SPINNING INTO BUTTER
by Rebecca Gilman
Directed by Scott Palmer
September 7-24, 2017
The Vault Theater

CAST
Sarah Daniels ............................................................. Kymberli Colbourne*
Ross Collins ............................................................... Andrew Beck*
Dean Catherine Kenney ............................................... Morgan Cox**
Burton Strauss ............................................................. Peter Schuyler*
Mr. Meyers ................................................................. Rusty Tennant
Patrick Chibas ............................................................ Carlos-Zenen Trujillo
Greg Sullivan .............................................................. Phillip J. Berns**

CREW/PRODUCTION TEAM
Director ........................................................................ Scott Palmer
Stage Manager ............................................................ Ephriam Harnsberger
Costume Designer ......................................................... Melissa Heller
Scenic Designer ............................................................ Megan Wilkerson
Lighting Designer & Technical Director ......................... Jim Ricks-White
Sound Designer ........................................................... Cassie Greer
Assistant Stage Manager ............................................... Grant Thackray^
Props Master ............................................................... Carlee Whalen^
Dramaturg ................................................................. Tiffany Rousseau^
Marketing Assistant ..................................................... Renée Zipp^

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**Bag&Baggage Associate Artist
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INTRODUCTION

Systematic Racism is a problem in the United States, and one of the most challenging issues to deconstruct and heal around the world. Without hesitation, Rebecca Gilman wrote *Spinning Into Butter* as a way to confront racism head on with characters who don’t really see themselves as part of the problem - something we find very common among people who don’t see how they can be racist just because they don’t “hate” or demonstrate publicly hateful behavior toward people of a different race or skin color. In *Spinning Into Butter*, at a fictional but all-too-familiar liberal arts university, administrators of the school deal with how to respond to racist hate notes left on an African American student’s dorm room door without letting the issue get beyond their control.

What they are able to uncover through on-campus forums, after-school discussion groups, and facing their own subconscious racism is challenging for some, and no surprise to anyone who’s dealt with racism personally. *Spinning Into Butter* doesn’t softly address issues of race and sexism in education in the United States - it faces them head on. This particular element of realism in the show may be enlightening, provoking, or just plain frustrating to audiences, but it is needed and in a world still plagued by these issues.

*Spinning Into Butter* premiered in 1999 at the Goodman Theater in Chicago, IL, attempting to shed light on an important issue and an important perspective facing the United States as a nation. *Spinning Into Butter* at Bag&Baggage in 2017 is an incredibly pertinent story for our multicultural, multi-colored city of Hillsboro - and all of Washington County - where we face the questions presented in this play on a regular basis.

Kymberli Colbourne plays Sarah Daniels in Bag&Baggage’s production of *Spinning Into Butter*
People of Color in the United States in 1999

*Spinning into Butter* was written after a time when the United States had heavily worked through issues of race, heavily focused on desegregation, and given a great deal of attention to various facets of bringing together people of color and people who were white. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s greatly shifted the system of separated bathrooms, restaurants, schools, and many other public resources, making it far easier for someone of color to live in the United States, earning money, raising a family, and living a happy life.

The problem of systemic racism, however, was not solved by the Civil Rights movement; we are still working to deconstruct a social system that limits people of color still today. In 1999, *Spinning Into Butter* was written to address this still prevalent issue, and to confront audiences who thought everything was solved in the ‘50s and ‘60s. While desegregation may have been a huge accomplishment of the Civil Rights Era thanks to people like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, there was - and still is - a lot of work to be done to undo the damage systematically inflicted upon people of color in the United States.

Looking at the population trends and economic status of the US in 1999 helps us understand how racism is systemic and woven through our nation. According to the US Census Bureau, the median White American family household income in 1999 was $44,687; the average household income of an African American family was $29,423, with Hispanic families sitting in the middle with an average household income of $33,676.

Geographically, African Americans were still strongly segregated into the southern states (with significantly smaller populations in northern and central states), and according to the US Census Bureau, “...the poverty rate for Blacks (24%) remained about three times higher than the rate for White non-Hispanics (8%)” in 1999. Another factor that plays an important role here is education. In 1999, the percentage of the population aged 25 and older that had a high school diploma or more for White citizens was 87.7%; 77% for Black citizens; and 56.1% for Latinx citizens. The percentage of those who had a bachelor’s degree or more is drastically different, with White citizens at 27.7%; Black citizens at 15.4%; and Latinx citizens at 10.9%.
While the entertainment industry was seeing a steady uprise in more people of color in predominant roles and popular culture (for example, the big box office hit of 1999 was *The Matrix*, starring Lawrence Fishburne as Morpheus and Gloria Foster as The Oracle; Deezer D played Nurse Malik McGrath on the popular show *E.R.*; and the music group TLC topped the charts with their single “No Scrubs”), the socioeconomic status of African-Americans and Latinx citizens still needed a lot of improvement.

