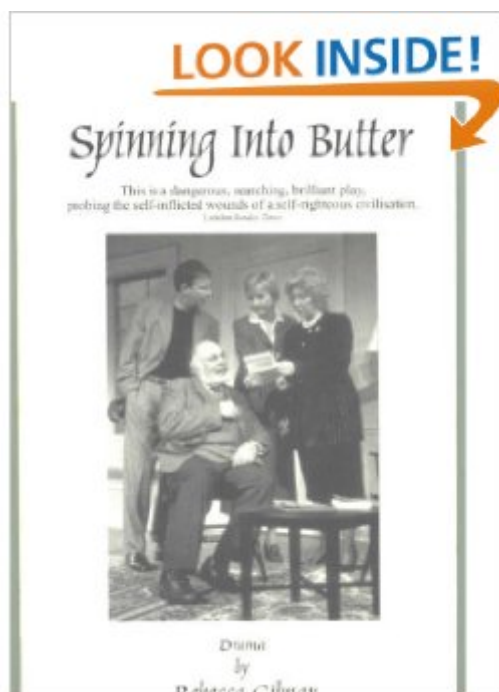


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Spinning Into Butter: A Play In Two Acts



Synopsis

Set on a college campus in Vermont, *Spinning into Butter* is a new play by a major young American playwright that explores the dangers of both racism and political correctness in America today in a manner that is at once profound, disturbing, darkly comic, and deeply cathartic. Rebecca Gilman challenges our preconceptions about race relations, writing of a liberal dean of students named Sarah Daniels who investigates the pinning of anonymous, clearly racist letters on the door of one of the college's few African American students. The stunning discovery that there is a virulent racist on campus forces Sarah, along with other faculty members and students, to explore her feelings about racism, leading to surprising discoveries and painful insights that will rivet and provoke the reader as perhaps no play since David Mamet's *Oleanna* has done. *Spinning into Butter* had its world premiere at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in May 1999 and will open at the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center in New York in April 2000. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

It has been years since I have read a new play with a message as important and relevant as *Spinning Into Butter*. Although countless plays have been written on the subject of race relations in the United States, this is the first that I know of to tackle the new brand of politically correct, closeted racism that is so rampant in our nation today. The racists in Gilman's play are not of the extremist, "I wear my hate on my t-shirt" variety. Gilman's racists are unique in that they are easy to identify with, and as you begin to point the finger at their actions, you can't help but point the finger at yourself as well. If you are searching for a genuinely important piece of theatre to add to your season, put this play at the top of your reading list.

Rebecca Gilman is a true dramatist of ideas, and hence very adept at pulling the rug out from under an audience's feet. In "Spinning Into Butter" she subverts the otherwise smooth workings of current American identity politics with her stage writer's sure instinct that individuals, circumstances and motives alter cases. Though much of the published commentary on the play singles out merely one liberal's "confession" of racism, it is fairer to the play, I think, to recognize that the dramatist sees all her characters in their different ways as racists, those who arbitrarily privilege themselves or other members of formerly oppressed or ignored groups as much as those who covertly oppose them. In such an environment, the playgoer finally has to ask, "Are the characters (and by extension we ourselves) incapable of seeing particular persons as individuals, or have we all been rendered crazy by the imperatives of groupthink?" Equally disturbing, the college at which the play takes place is one where those who prosper, whether students or administrators, are simply those most savvy at whacking a system set up by money grubbers bent on student retention and their odd allies, the thought police. From such an environment, the more sensitive and intelligent must either flee or else be banished. Gilman's insights here bear affinities to those in recent campus novels by Philip Roth, Francine Prose, and J. M. Coetzee where rightist bottom line considerations are shown to have joined forces with leftist PC dictates straight out of the Chinese Cultural Revolution to produce startling new hells. The story of "Little Black Sambo," which gives the play its title, is a marvelously apt and ironic controlling metaphor for this dramatic action. Finally, if the play has any weakness, I would say it is a certain pallid quality arising from an absence of particular depth or memorableness in any of the characters. At least in reading, none of the parts seems to be a fully written dramatic role to which different actors might bring different insights and emphases. Nevertheless, Rebecca Gilman has succeeded in having complex ideas emerge with naturalness during the course of a dramatic action of wit and vitality. For this, she deserves high praise indeed.

Plays, of course, are meant to be read aloud but this is pretty gripping reading just as a book. The main character, Sarah, is ambiguous enough to be real and to elicit in many of us some clear recognition. She grapples with her racism in terms of the crisis precipitated by a "student of color." It is interesting to follow the dilemma to its finale as all the characters represent an academic nightmare of political correctness and knee-jerk liberalism. I plan to use this in my book club by having each member take a part and read it through. I think this would be a different and highly provocative exercise for any reading group. Hearing some of Gilman's language out loud is bound to set up some excellent discussions. I recommend this play either for silent or out-loud reading in a

group. I look forward to seeing the play.

Gilman is certainly one of the most promising young playwrights in the world, and this play solidifies that. She has created a beautiful portrait of the problems created when those in power attempt to relate to different races, and the absurdity of an individual believing he or she can relate to someone with completely different life experiences. Gilman zeros in precisely on how political correctness has gone too far as to be almost absurd, instead of letting people have their own say in matters. When the headmaster of the college in this play attempts -- with good intentions -- to intrude into the lives of her minority students, chaos ensues, and she realizes just how little she has learned about equality. Also wonderful in this play is the subplot about the professors and deans, who are all fighting for position and recognition among both the academic public and the student body, and how the wide infighting among faculty at colleges can affect its students. This play drives deep without seeming too, questioning just how many amongst us are truly racists without being aware of it, and how the road to hell really is paved with good intentions. A good modern read, and a playwright to watch.

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