

Advanced History

A reminder of how times have changed for the better

from *Creative Loafing Tampa Bay*

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Grace

4 stars

The Studio@620, 620 First Ave. S., St. Petersburg, 727-895-6620. Runs through April 22. 8 p.m. April 19 and 20; and 7 p.m. April 22. \$10, \$5 students/seniors.

I had a strange feeling watching *Grace* the other day -- the feeling that I was seeing history turned inside out. After all, I was a child in the Tampa Bay area in the early '60s, when racism, segregation and separate but unequal were the rule.

Forty-odd years later, I found myself watching a play in which the heroine is an egalitarian whistleblower, a woman who had the guts to testify against her own uncle and see him brought to justice for the Alabama church bombing that killed four little black girls. Who would have believed, back in '62 or '63, that there'd one day be a stage play about Libby Cobbs, that overt racism would be so far repudiated that the Klansman Robert Chambliss would be, unequivocally, the drama's villain and not a misunderstood champion of white dominance in Southern society?

Maybe you had to be there, in Tampa or elsewhere in the South, to feel what I did as I watched *Grace* -- maybe you had to remember the all-white schools or the separate water fountains ("white" and "colored") or the pervasive feeling that Martin Luther King was nothing but a "rabblrouser." *Grace* eloquently underscores that those days are long gone.

Much praise is owed to author David Smith, who based *Grace* on Cobbs' memoir, *Long Time Coming*. Smith's stagecraft is mildly innovative -- with a narrator, one flashback, an occasional chorus of voices and a few ghosts -- but this is a story so inherently dramatic, all it requires is a solid knowledge of the facts and the ability to dramatize them.

Smith amply possesses both these qualities, and his play holds our interest from start to finish. It starts in 1963, with Libby pregnant and helping her aunt Tee sew together Ku Klux Klan robes. Soon we meet Cobbs' uncle Robert, a mean dog of a white supremacist who tyrannizes frightened Tee, makes sexual advances on Libby and eventually remarks that "I got enough stuff put away to flatten half of Birmingham." Then the unthinkable occurs: Someone sets off a bomb on a Sunday morning at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and four innocent girls die. Libby tells the FBI everything she knows, but nothing comes of it, and no one is prosecuted. Then 14 years pass; Libby becomes the first female minister in Alabama, and a new attorney general reopens the case. With Libby's help -- provided at the cost of her personal security -- he convicts Chambliss of murder.

But the story doesn't end there: It continues with the harassment that drives Libby from Birmingham, includes Libby's efforts to write a book about the bombing and features a few moments from Libby's love affair with Joni Nevins (also the narrator). At the end, she even encounters the specter of her uncle, who's as repugnant dead as he ever was alive. Libby's more gracious toward him than most audiences will be.

This is potent material, all the more fascinating because we know that it's based on reality. And while the production at St. Petersburg's Studio@620 lacks a satisfying set, the acting is usually good enough to make us ignore the unconvincing surroundings.

In the most important role, Nevada Caldwell is likeable but lacking in dimension. She plays Libby as a disarmingly straightforward woman, a simply moral figure without contradictions or depths to plumb. This is a credible enough portrayal, but still it gives us no clues as to what led Libby to become a minister or what moved her to stand up for justice when everyone around her --the Birmingham police force included -- was either *in* the Klan or supportive of it.

As Libby's long-suffering Aunt Tee, Dawn Truax is similarly monochromatic: She gives us the oppressed spirit of the character without suggesting that, buried beneath it, there's a spark or two of life still gleaming.

Nothing's missing from Jim Wicker's portrayal of Robert Chambliss, though. There's a fatigue in Wicker's face that seems the affliction of a bad man weighed down by the presence of goodness -- by a society that, however evil, just refuses to be evil enough. Of course this low-class thug hates African-Americans: If *they're* not on the bottom, then *he* is -- a horrific notion.

As his nemesis in the attorney general's office, Drew DeCaro is superb. He's a luminous actor who seems to bring his atmosphere with him. One look and you discover ethics, ambition, industry and self-satisfaction, all the colors and paradoxes of a real human being.

The unpredictable actor Steve Garland plays Chambliss' defense attorney, and this time does everything right (could this really be the same guy who was in *Krapp's Last Tape?*): There's as much malice in his smile as in a hyena's.

As the narrator who turns into Libby's lover Joni, Amy Gray is delightfully spunky and gregarious (though she tripped on her lines two or three times on the evening I attended). Finally, Janae Starling as little Denise McNair (one of the girls killed in the church bombing) is endearing; she's not given much to do, but she does it with childish charm.

Angela Bond's direction is sure-handed, and it would look even better if she had a real set to work with. The costumes, uncredited, are occasionally eloquent.

There are a few elements of Smith's script that don't quite work: The many appearances of Denise McNair manipulate our emotions, and the occasional chorus of voices doesn't really succeed as stream-of-consciousness. A flashback in which Chambliss nearly rapes Libby seems perfunctory, and we never get much of a sense of the Klansman's two henchmen (played by Garland and DeCaro).

And still the play remains fascinating. Anyone who spent the early '60s in the South will recognize its truth, especially its portrayal of a world in which racists dominated white society at every level -- government, law enforcement, social class. Racism isn't dead, but a play like *Grace* is another step in its long demise. I recommend it to anyone interested in Southern history, and in the emergence of new -- and also notably Southern -- heroes.