

# LAWEEKLY

## Theatre

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## Detours: A lost highway and roads not taken

By STEVEN MIKULAN

There was much quoting, in the recent obituaries for crime novelist Mickey Spillane, of *I, the Jury*'s notorious closing lines, with their tough-guy frisson of sex, blood and revenge. Overlooked, but far more revealing of the book's mid-20th-century sensibilities, was this comparatively circumspect passage in which private eye Mike Hammer explains his disgust with homosexuals: "They were hiding behind the door when sexes were handed out. They got what was left over and not enough of it at that." This perspective on gays was the American consensus in the 1940s, the time of Spillane's novel, and forms the oppressive horizon of Zsa Zsa Gershick's intriguing drama, *Bluebonnet Court*.

The play, premiering at the Hudson Mainstage, is set in 1944, when the tide of war has turned and Americans are already beginning to imagine the new world just around the corner. Helen Burke (Leslie Cohen), a New

Yorker driving through Texas, listens to her car radio while a “marriage maven” and a preacher drawl advice through the speaker. The subjects of their imperatives seem like harmless stuff — marriage, peach cobbler and salvation — but subtly allude to an iron curtain separating Helen from the rest of society, for she is not only Jewish, but one of those people who supposedly hid behind the door when sexes were distributed.

Helen is also a survivor of sorts, a brash female journalist in a man’s profession, attired in slacks, jacket and fedora, and whose hands must always be occupied with a typewriter, a cigarette or a whiskey flask. After running her car off the road to avoid hitting a deer, she wanders into the Bluebonnet Motor Court, a sagging, sun-bleached motel sitting on the edge of Austin. Helen reluctantly resigns herself to staying here until her car is repaired, after which she can resume her trip to California, to a job writing for the movies and a tentative love affair with a Hollywood actress.

It’s soon clear that Helen’s going to be stuck at the motor court and will endure all sorts of cultural indignities in this tidy metaphor for the stifling embrace of heartland life. And, sure enough, Helen is continually hunted down by the chummy (“You got that Roman nose!”) proprietress, Lila Jean (Jamey Hood), and bullied by Lila’s drunken war-vet husband, Roy Glenn (Jonathan Nail).

But she’s also smitten by their charwoman, Orla Mae (Dalila Ali Rajah), a young black woman with a passion for books. A relationship grows between Helen and Orla Mae, first as a bond of outsiders, then as a romance between two women. Bluebonnet Court is refreshing first for its absence of a modern, feel-good vocabulary. (The play takes place before lovers were “life partners” and blacks like Orla Mae were “people of color.”) Perhaps because it is so free of culturally sensitive speech, the play does not preach or pander. The story has its villains, but we never meet them — even Roy Glenn, whose drunken comments about Jews make Mel Gibson look like Bono, turns out to have an artist’s soul.

Sometimes Gershick’s play does strain credulity, especially when it seems as though nearly all its characters are gay. Bluebonnet Court also wobbles into melodrama now and then in Act 2. There’s a scene (or rather, the aftermath of one) involving a woman, Nanalu (Michelle Merring), who’s been savagely raped and beaten for “passing” for white, and here Gershick does break out the hankies, but luckily the evening does not revolve around the incident. (Perhaps the scene jars so much because Nanalu’s assault is the story’s most traumatic moment yet occurs offstage and to a secondary character. It also doesn’t help that in this

production, the victim is played by an actor who just doesn't seem light-skinned enough to have passed for Caucasian.)

Nevertheless, Gershick knows when to keep her play from overheating by filling it with cultural humor, from Helen's explanation to Lila Jean that "faygele" is "Yiddish for actor" to Helen's shrugging acceptance of a ham sandwich from her clueless hostess. Gershick is also mindful of the story's period, freely dispensing the bourbon and cigarettes that were the era's social currency, while creating characters who are all the more believable for being fatalistic rather than defiant. Even the recurring pastiches of radio broadcasts, delivered by actors Jeanne Simpson and Andrew Thacher, temper their innate nostalgia with an underlying chill of conformity.

Director Kelly Ann Ford has done some nice work, powered by Cohen's and Rajah's excellent performances, which bring to life a tenuous, aching attraction between their two characters. Ford gets superb technical support across the board. Joel Daavid's multitiered set makes efficient use of the relatively small stage, while Kathi O'Donohue's nuanced lighting plot brings character to the eponymous motor court, and Bob Blackburn's sound design summons the soundtrack of a vanished America. Finally, Shon LeBlanc's spot-on costumes lend an authenticity to the story without turning the actors into clotheshorses.

Some may question how anyone could fall for a play that ends with its homosexual, interracial lovers literally riding off into the sunset, but here we must quote Mickey Spillane's famous expert on all things gay: "It was easy."