

WHITE MICE

for Libby Zeleke



THE FACT OF THE MATTER is that it is almost impossible for European societies as they are to eliminate racism in a thoroughgoing way. Racism is not simply a set of attitudes and practices that they level toward us, their socially constructed ‘other’, but it is the very principle of self-definition of European/Western societies. It could be said that what is otherwise known as European civilization – as manifested in the realm of arts and ideas – is a sublimated, formalized or simply a practiced version of racism.

– Himani Bannerji, *Thinking Through*

ANYWHERE but in Europe it is we whites who ‘smell bad’. And I would even say that we give off an odour as white as the gathering of pus in an infected wound. As iron can be heated until it turns white so it can be said that everything excessive is white ... white has become the mark of extreme decomposition.

– Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*

Characters

ROBERT is a white-furred mouse, early thirties.

DOUGLAS is a white-furred mouse, Robert's older brother, early thirties.

The Actors' Relationship to the Audience

A good way to think of the predicament of doing the play is to imagine that the production team is from another galaxy and has come to Earth to check things out. Upon arriving the team finds these artificially constructed 'races' – not only does the 'white' race treat everybody else like shit but they seem for the most part to keep themselves totally deluded about the severity of the situation. Coming to the conclusion that the white people must be mentally retarded, the production team from another galaxy decides to help out by putting on this small play.

Thinking that the white folks are not smart or strong enough to handle an overt deconstruction of their identity, they decide it would be better to use the metaphor of mice. Practically, this plays out in many of the moments when the actors will establish contact with the audience, explaining finer points and often lecturing to the point of being patronizing – but just to that point and not beyond. White people, by virtue of a buffer born of their complicity with this state of affairs, are amazingly stupid around this issue and must be approached with caution.

In addition, the production team from another planet is also aware that there will be a couple of white people and many people of colour who are already up to speed with their understanding of the situation, so the occasional moment can be played for them in an obvious display of complicity.

Set

The suggestion of an apartment in downtown Toronto. The set is composed of a tiny 12' x 12' playing area, upon which are painted large cartoon-like floorboards. There is a suggestion of a back wall spanning the width of the square, created with six metal wall studs reaching high up into the grid, interrupted only by a metal arch suggesting a mouse hole. Surrounding the little area, deep behind the set, are papier mâché globes floating in the darkness; some of the globes are cut in half and placed on the ground, on the ceiling and against the walls to invoke a sense of infinity. The cartoon floor and the globes are similarly coloured to suggest that the characters float in a universe of many worlds. Set pieces include two oversized chairs and an oversized table, upon which sits a large wheel of cheese and a very large knife.

Light

The light is confined to the 12' x 12' area, with six strips of light two feet wide running up/down upstage and six running right/left, plus other specials and fills. The strips are used quickly, following the actors as they run around the small area to create a maze-like effect.

Music

The music is ubiquitous – chilled, rhythmic and soulful, and decidedly influenced by a black aesthetic, preferably composed by a black person. The ubiquity of the music and the style choice is a reference to the thorough influence of black artists in the musical world. The two mice, like most white people, always listen to music invented, inspired or created by black people.

Costumes

The costumes, while cartoon-like, are again meant to evoke the notion of white people appropriating an urban black culture – an overt hipsterism located solidly within a funky vibe yet somehow always missing the mark.

Performance Style

The two actors perform in a high-speed vaudevillian manner. Some scenes feature an overt affectation of mouseness – curled hands to indicate paws, lifted top lip to reveal mouse teeth – but other times they are human, all too human. This can turn on a dime. A definite logic is difficult, but when they are frightened or posturing they are, perhaps, especially mousy. In addition, and related to the vaudevillian style, the actors' bodies are almost always oriented straight on, facing the front or back or turned directly sideways – always avoiding any diagonal posture. Only the most tender moments between the two break this rule.

Production History

White Mice received its first reading in 1997 under the auspices of the Theatre Centre. Featuring James O'Reilly as Robert, Darren O'Donnell as Douglas, it was directed and dramaturged by Jean Yoon with additional dramaturgy by Libby Zeleke.

White Mice was first produced by Mammalian Diving Reflex in 1998, featuring Stephen Guy McGrath as Robert and Bruce Hunter as Douglas. It was directed by Darren O'Donnell and produced by Naomi Campbell, with lighting by R.A. Armstrong, music by murr, set design by Naomi Campbell and Darren O'Donnell, costumes by Samuel Jackson and Lori Hickling and stage management by J.P. Robichaud.