Vermont and Middlebury College

When examining the status of people of color in general throughout the United States, it is helpful then to look at what was happening specifically where this show is set: the state of Vermont. With the US population at 273 million in 1999, Vermont’s population totaled 608,827, with 589,208 of those citizens being white; 3,063 Black or African Americans; and 5,504 Latinx.

*Spinning Into Butter* is based on an incident that occurred during playwright Rebecca Gilman’s time as a student at Middlebury College, which is a liberal arts college in Vermont. To better understand the setting of the play, let’s look at what Middlebury is like:

Founded in 1800, Middlebury is considered a “top-tier liberal arts college” with about 2,500 students and an 8:1 student-faculty ratio. Most classes are small; the mean class size is 16.

In 1883, the trustees voted to accept women as students in the College, making Middlebury one of the first formerly all-male liberal arts colleges in New England to become a coeducational institution. Middlebury is also the first American institution of higher education to have granted a bachelor’s degree to an African-American, graduating Alexander Twilight in the class of 1823.

Student Life examples described on the Middlebury website include required first-year seminars: discussion-oriented courses with an intensive writing component to help students make the transition to college work, and seminar teachers also serve as first-year students’ advisors.
Black History in the 90s

Black History milestones leading up to the writing of *Spinning Into Butter* in 1999 can help us further contextualize the immediacy of the issues about which Rebecca Gilman was writing. Find some of the most striking ones highlighted in the timeline below:

1994
- African Americans in leadership positions for the first time:
  - Ron Kirk elected the mayor of Dallas
  - Lonnie Bristow appointed president of the American Medical Association
  - Dr. Helene Doris Gayle appointed Director of the National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (also the first woman to hold this position)

1995
- The Million Man March - a gathering of African American men - is held on October 16 in Washington D.C., organized by Minister Louis Farrakhan, to "convey to the world a vastly different picture of the Black male"

1996
- George Walker becomes the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize for music
- Affirmative Action is abolished by California lawmakers via Proposition 209
- Tiger Woods wins the Masters Tournament in Augusta, Ga., becoming became the first African American - as well as the youngest golfer - to do so
- The first African American mayors are elected in Jackson, Mississippi and Houston, Texas
- Wynton Marsalis’ *Blood on the Fields* - a composition that follows a couple moving from slavery into freedom - wins a Pulitzer Prize in Music, and is the first jazz composition to receive the honor

1997
- The Million Woman March is held on October 25, where an estimated 750,000 African American women gathered together to march on the Ben Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia to focus on their trials, circumstances, and successes
- African American men who were exploited through the Tuskegee Syphilis Study received a formal apology from President Bill Clinton

1998
- Historian John Hope Franklin is appointed by President Clinton to head the President’s Commission on Race, with the goal of creating a national discussion on issues surrounding race

1999
- Serena Williams wins the U.S. Open Women’s Singles Tennis Championship at the U.S. Open, becoming the first African American to reach such an achievement since Althea Gibson won in 1958, and going on to dominate the sport.
- Maurice Ashley becomes the first African American chess grandmaster
Little Black Sambo

The story *Little Black Sambo* was originally written by Helen Bannerman, a Scottish writer of children’s books, and first published in 1899. Inspired by her time spent living in India and experiencing Indian culture, Bannerman may not have intended to be racist with her story, but her poor choice of name and the need to include the word “black” in the title have made the story very offensive - particularly among the Black American population in the 20th and 21st centuries. The name Sambo became a term used as a slur for people of color and the book was banned in the 1970s, becoming the only censorship case ever to reach the United States Supreme Court in 1976.

*Little Black Sambo* was very popular and spread across the world as a beloved story, yet the systemic racism and social implications underneath Bannerman’s tale make it offensive and racially condescending. The title of Rebecca Gilman’s play comes from the ending scene of *Little Black Sambo*, and it is no accident that *Spinning Into Butter* picks up on the controversies raised over a hundred years ago in what many white people have described as an innocuous children’s story.

