

Article published Jun 18, 2015

'Intimate Apparel': An intimate look at love in a very different time

By Jim Lowe
Staff Writer

Lynn Nottage's "Intimate Apparel" is set in 1905 New York City. Esther, a lonely black seamstress, stitches sumptuous corsets and negligees alone in her boarding house bedroom. When she receives a letter from a workman digging the Panama Canal, she begins to dream of sewing her own trousseau.

"It operates on so many beautiful levels," explained Giovanna Sardelli, who is directing the Dorset Theatre Festival production June 25-July 5, opening the professional company's 2015 season.

"I was just struck with the heart of the story. You don't often see plays that examine women's lives so intimately like this. That struck me," she said.

In "Intimate Apparel," the denizens of the boarding house where Esther lives and her colorful customers, including an unhappy young Fifth Avenue socialite, a successful black prostitute and a shy Jewish cloth salesman, support her in her goals of opening her own beauty parlor. But 19th-century gender roles and the ubiquitous self-interest of others stand in her way.

"I like how through all these disparate characters — characters that have different social stations, ethnicities, races, religions — Lynn Nottage has done such a beautiful job showing how the heart of every human being is the same — underneath all of that, it's the same," Sardelli said. "And she does it in such a beautiful way."

Nottage (b. 1964) is an American playwright whose work often deals with women of African descent. An associate professor of theater at Columbia University and lecturer in playwriting at Yale University, she won the 2009 Pulitzer for "Ruined." The inspiration for "Intimate Apparel," which premiered in 2003, was a family photograph of an unknown couple at the beginning of the 20th century.

“In that final moment at the end of Act One, the stage direction asks for a photograph of an unidentified Negro couple; that took my breath away,” Sardelli said. “She had so skillfully shown us this entire life, and the political aspect of that — that these lives are not lives that we have cared enough about to track history, to be able to identify them, to give them their humanity, stunned me so much,” Sardelli said. “And I love it that it comes at the end of Act One.”

Historical accuracy also seems to be something Nottage cared about.

“I found she was really accurate in terms of lingerie and ladies’ undergarments,” Sardelli said. “When you read the play, it reads so effortlessly and beautifully. With each subsequent read, you keep uncovering layer after layer of information, of history. It’s really great.”

One difficulty in producing “Intimate Apparel” is that all the action takes place in a bedroom — or rather, in different bedrooms.

“There are six characters and five intimate spaces,” Sardelli said. “Because the play is talking about this common thread of humanity, we decided that some of the bedrooms could be shared. The physical design was one of the trickiest I’ve done in a very long time.”

For the actors, the challenge was increased by Dorset’s short rehearsal schedule.

“So you have to learn about a new period; you have to wear a foreign item,” Sardelli said.

“If you want to wear a corset now, you can, but typically you don’t. Movements we take for granted, suddenly you can’t do. We had an actor drop a book and she couldn’t bend over to get it. So the actors are adjusting to another time and place.”

One actor needs to learn to sew; another is learning to portray a concert pianist; and another is learning about a different religion, and how to handle fabrics like an expert.

“In this time, you were either taken care of, or a laborer,” Sardelli said. “Every single person who plays a laborer is learning about that. So on top of the story, there’s a lot of technique in this play.”

For Sardelli, the cast and the productions staff, the challenge is making all these disparate parts work together.

"But actors impress me to no end with their ability to literally put on another person's shoes and wear another person's undergarment and assume their reality," Sardelli said. "I'm having a great time."

For Sardelli, "Intimate Apparel" is about how we see our fellow beings.

"We look at someone and make assumptions," she said. "But what parts of their humanity do you deprive them of in your assumption? Nottage is asking you to look at the people around you and be a little more curious about who they are."

A preshow talk, "Black Women in the United States," at 6 p.m. Thursday, July 2, will feature Gretchen Long, Williams College professor of history, and DTF Artistic Director Dina Janis.

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 and 8 p.m. Saturday, June 27; 3 p.m. Sunday, 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 \$20-\$45; \$20 for students, \$8 for 12 and younger; call 802-867-2223, or go online to www.dorsettheatrefestival.org.