

# Dinner with the Jaspers

By: David Barbour



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## The supercharged family drama *Purpose* comes to Broadway with a deluxe scenic and lighting design

The playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins is becoming Broadway's favorite provocateur. Last season, he captivated audiences with *Appropriate*, a sizzling satire about a once-prominent Arkansas family trying to live down its history of slaveholding. Now comes *Purpose*, set among the members of a politically and religiously prominent Black family. The Reverend Solomon Jasper and his wife Claudine were lions of the Civil Rights movement, but the parade has moved on, and they no longer play host to a procession of governmental and media-world celebrities. Their sons are

greater or lesser disappointments: Junior, a former state senator, has done time for embezzling campaign funds; his aggrieved wife, Morgan, is about to serve a sentence for aiding and abetting her husband. Nazareth, or Naz, is, to his parents' consternation, one of life's loners, a nature photographer who is never happier than when shooting an uninhabited landscape. Eyebrows are raised when news gets around of Naz's arrangement with his queer friend Aziza, donating sperm (via turkey baster) so she can have a child.

Then again, this revelation nearly gets lost during a birthday meal that

contains the most bombshells per minute since the Weston family sat down to dinner in *August: Osage County*. They include mental illness, infidelity, and fraud, not to mention Junior's ill-fated effort at peddling his prison correspondence with Claudine. After dinner, the tremors keep coming, including the threat of a tell-all memoir, a sinister stash of pills, and a suicide attempt.

The production, directed by Phylicia Rashad and seen last season at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre, opened in March at Broadway's Helen Hayes Theater. It benefits from a scenic design, by Todd Rosenthal, which speaks volumes about the Jaspers and their history, and lighting, by Amith Chandrashaker, which effectively tracks the play's night-into-morning time frame, strikes a strong contrast of warm and cold looks, and pulls the audience in and out of the action for the monologues delivered by Nazareth. Their work contributes enormously to a play that examines the aftermath of a social movement's end and the consequences of growing up in its shadow.

### Scenery

The set of *Purpose* is imposing, featuring a large-scale living/dining room with an upstage alcove, a curving staircase, and a gallery level leading to several bedrooms. Upstairs, a collection of family photos frames a large portrait of the young Jasper Solomon; on the first floor is a shrine to Martin Luther King, whose portrait dominates the room. Windows upstage and stage right offer a view of the snowstorm raging outside.

(This is an important plot point, as the bad weather prevents anyone from escaping.) The space is filled with tasteful, expensive-looking furniture, and the walls are painted a distinctive color known as Chivalry Copper. Other touches included an old-fashioned china cabinet in the dining area. It's a warm, comfortable space, yet it retains a certain museum-like aspect. One imagines that visitors might find it more welcoming than, say, the members of the Jasper family's younger generation.

Designing this interior for *Steppenwolf* was a bit of a challenge, Rosenthal notes, because the theatre "has qualities of a proscenium and a thrust." In such circumstances, he asks, "How do you make an interesting, compelling ground plan that's not flat?" Having figured it out in Chicago, he adds, "Moving it to New York and reducing the size of the ground plan was a challenge as well."

At the same time, Rosenthal notes, "Phylicia was very, very clear about what she wanted. A lot of the set's qualities are qualities of her house, in terms of the warm colors and the fact that she likes curved architecture." The



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curves help create various areas for a play loaded with one-on-one encounters. Still, the designer says, because the stage of the Hayes is relatively narrow, "We prioritized the dinner table [where the play's biggest scene unfolds] and the sofa [which hosts a great deal of downstage action]."

Even as the set was trimmed to fit a smaller space, it arguably became more detailed. "Besides scaling it down," Rosenthal says, "Phylicia wanted every object in the room to have a narrative. The premise is that each thing was acquired or was gifted to Solomon. Phylicia wanted everything to look authentic." These objects also help one to understand the costs of living in a storied family with parents whose accomplishments are impossible to match.

"I didn't have a go-to props person when I first started working on Broadway," Rosenthal says. "I was always having to scramble, going to shops and flea markets to find the perfect prop. Now I have Faye Armon-Troncoso. She's really reliable and has great taste." Among the key props he cites is Solomon's easy chair. "We wanted it to stand out, something that doesn't quite go with the rest of the room but something he'll never replace."

The Jaspers reside somewhere in the Chicago metro area; Rosenthal says he elected Evanston, the mon-eyed suburb that houses Northwestern University, as a point of reference. A stickler for authenticity, to capture the feeling of the area outside the Jasper house, he says, "I crawled through the backyards of these really wealthy homes in Evanston."

Rosenthal says it was Rashad's idea to add a second level to the set. ("She wanted it to be a mansion.") Interestingly, what the play lacked when the design process began was a second act. Although nobody expected Jacobs-Jenkins, who was still finishing the play, to surprise them with a change of location, the trick involved anticipating what might be needed. As it happens, the piano, located upstage and to the left of the dinner table, turned out to be important, and the second level gave new staging opportunities that proved helpful.

Hanging over the action is a chandelier, another sign of wealth. "In Chicago, we had more of a coffered ceiling," Rosenthal says. "In New York, we opened it up more," a decision that gave Chandrashaker more positions for his rig. Overall, the designer notes, the biggest challenge was guaranteeing sightlines in the Hayes, which has



Chandrashaker uses the zactrack system to repeatedly carve out the character of Nazareth for his lengthy monologues.





