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## IWU Guest Director Ashley White on Producing "Appropriate"

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WGLT Interview with Ashley H. White, October 4, 2022

[Introduction]

Ariele Jones: A family patriarch passes away and the estranged adult siblings must reunite to sort through the family house, the Arkansas plantation house that they grew up in. Family dysfunction and their father's past is thrust into the spotlight. This is the premise of the show "Appropriate" by Branden Jacob Jenkins and will begin its run at Illinois Wesleyan University on October 5<sup>th</sup>. For Datebook, I'm Ariele Jones and I spoke with director Ashley H. White about the production and the major discovery from their dad's past that adds to familial tensions.

[Beginning of Interview]

Ashley H. White: While they're cleaning things out some artifacts and souvenirs from previous- uh- Klan activities are discovered.

Jones: Oh wow-

[White awkwardly laughs]

Jones: -we're going there

White: -and- yeah, yeah, I should've mentioned it's an all-white family-

Jones: Uh-huh

White: -and there are varied responses to the things that are discovered and it's a really [sighs] thoughtful and sharp look at white families coming to terms with their inherent racist histories and so it's-it's a necessary piece but it's not only about the inherent racism in the family, it's also about the family itself and all of the trauma that we carry and the conversations that we refuse to have.

Jones: You- you mentioned these themes can be very pointed, how do you as director...um... show that there are other- we're dealing with a lot of other things in this play as well?

White: Branden Jacob Jenkins is the playwright and he's an incredible playwright and- and one thing that is common in all of his pieces is humanity and- and the importance of layering... um emotions onto humanity and the human experience being so unique to everybody and it's... I think that that's the entryway into the piece is- is the direct humanity of everybody involved, but then with humanity comes- comes grace but also comes consideration and we can't hold back on- especially looking at something from this lens. And so I- we- I have an incredible dramaturg from D.C. and we have been having extensive conversations about the balance of- and not making this a heavy handed play about the characters being racist actively, but more a heavy handed play asking questions about what is inherently racist in white families and how do we responsibly handle that- uh especially in regards to our children and in handling um- new information that may come up and may really pull the veil back on just how

bad and traumatic our own histories are and that's- I mean that's the responsibility of white folks across the nation and- and this playwright has just written this awesome piece that really kind of shows it in a very human way because we've all had a relative die-

Jones: Yes, yes

White: -and we, you know, at some point we're all going to have to clean out a house... and those houses, the questions that they raise and the things that they um... reveal can be as much about self as they are about others.

Jones: Ashley, what are you hoping... um an audience takes from this show?

White: I-so... When I discussed my concept with both the creative teams and the cast... uh, I said that I want it to feel like a "haunting mirror." Um, there is definitely some- some spiritual elements to the piece and the play, uh and it needs to feel like you're looking in a mirror a little bit. And so we're trying to find a balance of realism and um... uh... spiritualism intersecting in this story, but really and- Branden Jacob Jenkins has an awesome quote about his desire for his work is for people to ask questions, to leave asking more questions than they went in with. And I want everyone to leave thinking, "I- I have some work to do."

[Closing]

Jones: That was guest director Ashley H. White, talking about what she hopes people can take away after seeing the show "Appropriate." "Appropriate" is running from October 5<sup>th</sup> through the 9<sup>th</sup> at Illinois Wesleyan's Mirza theater. For more details and tickets go to [iwu.edu/theater](http://iwu.edu/theater).

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