You can watch a cartoon version of *Little Black Sambo* from 1935 by following this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDsIE0CMLvc

THE PLAYWRIGHT: REBECCA GILMAN

Rebecca Gilman is a playwright based in Chicago, Illinois where she is an Artistic Associate at the Goodman Theater. Originally from Trussville, Alabama, Gilman grew up in one of the most predominantly black states at the time with a front row seat to the systemic racism that is laced through our country’s politics, economy, and everyday lifestyle. She graduated from Birmingham-Southern College, Alabama in 1987 and went on to earn two Master’s degrees, one from the University of Virginia and the other from University of Iowa in Playwriting.

Ms. Gilman is an associate professor of playwriting and screenwriting at Northwestern University as part of its MFA in Writing for the Screen and Stage program. She is the recipient of a Global Connections Grant by Theatre Communications Group and an American Scandinavian Foundation Creative Writing Grant for the development of a new play in conjunction with Göteborgs Dramatiska Teater in Gothenburg, Sweden: Rödvinsvänster (Red-Wine Leftists): 1977.

Her work on *Spinning Into Butter* was received very well by audiences across the country and is now one of the most-produced plays in the country. She was awarded the Roger L. Stevens Award from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays as well as a Jeff Award for Spinning Into Butter, and she was also the first American playwright to win an Evening Standard Award.
According to the Lincoln Center Theater, “Rebecca Gilman had been living in Chicago for six years after finishing a graduate degree at the University of Iowa. Coincidentally, there was a real-life incident at the time at the University of Iowa involving racist e-mails received by some minority students there, but the central event of Spinning Into Butter actually derived from an episode at Middlebury College in Vermont in the early 1980s, when Gilman was a student there.”

American Theater Magazine commented on Spinning Into Butter, saying “Gilman’s point, of course, is that liberal intellectuals often talk a good game about diversity, but so fail to have the requisite experience or true understanding of minority experiences, that they end up as part of the problem.”

“While the concept of political correctness has made us more sensitive to how we perceive each other,” Gilman says, “there’s also a danger that the rhetoric will be allowed to mask some of our really angry feelings. People are now often afraid to articulate what they actually feel about each other.”

Her complete body of work is just as fascinating and challenging as her work on Spinning Into Butter; of these other plays, Boy Gets Girl received an Olivier Award nomination for Best New Play, and she was named a finalist for the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for her play, The Glory of Living. American Theater Magazine stated, “As you read the burgeoning Gilman oeuvre, other common themes emerge. She’s fascinated by crime but is determined that her perpetrators’ actions are never seen as isolated from societal forces. She fights objectification but seems to understand its hold on modern consciousness. She’s never crudely polemical; there’s always a sense of life’s ironies and ambiguities.”
OUR PRODUCTION: THOUGHTS FROM DIRECTOR SCOTT PALMER

“I am a racist. How could I not be?

I come from a middle-class white family, went to a predominately white high school and college, and am a leader of a non-profit theatre company in an industry that is predominately white in a community that is more than 60% white. I have been the recipient of the benefits that come from an economic system that privileges white people, and I participate in social, economic, and political systems that suffer from endemic racism and structures. I have been a consumer of media, entertainment, and social content that privileges white skin all my life, and live my life in relative comfort, safety and security that is granted me largely because of the color of my skin.

I am a racist because I am a product of a racist culture, system, and institutions.

I’m not an angry, aggressive extremist that degrades and vilifies others based on their ethnicity, but that doesn’t mean I’m not a racist. I don’t intentionally discriminate against people of color in my hiring practices, but that doesn’t mean I’m not a racist. I may be a progressive thinker, a donor to nonprofits that serve communities of color, and an out member of a sexual minority group, but that doesn’t mean I’m not a racist.

As Jeff Cook, a contributor to Huffington Post explains, “I lived a life marked by opportunity and forgiveness; and while I may not have always had much, I have always had the benefit of the doubt…I am uncomfortable with, ignorant of and distant from racial inequalities that exist in my country.”

I have a lot of work to do.

Spinning Into Butter was written in 1999 and quickly became one of the most popular plays of the day; Rebecca Gilman’s direct, bracing approach to white people exploring racism with other white people. When we knew that The Vault was going to become a reality, I knew that we had to do a play like this as our first production. Something I learned in Scotland many, many years ago: start as you mean to go on.

