

Palisadian Nazi Nest Revisited

By ERIKA MARTIN
Reporter

Murphy Ranch, the infamous World War II-era Nazi compound that, until recently, was nestled in the hills of Pacific Palisades, comes back to life in a new play at the Hudson Theatre in Hollywood.

Playwright Laurel Wetzork's "Blueprint for Paradise" uses the history of the site as inspiration to examine the psychology of racism and fascism—themes that remain strikingly relevant in national discourse today.

Set in 1941 during the weeks leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor, the play draws on the true story of Norman and Winona Stephens who commissioned

African-American architect Paul Revere Williams to design a compound and training ground for Nazi sympathizers on their 50-acre **Rustic Canyon** property.

Wetzork said she'd always taken an interest in WWII history because many of her family members and loved ones fought in the war. When she stumbled on the story of Murphy Ranch in her research, she was gripped by the local events and the couple's separation of their politics and personal relationships.

"It's sort of a hidden side of LA, I think," Wetzork said. "People think Los Angeles is very liberal, but it's not and it wasn't."

Her play is centered on the couple, fictionalized as Clara and Herbert Taylor, who are used as a

vehicle to examine a theme Wetzork visits often: Appearances can be deceiving.

The husband and wife's sunny piety and misplaced social conscience, and their comfortable relationship with their immigrant household help and Williams, belie dangerous beliefs.

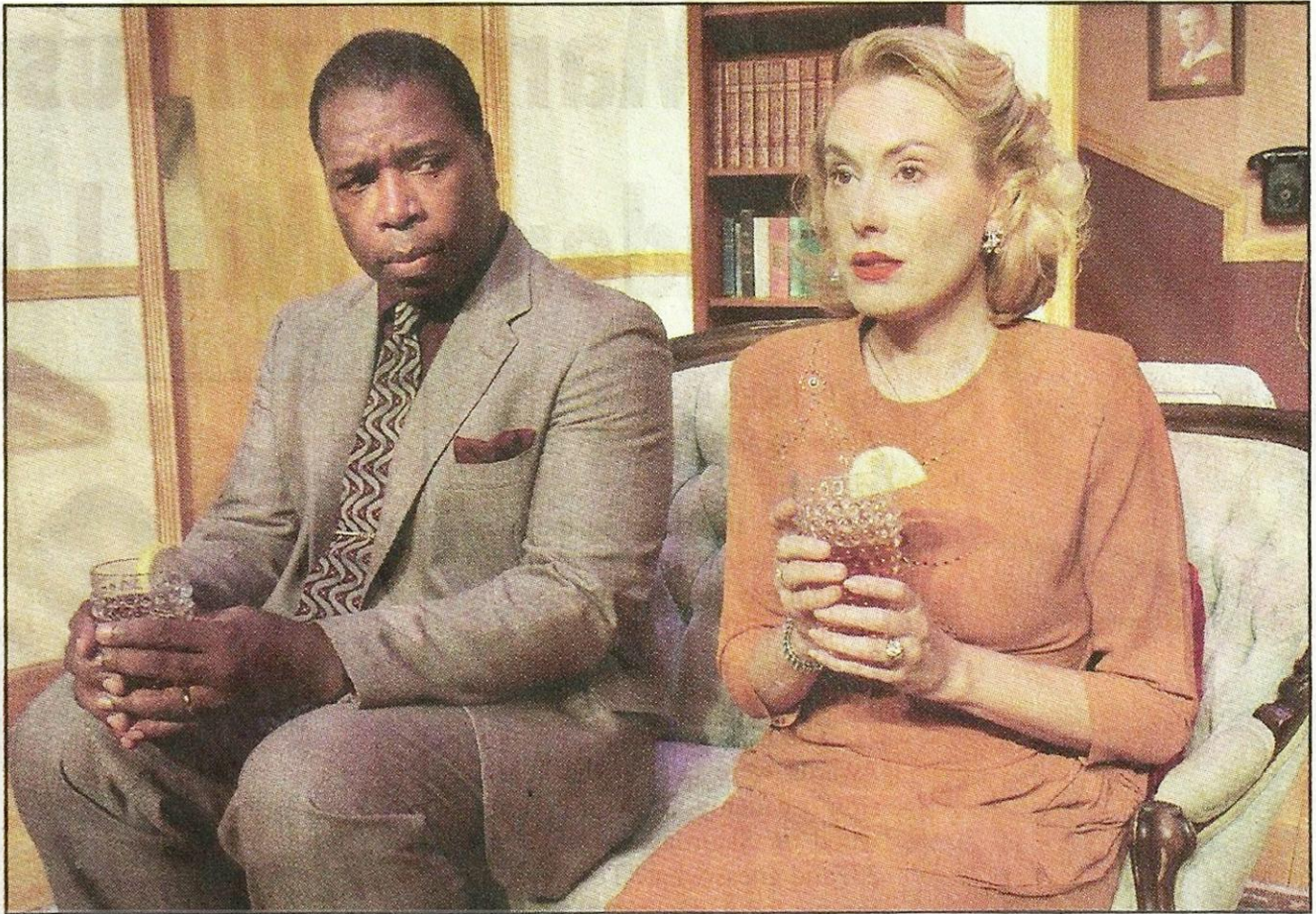
"I found it hard to understand why they would hire a Black man," Wetzork said of the real-life couple. "I wanted to examine the wife's journey—to discover how Williams' achievements and personality might have shaken her preconceived notions of the way the world should work."

Williams designed landmark LA buildings such as Saks Fifth Avenue in Beverly Hills and the



David Jahn, right, and Meredith Thomas in Laurel Wetzork's "Blueprint for Paradise."

in On-Stage Performance



Regi Davis, left, and Meredith Thomas in "Blueprint for Paradise."

Photos by Ed Krieger

LA County Courthouse, as well as private residences for the likes of Frank Sinatra and Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz.

Wetzork was shocked to discover Williams was unaware he was designing a compound for Nazis. His employers did subject him to second-class treatment—Williams even learned to draw upside down on his plans so they didn't stand on the same side of the desk—but unfortunately this sort of prejudice was more common at the time.

Despite the seriousness in subject matter, the script is punctuated with comic relief. This balances darker moments of fear mongering and racism that seem to comment on current events.

"Starting to write it, I didn't know that there might be an echo

now," Wetzork noted. "Lines from the play are coming out of politicians' mouths."

Wetzork's research into the period turned up LA's surprising ties with Hitler's policy, namely Pasadena's Human Betterment Foundation, of which the Stephens were members. The group sterilized the mentally ill, handicapped and criminals, which in turn inspired Hitler's eugenic policies.

"In the play, Clara is greatly influenced by them, as well as by the ultra-conservative Mothers of America who opposed U.S. involvement in the war," Wetzork said. "I wanted to make her have good intentions but go a different way."

The master plan for the compound was never realized and

federal agents seized the property the day after the Pearl Harbor attacks. In the early 1970s, the city of Los Angeles claimed the property, turning the bunker into an artist colony.

But a 1978 fire ushered its abandonment and the vandalized building on the site was used as nothing more than a hiking destination. Many of the structures were demolished in February due to safety concerns.

"*Blueprint for Paradise*" runs July 30 through Sept. 4, with performances on Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m. All tickets are \$25. The Hudson Theatre is located at 6539 Santa Monica Blvd. For information and to purchase tickets, call 323-960-4412 or go to blueprintforparadise.com.