

Admission Is Free, but Guilt Costs Everything: The Gamm delivers another biting look at who we think we are



L to R: Deb Martin as Sherri Rosen-Mason, Jacob Osborne as Charlie Mason, Jim O'Brien as Bill Mason;
Photo credit: Peter Goldberg

A close friend of mine who was once head of admissions for an elite prep school in Massachusetts would often tell the story of the moment he decided that his mission to cultivate diversity within the incoming student body was not panning out. The school is nestled in an ethnically homogenous environment (read: white) and is known more for its Division One hockey program and its canoe-building courses than its appeal to a broad cultural range of students. On one particular campus tour, my friend was interviewing an African American family who clearly expressed skepticism about the diversity of the campus. After several attempts to point out particular students of color and a scattering of cultural events, the mother of this family was nonplussed. Eventually, she turned to my friend and said, "Cut to the chase ... just tell me, how white is this campus?" With a sigh of resignation, he answered, "Pretty damn white, ma'am." He resigned not long afterward.

This anecdote dates to the early 2000's, but it would appear that not much has changed in the last two decades as Joshua Harmon's *Admissions*, now running at The Gamm through February 9, attests. A hornets' nest of societal and cultural diversity issues, *Admissions* tackles the question of liberal white guilt and social justice and their resolve in the face of personal advancement. It's a play that not only faces these issues head on, but doesn't tie everything up in a nice neat bow. No matter how well-intentioned some of the characters may be, everyone's personal truths and proclivities eventually surface, and the results can be messy.

Directed with skill and sincerity by Bryn Boice (making her Gamm debut), *Admissions* concerns a privileged white family at Hillcrest prep school coming to grips with their white son losing a coveted acceptance to Yale while his friend and fellow student, a biracial boy of similar but reportedly somewhat lesser academic achievement, gets in. Sherri Rosen-Mason (played with an arch sincerity by Deb Martin whose intensity and comic timing is powerfully on display throughout) heads up the admissions office at

Hillcrest bent on hitting quotas of diversity that not only prove her commitment to liberal values, but serve as a feather in the cap of the school itself. Her opening scene is a wicked dissection of the word salad inherent in much of our liberal jargon concerning proactive diversity measures. She calls Roberta, the development director (Wendy Overly in a deceptively flighty performance that ultimately serves as a quite profound devil's advocate chorus) to the carpet for not creating a brochure that reflects the 18% - 19% diversity level that Hillcrest touts. Sherri screws herself up in politically correct linguistic gymnastics in an attempt to get the plain-speaking Roberta to understand that she wants overt portrayals of obviously ethnic students in the catalog. When Roberta points out one student she included, the blunt response finally comes out - "but he doesn't *read* black."

At first, Boice's direction seems to lean toward an outward-facing presentational physical comedy, but as the language of the scene sinks in, we realize that the style works perfectly. Subsequent scenes with every character maintain this high-energy, fast-paced approach that serves the comedy, while the impact of the words and the script serve their own purpose. Think "All In The Family" - if those episodes wallowed too deep into the serious issues they explored, the show would have been a drag, preachy and ultimately overbearing, but a brisk, comedic approach allowed the serious moments to land that much harder - and so it is with *Admissions*. This first scene is where Sherri's modus operandi is established; we already question her underlying intentions due to her inability to simply say what she means, for fear of sounding as if she's simply looking for the next great minority applicant to prop up her own resume. The interplay between her and Roberta serves as a standalone capsule of author intent and, as one rather vocal audience member on press night blurted out mid-scene, "This play is good! It shows what complex hypocrites we are!"

All this before we even reach the main conflict of the story. Sherri and Bill (her husband, played by Jim O'Brien in the kind of understated, simmering performance that is his forte) learn that their son Charlie has been merely deferred, not accepted, for Yale and immediately go into damage-control mode, thinking about who they can call and what strings they can pull. It is at this point that Jacob Osborne, as Charlie, launches into one of the most notorious and controversial monologues in modern theater. Osborne (who ironically did attend Yale, according to his bio), was clearly drafted in for his ability to capture not only the appearance of a 17-year-old, but his ability to capture a beautiful balance between the popped-collar Chad of a prep school student and a socially conscious teenager struggling to make an active attempt at change in the world. In a dizzying display of brute-force memorization and verbal alacrity, Osborne's Charlie launches into a diatribe about race, privilege, sexism and reverse discrimination that elicited applause for both its delivery and its ability to slap our brains around and make us briefly question our own perceived notions and ideals concerning race and equanimity. Often referred to as the "Penelope Cruz" monologue, Charlie's rant questions who gets to be considered "of color" and who gets to "pass" as white all based on seemingly arbitrary and prejudiced attitudes about nationality on a country by country basis, regardless of actual genetics and geography. However, just as we think we're applauding Charlie's precocious insights, O'Brien steps in with perfect deadpan comedic timing to declare his son a "spoiled brat," followed by, "well, we successfully raised a Republican."

From here on in, the tortured divide of what Charlie calls "liberal white guilty bullshit" and ingrained support for a child is allowed to play out, resulting in Sherri's most perfect utterance, "Some of my best friends are white men." Even family friend Ginnie, mom to the biracial son who was accepted to Yale, falls victim to the bickering. In the hands of Gamm veteran Karen Carpenter, this potential throwaway role serves as a critical foil to Sherrie's unraveling tiger mom, serving as the first palpable fallout of what may be Sherri's racial hypocrisy, but also potentially delivering the key twist to the play's ending. Charlie is the only character (well, besides the long-suffering Roberta) who actually makes an attempt

to put principled action to words, declaring to his parents, "If you could make change without *doing* anything, then there would be change by now." It's a call to arms for anyone hearing these words. The ending, while untidy and unsatisfying, is utterly realistic and underscores that "complex hypocrisy" about which our fellow audience member enthused.

Admissions boasts an elegant and intriguing scenic design by Patrick Lynch that utilizes a sliding brick wall to take us into and out of the Mason's (presumably on-campus) apartment. White, sparse and reeking of a Crate and Barrel catalog, the privilege embodied is delicious, even down to the display logs nestled in a kitchen nook. Charles Cofone's sound design relies on a percussive motif that almost signifies suspense thrillers while not being overbearing. Amanda Downing Carney's costuming is spot on, capturing the essence of upper middle-class prep school denizens, from the ever-present athletic casual of Ginnie and Charlie, to the tweediness of Bill Mason's school administrator.

Admissions is not only a "good play," it's important work. While calling up the ghosts of the socially conscious sitcoms of the 1970s, it entertains while challenging us to ask questions that "good white people" thought were already answered. Harmon reminds us here that the questions need to keep coming as our attitudes evolve and progress. The double meaning of the title asks us not only to keep digging into our motives, but confess where we just don't quite know what we truly want. Sacrifice to a cause is noble, but let the other guy do it. Is anyone's conscience on that front truly clear?

The Gamm presents Joshua Harmon's Admissions through Feb 9, 1245 Jefferson Blvd, Warwick. For tickets and more information, call 401-723-4266 or visit gammtheatre.org