Spinning is a complicated play; one that is both intellectually challenging and emotionally complex. It often feels like it raises more questions than it answers, and poses obstacles without suggestions of how to overcome them. It is a play that grapples, cajoles, ignores, resents, mocks, dismisses, fabricates, minimizes, exaggerates, simplifies, and complicates - all in the name of opening a discussion. It is a play that deals with well-meaning, liberally minded white people dealing with issues of racism in a way that I think is hugely relevant to me personally and to the community of Hillsboro. It is really a play where white people talk to white people about racism, and start the work of deconstructing our own understanding of our complicity in racist systems. It is hard work; often ugly, bitter, angry, and extremely charged work...but it is essential work for us to do, and the kind of work that only we can (and should) do with each other.
As Michael Eric Dyson said, “It’s not enough to be against something. What are you for? Empathy is critical, if it can be developed - [but we need] substantive manifestations of that empathy. It is one thing to attain it intellectually, but it’s another to do something about it. To challenge norms, presuppositions, and practices in communities across the country...makes a huge difference....White people have a better chance of speaking more directly to the white folk they know, because they’re less likely to be subject to ridicule. They’re insiders, so to speak.”

Let’s talk about it. I have no idea if other people feel the same way that I do, or if others feel like they have as much work to do as I do, but I really want to talk about it. I want Bag&Baggage to be a place where these conversations become a part of the fabric of our building, and a place where every member of this community feels not only welcome but an essential part of our work. Let’s talk about it.

As Cook writes, “I have a certain degree of power and privilege because of my skin color. That is not something I need to feel guilty about. I didn’t ask for it or seek it out, but I have it. The responsibility for having it isn’t on me; but the responsibility for what I do with it is.”

Welcome to the very first show in our new home. I hope this is the first of many, many, many conversations we have about our shared humanity, our shared responsibility, and our shared hope for the future.”

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**TERMS TO KNOW**

**Nuyorican** is a combination of the terms “New York” and Puerto Rican” and refers to the members or culture of the Puerto Rican diaspora located in or around NYC, or of their descendants (especially those raised or still living in the NYC area).

**Significance:** Patrick is from New York, and his family originally came from Puerto Rico - he is not one or the other, he is both, by residence and ancestry. He is given an “other” option when he applies for the scholarship that Sarah is trying to help him get, but then this option is removed upon almost forceful questioning. Sarah is attempting to preemptively categorize Patrick into a more “simple” category, claiming it is for a noble cause (to help him get the scholarship), but ultimately, this action is disrespectful to Patrick’s expressed racial identification.
To equivocate is to use language subject to multiple interpretations, with intent to deceive or to avoid committing oneself in what one says.

Significance: Ross has kept his relationship with Petra a secret from Sarah but he hasn’t necessarily lied to her, so as not to “commit himself in what he says” - or in this case, what he doesn’t say. Later Ross accuses Sarah of equivocating about racism. Equivocation is a central theme of Spinning Into Butter - racism is such a charged issue that many white people equivocate habitually so as not to offend anyone involved in the conversation or to be perceived as racist.

Decency is the quality or state of being or conformity to standards of taste, propriety, or quality.

Significance: Sarah uses the word “decency” to describe what she would expect the faculty to share with her about Ross and Petra’s previous relationship, but this also applies to her expectations of behavior and ideals in general. Much discussion around racism invokes white peoples’ unreasonable expectations of people of color, and the lack of implied “decency” they may perceive in non-white populations. Sarah describes later in the play ways how her students at Lancaster were lacking in “decency.”

Pedagogy is the art, science, or profession of teaching.

Significance: Spinning Into Butter is set in academia, and intertwines pedagogy with social issues at various points. Strauss references pedagogy when discussing Sarah’s qualification to consult on the various courses the school will offer for the Winter term. This conversation gives us a glimpse into the frustration that Sarah may feel in this academic environment, and illuminates Strauss’ underlying sexism that shows up as a through-line in the play.

Bourgeois is a word borrowed from the French, defined as being characteristic of the middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes.

Significance: People at Belmont (or, to generalize, at most liberal arts colleges in Vermont) do not typically want to be considered part of the middle class, but rather something of higher status. Sarah uses the term “bourgeois” to attack Petra - probably because she is tired of the self-righteous, high-and-mighty attitude she perceives in Vermont compared to other places she’s lived, or to her previous job working with under-privileged students at Lancaster.

Tokenism is the policy or practice of making only a symbolic effort to be inclusive to members of minority groups, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of racial or sexual equality within a workforce.