White Mice was presented by the World Stage Festival 2000 in association with Mammalian Diving Reflex and featured the same team, with Darren O'Donnell playing the role of Robert.

White Mice was also produced in 2000 by Theatre Passe Muraille in association with Mammalian Diving Reflex, featuring the same creative team, with SimJones Inc and Lori Hickling as the costume designers.



Overture

(The voice of a black man speaks as the house lights fade.)

HIGH IN THE TOWER, where I sit above the loud complaining of the human sea, I know many souls that toss and whirl and pass, but none there are that intrigue me more than the souls of White Folk. Of them I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. Mine is not the knowledge of the traveller or the colonial composite of dear memories, words and wonder. Nor yet is my knowledge that which servants have of masters, or mass of class, or capitalist of artisan. Rather I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious! They deny me my right to live and be and call me misbirth! My word is to them mere bitterness and my soul, pessimism. And yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped – ugly, human.

– W.E.B. Du Bois

Scene 1

(*Lights up to discover Douglas sitting in a chair preparing to eat the cheese and Robert standing in the doorway.*)

ROBERT: I'm home.

DOUGLAS: Good, you're home.

ROBERT: Should I take out the garbage?

DOUGLAS: Do you want to take out the garbage – or –

ROBERT: Would I rather you did it?

DOUGLAS: Would you rather I did it?

ROBERT: Well –

DOUGLAS: Well what?

ROBERT: Well –

DOUGLAS: It's a simple question.

ROBERT: Frankly –

DOUGLAS: Be frank.

ROBERT: I could use the exercise.

DOUGLAS: Then go! Go! Take it out, take it out, take it out!

ROBERT: All right, here's! my! garbage! And I'm takin' it out –

DOUGLAS: On me!

ROBERT: I'm takin' it out on you, you freakin' little mouse turd.

DOUGLAS: Take it! Take it! Take it!

ROBERT: All right, I've had a fucked-up day and the same song keeps repeatin' in my head and it's all your freakin' fault!

DOUGLAS: Why's it my freakin' fault?

ROBERT: 'Cause you're my brother and I love you!

DOUGLAS: Oh, you don't.

ROBERT: Yes I do!

DOUGLAS: No you don't.

ROBERT: Yes I do!

DOUGLAS: No you don't.

ROBERT: Yes I do!

DOUGLAS: Yes you do!

ROBERT: No I don't.

DOUGLAS: See, you hate me, you stupid excuse for a stupid excuse.

ROBERT: You stupid freakin' trickster, you tricked me!

DOUGLAS: What are friends and family for?

ROBERT: What are friends and family for?

DOUGLAS: Well, since you asked –

ROBERT: Did I?

DOUGLAS: Friends and family are for fantastic fanciful folly, fraternalizing, and for the further fomentation of fundamental philosophies.

ROBERT: Simply?

DOUGLAS: Friends make the world go round. Without friends we'd be –

ROBERT: Lonely, oh so lonely.

DOUGLAS: My guiding principle is to get out, meet new mice, encounter new ideas and evolve. Grow or die, that's my motto!

ROBERT: I was out today.

DOUGLAS: That's the spirit.

ROBERT: I walked for blocks and blocks.

DOUGLAS: And how did it make you feel?

ROBERT: Terrible, awful, lonely, lonely, lonely. I walk up and down the streets searching for a familiar face, a friendly smile, searching for something, anything, anything that doesn't remind me of what a stupid abysmal excuse for a stupid freakin' fuckin' freak that I am. I'm cut off!

I have no one to talk to except all the other stupid freakin' fuckin' freaks that look exactly like me, think exactly like me, walk exactly like me, and talk exactly like me! Everywhere I go I see the same stupid freakin' blank faces starin' into their own oblivion!

DOUGLAS: It's a sign of the times!

ROBERT: So ... I've decided to become political.

DOUGLAS: Political?!

ROBERT: Political.

DOUGLAS: Political?!

ROBERT: Political!

DOUGLAS: Political?!!

ROBERT: Political!!

DOUGLAS: Why?!

ROBERT: 'Cause I'm sick of this stupid freakin' fuckin' place and the way it makes me feel and I want to change it.

DOUGLAS: But! But! But!

ROBERT: But nothing! I have no hope for the status quo and if you had a soul neither would you.

DOUGLAS: But isn't your very existence political?

ROBERT: Political?! I embody the status quo. Look at me, I'm all form, form, form. I have no content.

DOUGLAS: But the content of your existence?!!!

ROBERT: It's! Not! Enough! Any more!

(Blackout)

Scene 2

(Lights up to discover Robert sitting in his chair and Douglas pacing back and forth.)