The lighting tracks a night-into-morning time frame, striking strong contrasts between cold and warm looks.

a slightly odd audience layout and a fairly high stage. The set provides the director with an ample staging ground for the domestic skirmishes that make up the play.

### Lighting

Lighting designer Amith Chandrashaker talks about the challenges of walking into the project when it was still unfinished. "When we started rehearsals at Steppenwolf, three weeks before tech, there was nothing after the dinner scene. When I got there, the night before tech, we got the nighttime scenes, everything that happens after dinner. Then the day before dress rehearsal, we got the whole morning section, including the final monologue. The biggest challenge was going so long without knowing what it was."

The designer seems remarkably unfazed by this situation. "We knew everything leading up to the family's big explosion. When we got the new pages, we understood where he was going with it. He might have come in and said, 'The final scene is in the garden.' But, with a writer like that, you

just trust the process; luckily, I've worked with him before."

Also, he says, "I had worked at Steppenwolf before, and it has a very supportive team. I tried to give myself some wiggle room, to adapt the rig to wherever the show took us. Other than that, I knew the rough outline, and Phylicia kept us all in touch."

Commenting on the large number of practical units, including ceiling lights, Chandrashaker says, "Todd made a proposal, and we went back and forth about the best place for them. We wanted it to feel like a real place. One of Phylicia's guiding stars was that it should feel like a house where they've raised two boys and have lived for so long. We wanted to make it feel luxurious yet homely, comfortable, very lived-in. Having the practicals helped give it that warmth." He adds that the units create a lived-in effect, adding depth and interest to the overall stage picture.

Another task on the designer's to-do list was developing the ability to repeatedly carve Naz out of the action for lengthy monologues. "We were trying to figure out the right language of

focusing on Nazareth, because in those moments, he's operating on a different timeline than anyone else. We tried it in Chicago with no change in the lighting. But we soon felt that making a large change gave the actor the ability to connect with the audience. He commented that it helped him step forward and break the fourth wall." In Chicago, Chandrashaker had a followspot operator follow Nazareth as he walked around the stage. The New York production uses the zactrack tracking system to keep Jon Michael Hill, who plays Nazareth, fully lit.

"For us, zactrack was the only option, because the Hayes is a smaller theatre and we couldn't put in a followspot without killing a bunch of seats," Chandrashaker says. "We had a few sessions with [Hill] going through his moments. We use it in different ways. We'll bring the lighting down to highlight, but when he's going to move, we'll have a cue to unfreeze the moving light that follows him. As he is landing, we'll have another cue to freeze it if he's going to pause for a certain period of time."

The lighting is also designed to pick out each principal at the dinner table. "We wanted to have a kind of interrogation light table," he says, adding the key is to "line them up in the right places and put specials on them, trying to catch them as they go in and out. We are okay if they fall out of the light and come back. There's something interesting about them appearing for their lines and then sitting down that adds to the tension of the scene."

One of the rig's workhorses, he notes, is the Martin MAC Encore Performance WRM, chosen, he says, because "we knew it was going to be a warm, naturalistic show and we wanted to light African American skin well. It would also deal with the gorgeous orange-pink walls."

The full rig, provided by PRG, includes 20 Encore Performance WRMs, four PRG Best Boy Spot LEDs, two Robe T1 Profiles, ten GLP impression X5s, eight impression X4s, five impression X4 Bar 20s, one

impression X4 Bar 10, 91 ETC Source Four Lustr 3s in various degree sizes, 12 Chroma-Q Color Force II 48s, two Color Force II 12s, four CHAUVET Professional COLORado Solo 2s, two Elation KL Par FC WFLs, five Astera AX5s, two Rosco Braq Cube 4Cs, three ETC Source Fours in various degree sizes, two Source Four PARs, and two MR-16 birdies.

Hudson Scenic, the show's scenic fabricator, supplied the LED tape used in the set, consisting of City Theatrical/Environmental Lights Cove Wash and Eluxtra, and six snow rollers with variable-speed DMX control. "When the play was still being written, we didn't realize how much it was going to be snowing," Chandrashaker says, noting that it continues until late in the play. "So," he adds, "our snow plans in Chicago were tricky. When we moved to New York, we knew we needed a more robust snowstorm. So, we got snow rollers with variable speeds, which allows us to amp it up

at times." He adds, "There's none at the top of the show. When the dinner scene starts, there's a blizzard outside, and it continues through all the nighttime scenes." He adds, "We love how it accumulates," reaching several inches, giving the props team a major task in prepping the set for each performance.

"It's always about trying to find the right language," Chandrashaker says. "You don't want to make heavy-handed gestures in the monologues, but to find the right balance of helping the piece's realities and shifting them. As bombastic as it is, it's a very delicate play. You just want to make the actors comfortable so they can give these explosive performances."

Other key personnel includes Sotirios Livaditis (associate scenic designer), Stoli Stolnack (associate

lighting designer), Max Grano De Oro (lighting design member candidate), Jeff Englander (programmer), Mia Roy (production electrician), Anastasia Sioris (assistant production electrician), Steven Sury (production/house carpenter), McBrien Dunbar (advance carpenter), Jeanne (JJ) Hu (house props), and Dan Mendeloff (assistant props). Having earned good reviews, well-positioned to be an awards-season player, *Purpose* is scheduled to run through July 6. 📡



The snowstorm seen outside the window is a key plot point. Hudson Scenic supplied six snow rollers with variable-speed DMX control.