

“A Bid For Respect”
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With help from Dee, others, Seaton unveils 'Bridge Party'

Watching Sandra Seaton's "The Bridge Party," one is reminded of Kevin O'Morrison's "Ladyhouse Blues." A conflagration of women gather together in the absence of men, most gone off to war-- World War I in O'Morrison's play, World War II in Seaton's. There's a similar sense of solidarity by necessity, a holding action against catastrophe.

Similarities aside, "The Bridge Party"--offered Thursday at the University of Michigan Rackham Auditorium in a staged reading--is very much a self-contained work. Coming off her tumultuous U-M staging of "Antigone," director Glenda Dickerson shows she can be just potent with a "chamber" production steeped in intimate lives and theatrical naturalism.

It helps, of course, to have an actress like Ruby Dee--at 74 one of the *grande dames* of American actresses--in a lineup that also included professional stars Michele Shay, Kim Staunton, Lynda Gravatt and Adilah Barnes. Dickerson pulls off this casting coup while beautifully blending these pros with U-M theater majors in a mother-daughter mix that's the centerpiece of Seaton's play.

It's July 1942 in Delphi Tenn., and a group of black ladies and their teen-age offspring gather for a weekly bridge party at the house of Emma Edwards (Dee), mother of four and earth mother to all.

In the course of a hot, languid afternoon the women crack jokes, fret about their men gone abroad (including Emma's two sons), worry over money and imagine lavish "Spanish style" homes in California. They discuss nappy versus conked hair styling, as well as the virtues and vices of skin shades--historically an incendiary issue in black communities.

Suddenly dreadful news intrudes. A young local black man accused of rape has been taken off a train and lynched. And all at once a fortress mentality seems frightfully justified, especially with the jarring intrusion of a pair of white lawmen busily rounding up guns in the city's black community ("The Bridge Club" incidentally makes a strong argument against gun control).

These ominous events have a profound influence on Emma's younger daughter Leona, played with radiance by undergrad Angela Lewis. Pregnant and saddled with a busted marriage, Leona longs to split for California. By show's end she's become an apostle of family values (though she still considers her husband a stinker), of the survivalist practicality of staying together.

Leona's determination to "raise the boy right here" is a blow to her wayward spouse's mother Mary Jane (Barnes), a huffy, prudish woman who demands "my son's" ring back and is constantly storming off the stage in the show's funniest performance. Other acting standouts included Cortney Wright as Leona's older sibling Theodora, Staunton as sensitive eldest sister Marietta, and Phillip Pirkola as a quietly menacing deputy.

A defiantly upbeat show with scary undertones, “The Bridge Party” takes an odd turn at the very end: Staunton abruptly turns narrator and issues a deep-focus warning of possible future race war (“Sometimes you have to fight evil with evil . . . I hope it never comes to guns, but it might have to . . .”)

Was this Seaton’s way of time-tripping into the tumultuous late ‘60s, or is she suggesting anew that revolution may be the only means to be free at last? If she means the latter, her eloquence far outshines her message