

# Rutland Herald/Times Argus

Article published Jun 28, 2015

## **Theater Review: Race, romance and human nature in 1905**

By Jim Lowe  
Staff Writer

Esther is a black seamstress in 1905 New York City, making a meager living sewing lingerie for wealthy white women. She's also 35 and lonely. So when the opportunity for romance comes along, albeit long distance, she jumps at it.

Dorset Theatre opened its 2015 season Friday at Dorset Playhouse, with a tender, powerful and ultimately irresistible production of "Intimate Apparel," Lynn Nottage's 2003 drama about a kind, single black woman's fight for survival in a world stacked against her.

Esther got to New York the hard way, working in the fields along the way from her native South. Once there, she had the good fortune to land in a rooming house where the feisty landlady, Mrs. Dickman, taught her to sew. It seems that Esther had a genius for sewing the complex and delicate women's lingerie of the day — making her very much in demand.

Out of the blue, Esther receives a letter from a laborer working on the Panama Canal. George Robinson learned of Esther through a man from her church, also working on the canal, and wishes to correspond. A romance by mail begins and, eventually, George comes to New York.

What ensues says much more about human nature than it does about the racial segregation of the time, though that too plays a role. Most importantly, it reminds of the intrinsic beauty of human nature.

Directed by Dorset veteran Giovanna Sardelli, Dorset's production is not only stunning visually, it was arresting dramatically — thanks much to its excellent cast.

Esther was delivered in a fully dimensional performance by Marinda Anderson. She encompassed all of the seamstress's sides, from canny businesswoman to naïve bride to desperate lover to mature woman, attractively and sensitively.

Elain Gramm gave nuance to Mrs. Dickson, Esther's acerbic but supportive landlady. Janie Bookshire brought dimension to Mrs. Van Buren, the Fifth Avenue socialite, unhappy in her marriage and happy befriending Esther.

Chantal Jean-Pierre is convincing and sympathetic as the troubled prostitute Mayme, Esther's friend except when it comes to men.

Avery Glymph was convincing as the dashing but desperate George, but perhaps not as sympathetic as he could be. Conversely, Charles Socarides was truly sympathetic as the Jewish cloth salesman who has eyes for the forbidden Esther.

Most importantly, the six worked beautifully together.

Just as stellar was the physical production. Andrew Boyce's gorgeous set managed the nearly impossible, becoming six different bedrooms without a set change. (George appearing above one of them, from Panama, was a little weird.)

Sydney Maresca's costumes were beautiful period wear, and the lingerie was authentic and beautifully crafted. All was lit creatively and dramatically by Michael Gianitti, with an unusually effective and elegant sound design by Ryan Rumery.

Dorset Theatre Festival's "Intimate Apparel" is truly fine theater — a first-rate performance of an excellent play. Would that there be more like this.

#### Dorset Theatre Festival

Dorset Theatre Festival presents "Intimate Apparel," by Lynn Nottage, June 25-July 5, at the Dorset Playhouse, 104 Cheney Road in Dorset. Performances are at 8 p.m. Thursday-Friday, June 25-26; 3 p.m. today (June 28); 3 and 8 p.m. Wednesday, July 1; 8 p.m. Thursday-Friday, July 2-3; and 3 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, July 4-5. Tickets are \$45-\$20; \$20 for students, \$8 for 12 and younger; call 867-2223, or go online to [www.dorsettheatrefestival.org](http://www.dorsettheatrefestival.org).