which she watched once before rehearsals began and then never again. “I didn’t want people going home saying, I saw that play about the movie with Mary Tyler Moore.” Brought on to direct after Barton-Farcas had cast most of the roles, Notte found that the multiracial casting actually freed the production from people’s expectations and memories of the book and movie, helping her forge a unique entity with a life of its own.

Though the actors did not focus on questions of race exclusively, many found the multiracial casting opened up new avenues to explore in “the truth” of their characters. Barbara Kidd Calvano, who plays the mother, said that questions like “Was Conrad adopted?” offer her, as an actress, more opportunities to pursue in the character’s perspective and background.

For Jovinna Chan, a Chinese actress cast as Conrad’s girlfriend, playing a teenage girl with the last name “Pratt” wasn’t an easy idea to wrap her mind around. Yet she found she had no trouble identifying with the character’s struggle as the new kid in school, the outsider, the girl struggling to grow up.

Chan said that, because New York audiences are accustomed to multiculturalism and diversity, they are more comfortable with a multiracial family on stage than audiences elsewhere. “I wonder if we did this play in Illinois, I’m not sure about that,” she said. “It might be too striking in the Midwest; it’s not in their experience.