DOUGLAS: Look, what's your problem?

ROBERT: I don't know, where should I start?

DOUGLAS: I don't know. How about (*mockingly*) 'imperialism'.

ROBERT: All right, imperialism.

DOUGLAS: Take it away.

ROBERT: Well, I got a problem with it.

DOUGLAS: So join the club.

ROBERT: You don't.

DOUGLAS: Do too.

ROBERT: Do not.

DOUGLAS: Do too.

ROBERT: Do not.

DOUGLAS: Do too.

ROBERT: Do too.

DOUGLAS: Do not.

ROBERT: See! You stupid puppet of imperialist forces, you benefit from the imperial trickle-down effect.

DOUGLAS: That's been disproved. I'm one of the disposable. I'm disenfranchised.

ROBERT: Yeah, you and all your friends on College Street suckin' back the foam offa your stupid freakin' cappucciniweenies, sweating a caffeinated sheen over some stupid alien conspiracy theory, acting as if the neoconservative agenda is doing anything but creating more space for your freakin' consumption.

DOUGLAS: But I'm poor, I really am poor.

ROBERT: What's that on your whiskers?

DOUGLAS: What?

ROBERT: You heard me.

DOUGLAS: I heard you?

ROBERT: You heard me, you freakin' freak.

DOUGLAS: My whiskers are clean.

ROBERT: That's what you say.

DOUGLAS: And I'll say it again.

ROBERT: There's something white on your whiskers.

DOUGLAS: On all of them?

ROBERT: On all three of them.

DOUGLAS: I have something white on all three of my whiskers?

ROBERT: You sure do.

DOUGLAS: But, but, but –

ROBERT: It's steamed milk!! You have dried steamed milk on all three of your whiskers, so don't go telling me that your poverty is preventing a wholesale enjoyment of College Street cappuccini-weenies.

DOUGLAS: It wasn't a cappucciniweenie – !

ROBERT: Oh no?

DOUGLAS: It was a mochacciniweenie, a mochacciniweenie, for freak's sake! And I didn't pay for it, I exchanged it for some stimulating conversation with a female.

ROBERT: See! It's privilege I'm talking about, and you have it no matter how convinced of your pathetic poverty you are.

DOUGLAS: Oh sure, and the next thing you're going to tell me is that I have this holy privilege because –

ROBERT: Because –

DOUGLAS: Because –

ROBERT: Because of the colour –

DOUGLAS: – of my fur, you stupid freakin' race traitor!

ROBERT: Deny it!

DOUGLAS: Deny it?! I'm not even going to address it.

ROBERT: The hallmark of denial.

DOUGLAS: You're not going to guilt me over this one. I didn't invent this world. I didn't choose to be born. I didn't set up the freakin' rules.

ROBERT: Rules?! Oh, they're 'rules' now!

DOUGLAS: I. Am. Innocent!

ROBERT: Do you know that White mice comprise less than, do you hear me, less than fifty percent of Toronoronto's popopulation?

DOUGLAS: Big deal, what do I care? That's fine with me, I'm all for it. I like world music like everybody else.

ROBERT: Yeah, so long as you can enjoy it in a cozy supremacist atmosphere.

DOUGLAS: Supremacist?!

ROBERT: Shut your eyes!

DOUGLAS: Alrighty.

ROBERT: Picture your friends.

DOUGLAS: Alrighty.

ROBERT: Imagine a typical conversation.

DOUGLAS: Alrighty.

ROBERT: Just out of curiosity ...

DOUGLAS: Yes?

ROBERT: What are you talking about?

DOUGLAS: Important things.

ROBERT: Important things?

DOUGLAS: Yeah, important things.

ROBERT: Such as -?

DOUGLAS: Well ... media, films, music, careers. Careers in media, careers in film, careers in music. Careers in ... careers. Interesting things. Choices that artists make. You know, politics.

ROBERT: Just out of curiosity -

DOUGLAS: Yes?

ROBERT: In this diverse city of ours with less than fifty percent of the population possessing white fur –

DOUGLAS: Yes?

ROBERT: What colour is the fur of less than fifty percent of your friends?

DOUGLAS: Well, white, of course.

ROBERT: And the more than fifty percent of your friends?

DOUGLAS: Well ... (*eyes pop open*) You are a race traitor, a plain and simple race traitor!

ROBERT: And that, my brother, is fine by me!

DOUGLAS: Listen to me! Everybody's invited to come down to College Street for a cappucciniweenie. I haven't erected any fences, you stupid, arrogant, self-satisfied –

ROBERT: The problem –

DOUGLAS: Oh, here we go!

