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# Separate and Equal

Has there ever been more said with a conjunction than with the title of the play, "Separate and Equal"? It speaks volumes about the worthwhile venture written and directed by Seth Panitch.

Posted on September 15, 2018 by David Kaufman in [Off-Broadway](#), [Plays](#), [Still Open](#)

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David Kaufman, Critic

Has there ever been more said with a conjunction than with the title of the play, *Separate and Equal*? Substituting an "and" for the more usual "but," speaks volumes about the worthwhile venture written and directed by Seth Panitch. Though it's often a mistake for one person to take on both jobs, in this case the director Panitch knows exactly what the playwright wants, and delivers with always interesting results.

With an opening reference to "two households, both alike in dignity," *Separate and Equal* immediately evokes *Romeo and Juliet*; but as it unfolds, it doesn't resemble that great Shakespearean tragedy as much as the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century musical it inspired, *West Side Story*. And while they don't exactly recall the Jets and the Sharks, a team of three black players and a team of three white players engage in recurring basketball games—with an invisible ball—while not so much playing as dancing, often with balletic movements that are highly reminiscent of Jerome Robbins.

And though it won't be described or divulged here, suffice to say that the play's climax recalls the ending of *West Side Story*. There's even an Officer Krupke-type character—here called "Lt. Connor" (Ted Barton)—who shows up asking, "What the hell these n— — doing on my court?" *Separate and Equal* is, after all, set in Birmingham, Alabama in 1951, when segregation was the law.

With TV screens above the playing space setting the scenes, one of the first images is of a drinking fountain, marked "Colored;" a later one is of a KKK meeting, with "a cross burning brightly," both elements of Matthew Reynolds' production design.

Despite Connor's attempts to separate the teams, *Separate and Equal*, like its title, is really about the camaraderie that develops between the six players, epitomized late in the play when Edgar (Ross Birdsong) and Jeff (Steven Bono Jr.)—two of the white players—dare to drink from the colored fountain. "That's separate but equal, Mr. Jeff," says black player Calvin (Adrian Baidoo). "How's it taste?" "Like liquid fertilizer," replies Jeff.

Though the large ensemble of 11 actors is uniformly first rate—whether going through their balletic paces or tossing the invisible basketball and grasping it by clapping their hands, Pamela Afesi gives a particularly strong performance as Calvin's mother, Viola, as does Barbra Wengerd as Edgar's mother, Annabelle. Indeed, the crux of the play comes during an overlapping exchange with these two mothers—whose husbands abandoned their families—and their sons.



Adrian Baidoo and Ross Birdsong in a scene from "Separate and Equal" (Photo credit: Jeff Hanson)

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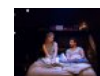
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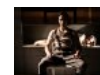
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Steven Bono Jr., Dylan Guy Davis, Edwin Brown III (in air), James Holloway and Adrian Baidoo in a scene from "Separate and Equal" (Photo credit: Jeff Hanson)

The other players are Will Badgett, Edwin Brown III, Jeremy Cox, Dylan Guy Davis, and James Holloway. Lawrence M. Jackson is credited with the Robbins-esque choreography and the "original," jazz-inflected music that accompanies the movements is by Tom Wolfe.

*Separate and Equal* (through September 30, 2018)

University of Alabama, in partnership with Birmingham Metro NAACP and Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

59E59 Theaters, 59 East 59<sup>th</sup> Street, in Manhattan

For tickets call 212-279-4200 or visit <http://www.59e59.org>

Running time: 90 minutes without an intermission

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About David Kaufman (80 Articles)

David Kaufman has been covering the theater in New York since 1981. A former theater critic for the New York Daily News, he was also a long-time contributor to the Nation, Vanity Fair, the Village Voice and the New York Times. He is also the author of the award-winning Ridiculous! The Theatrical Life and Times of Charles Ludlam, the best-selling Doris Day: The Untold Story of the Girl Next Door, and his most recent biography, Some Enchanted Evenings: The Glittering Life and Times of Mary Martin.

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