Significance: When Patrick writes his article reviewing the behaviors of the administration in response to the racist notes written to Simon on campus, he uses the term “tokenism” because it is how the administration has historically dealt - or not dealt, as the case may be - with many racial issues on campus. This is something many educational institutions do, whether they mean to or not, and this play underscores the reality that tokenism is not a solution.
Racism

*Spinning Into Butter* provides us with examples of racism in its many facets: particularly self-directed racism, outward racism, and white supremacy. The single black character in this story is never seen on stage, and this is no accident. The most rampant racism examples come in the form of outward racism: Sarah is condescending and dismissive of Patrick’s proclaimed race when she verbally pressures him into claiming “Puerto Rican” on his scholarship application. She makes a “joke” about him telling things to his “amigos”, and she never fully listens to him. Strauss is unable to let Patrick speak for more than two minutes in a forum without taking over and dominating the conversation. He also immediately advocates expelling Simon, rather than give him an opportunity to apologize or make things right.

Gilman, through this play, reveals the subtle yet pervasive ways American society teaches us to promote the idea that lighter is always better than darker, in every way - even (and sometimes especially) in terms of skin color.

Sexism

Throughout the play, both female characters are continually talked down to by the male characters, despite the fact that they all are in positions of authority and should be relative equals. Strauss’ behavior and language toward Sarah is often condescending and dismissive of her views, thoughts, and experience. He even elevates himself above Dean Kenney at times, yet has little to no negative treatment of Ross. With Ross, we see his sexism emerge in the way he handles - or doesn’t handle - his personal relationships with Petra and Sarah: repeatedly disregarding the views and opinions of both women, while maintaining a high regard of his own thoughts and feelings above theirs.

Pride

All of the white characters in *Spinning Into Butter* struggle with pride, and this is no accident. Sarah desperately wants to understand and support people of color - as well as rid herself of her own racism - but she has a lot of pride that keeps her from truly listening to both Patrick and Simon. Strauss doesn’t believe he is even a little bit racist and deeply wishes to vindicate himself and the school from any sort of accusation. Ross condemns Sarah of her racism, claiming she sounds like she’s proud of it, but refuses to admit to his own faults and struggles. Kenney dismisses Simon without any direct regard to his feelings or humanity, attempting to both defend the name of Belmont University, but also her own reputation. And Greg begins the “Students for Tolerance” group as a resume-builder, and almost seems suprised when the group turns out to stir real feelings. Mr. Meyers - while seeming to be sympathetic to Simon’s plight and have the least personal struggles with racism of any character in the play - has almost no grace for Sarah, attacking her instead of empathizing with her honesty, and manifesting the pride he feels in “not being a racist”.

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS

Before you see the show:

1. How do you define the terms “racism” and “sexism”?
2. What does it mean to be “politically correct”, and why do we often default to political correctness when talking about difficult issues?
3. Do you think that we, in the United States in 2017, still deal with issues of racism and/or sexism? If yes, how? If no, why not?
4. How do we handle racism or discrimination against people of color as a country? At your school? How do you handle these things as an individual? Would you consider yourself to be racist?
5. Are women in leadership roles treated differently than men in leadership roles? Why or why not?

After you see the show:

6. *Spinning Into Butter* is not a true story, yet is based on events that have happened in many academic settings across the nation. Have you ever heard of an incident happening like this in your school or your city? How did or do you think you would have responded if you were a student at Belmont?
7. Imagine you, like Patrick, were offered a scholarship, but asked to change your beliefs in order to receive the money.
   a. Would you be willing to alter your perspective?
   b. Where do you draw the line on the kinds of things you’re willing to compromise?
   c. How do you respond when you feel like your own identity is under attack?
8. Racism is the central theme of *Spinning Into Butter*, and Sarah goes into great detail identifying herself as a racist in Act 2.
   a. Why does Sarah believe that she is racist? Is she right?
   b. Are other characters in this play racists? Explain your answer.
   c. Is racism natural or a learned response?
   d. Is it possible for a person of color to be racist against their own race? If yes, why do you think this happens? If no, why not?
   e. Should white people even be talking about race? Why or why not?
9. Do you think sexism is a problem among the faculty at Belmont? Where did you see the male administrators respecting or disrespecting the female administrators in this play?
10. Why do you think *Spinning Into Butter* is an important story for us to tell?
11. Imagine that you have been commissioned to write a play about a social issue. What issue would you choose, and from whose perspective would you decide to tell the story? Explain your choices.
SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Background on Spinning Into Butter

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Rebecca Gilman

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