ROBERT: The problem –

DOUGLAS: You're going to tell me about the problem and –

ROBERT: The problem –

DOUGLAS: – is somehow or other –

ROBERT: The problem –

DOUGLAS: Gonna be me!

ROBERT: Why are you so freakin' fuckin' defensive?

DOUGLAS: 'Cause it's not my fault!

ROBERT: When –

DOUGLAS: It's never been my fault.

ROBERT: – did I ever say –

DOUGLAS: I love mousekind, I do, I truly do, and I just want –

ROBERT: –that it was your freakin' fault?

DOUGLAS: – everything to be okay!

ROBERT: Well, things are not okay. Okay?! Okay?!

DOUGLAS: All right, all right.

ROBERT: The problem –

DOUGLAS: Oh god, it's me, I'm the problem, I know I'm the problem.

ROBERT: – is institutional.

DOUGLAS: What are you saying?

ROBERT: And while it may be institutional, it is embodied in –

DOUGLAS: May I?

ROBERT: Dive in!

DOUGLAS: – in ... the individual!

ROBERT: Take it away!

DOUGLAS: As we've learned from the various coincidences that occur just beneath the surface of one's fur, a pattern that is perceived on the macrocosm will be reflected in the microcosm which, in turn, becomes the macro for another micro and so on ad infinitum, so any system that is predicated on imbalance and inequity, such as global economics, will necessarily find itself reflected in the day-to-day adventures of even the most politically conscious mouse, so I as a straight –

ROBERT: Sorta!

DOUGLAS: – White male mouse must somehow embody all the privilege and power that is the hallmark of this stupid, horrible, lonely, lonely, lonely, sad and isolated world.

ROBERT: Exactly!

DOUGLAS: Even though –

ROBERT: What?

DOUGLAS: I have no money, my teeth are yellow from neglect, my muscles are stringy from malnutrition, my paws shake from stress, no one loves me and I love no one, and contemplating suicide is the only hobby I still enjoy.

ROBERT: C'est la vie!

DOUGLAS: And believe you me, things could be much worse. This I know, I acknowledge. I realize how lucky I am beneath all of my pathetic self-serving, self-loathing whining and complaining. Suffering is not universal and nor is it relative. I know this. I know this. I know this. And contemplating suicide is only a sublimation of my desire to get married, buy a house, and father a brood of cute furry little –

ROBERT: You're sick! You're sick! You're sick!

DOUGLAS: I'm sick!

ROBERT: Your analysis falls apart at the slightest suggestion of a freakin' breeze.

DOUGLAS: I know, I know, I know.

ROBERT: I get the distinct impression that you somehow feel that by virtue of your self-perceived saintly self-perception re your centrality, you think you truly inhabit a position of marginality vis-à-vis your location as someone in the midst of what you would not only characterize as a reversal but –

DOUGLAS: A displacement! I feel displaced!

ROBERT: And that, my brother, will be the starting point for your ... Political Awakening!

DOUGLAS: Really!?

ROBERT: But remember, we mice can only learn in three. Very. Specific. Ways.

DOUGLAS: I know what you're going to say!

ROBERT: One!

DOUGLAS: By sweating!

ROBERT: Two!

DOUGLAS: By crying!

ROBERT: And –

DOUGLAS: Don't, please don't!

ROBERT: Three –

DOUGLAS: BY BLEEDING!

(Douglas grabs the knife from the table and attempts to slash his wrists. Robert grabs for the knife and a massive struggle ensues.)

ROBERT: Gimme that knife!

DOUGLAS: Don't, don't, I can't go on!

ROBERT: Give it to me!

DOUGLAS: I don't want to learn, learning is too hard!!

ROBERT: Gimme that knife, you stupid freakin' pathetic self-obsessed freak!

DOUGLAS: No, I want to die!

ROBERT: Give it to me!

DOUGLAS: I want to die!

ROBERT: You give it to me!

DOUGLAS: Please, please, please let me die!

ROBERT: No!

DOUGLAS: Let me have the knife!

ROBERT: I will not let you die!

DOUGLAS: Please, oh please!

ROBERT: You will not die!

DOUGLAS: Please!

ROBERT: You will not die!

DOUGLAS: Please, oh please!

ROBERT: You will not die!

DOUGLAS: Please let me die!

(*Robert finally gets the knife away from Douglas. Douglas collapses in Robert's arms.*)

ROBERT: If you ever! ever! ever! ever! kill yourself I will KILL you,
do you hear me?! I will kill you!

(*Blackout*)