

ART IMITATES LIFE

## Paintings and color clash in 'Permanent Collection'

By **Robert L. Pincus**

ART CRITIC

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In Thomas Gibbons' play, philanthropist Alfred Morris collected paintings in quantity by the likes of Cezanne and Renoir. He hung them according to his idiosyncratic taste – “odd and unfashionable and spiky” is how the education director at the Morris Foundation describes it. And when the collection's benefactor died, he insisted in his will that the art remain in place as it was upon his death, the installation never to be altered.

Much of “Permanent Collection,” now being presented by the Mo'olelo Performing Arts Company at 10th Avenue Theatre downtown, takes place in the Morris Foundation galleries and offices; all of the action revolves around its art and policies.

A new director, Sterling North, has just been appointed. But even before he enters its doors, Walter Murray, as North, faces the audience and delivers a monologue. He forcefully conveys the story of his drive to the foundation, during which he is halted by a policeman. His only offense, as he puts it: DWB (Driving While Black). North manages to intimidate the policeman with an explanation of his title and the threat of a lawsuit.

This tale anticipates the rest of Gibbons' play. Art and race converge. Issues about museum presentation and race intertwine, too. The relationship between the museum and the media also comes into play and somehow all of these issues dovetail in the course of the drama. As much as “Permanent Collection” is issue-driven, Gibbons offers up no pat conclusions.

True to the title at the heart of the drama, the collection is at the core of the story – more specifically its African art, amassed by Morris but relegated to the storage room. North wants to show several pieces in the galleries. Paul Barrow, the education director, tells him this is impossible.

“The will forbids it,” says Barrow. “You can't change the permanent collection.”

“Don't tell me something can't be changed,” declares a visibly angry North. “Don't tell me change is not allowed. My wife teaches civil rights law at Grant University. She tells me a provision in a will that is clearly discriminatory can be challenged in court. And overturned.”

The die is cast: African art becomes intertwined with North's desire to challenge the Eurocentric nature of the Morris collection.



NICK ABADILLA

Joe Powers plays Alfred Morris, idiosyncratic benefactor of the troubled art foundation at the heart of Thomas Gibbons' play "Permanent Collection," which confronts racism in the art world and the world at large.

## Real-world parallels

The play has a real-world backdrop that is crucial. The Morris is a thinly disguised version of the Barnes Collection, located in the Philadelphia suburb of Merion. Albert Barnes was every bit as eccentric as Morris, whose ghost appears in the galleries intermittently to comment on the art and his life. And Barnes was every bit as hostile to the world of curators and connoisseurs as Gibbons makes him out to be, in the guise of Morris.

Morris' ghost, performed with carefully calibrated verve by Joe Powers, makes it clear that the collector took great pleasure in building a collection with works by the likes of Cezanne and Matisse equal to those of stellar museums, while denying access to major art historians and others. Barnes grew up in the Philadelphia slums and when he made a fortune on the antiseptic drug Argyrol, he still felt as if he was the victim of upper-class snobbery.

The character of North shares many qualities with Richard Glanton, who led the Barnes Collection for much of the 1990s. And while there was no incident involving African sculptures, Glanton did accuse the museum's neighbors of racism when he proposed a parking lot for visitors and they demonstrated against it. There were multiple lawsuits surrounding his charges and the community's countercharges. Ultimately, he was ousted in 1998.

But as Gibbons explains in a telephone interview, building the conflict around art is far more interesting than focusing on a debate about a parking lot.

“When we walk into a museum, we're seeing a consensus of what is valuable in our culture. I wanted people to think about who decides what hangs in a museum,” says Gibbons.

And we do.

## Conflicting visions

In the real world, Barnes hung some African works in the galleries, alongside the modernist paintings – a fact wisely reflected in the design of the spare Mo'olelo production set by David F. Weiner.

But North makes the point that relegating so much of the African art in the collection to the storage bins is Eurocentric. He has a strong argument on this point, even if it remains ambiguous whether the charges of racism leveled at Barrow hold true.

We're confronted with conflicting visions of the Morris collection. In Barrow's view, it should remain true to the vision of the man who collected these works and created a home for them. In North's opinion, to freeze the installation in time is pointless, when there are great works in storage that will make the place more multicultural, more true to our time.

As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that their colliding views on art – as subjective as anyone else's – play a bigger role in their policy arguments than each admits at the outset.

The outcome is rife with ambiguity. North ultimately loses his position of power, but Barrow, who was ousted by North, isn't really welcomed back into the fold. Gibbons' gallery of supporting characters adds texture to the story's tensions. Kanika Weaver (Tanya Johnson), also African-American and 20 years younger than North, who isn't receptive to his extreme views of racism. Gillian Crane (Debra Wanger), a reporter for the city's newspaper, reveals the conflict of North and Barrow in her efforts to get the story, which aggravates the situation. But each is only too willing to tell his view of events, believing he is right. The theater company's artistic director, Seema Sueko, who has directed this production, clearly has a sensitivity to the complexities of these tensions.

In the real world, it seems virtually certain that the Barnes will be going against the founder's wishes in a big way: It

will be moving to downtown Philadelphia to stave off financial ruin.

In “Permanent Collection,” art imitates life. The Morris is doing the same, though a city is never named.

Barrow calls it a betrayal. Ella Franklin, longtime employee and newly appointed director, retorts, “When the board offered me this position, Paul, they gave me one directive: Keep the lights on. I've devoted my life to these rooms, but none of us can see in the dark, can we?”

One wonders whether Morris – or Barnes – would agree.

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