Six Degrees of Separation

Play is the first co-production between MCTC and Metro State

Ed Day

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You don’t have to know who Sidney Poitier is to realize that the issues of inclusion and exclusion, and class and race in “Six Degrees of Separation” remain relevant today.

The play, which premiered in 1990, is about a charming young con man named Paul who worms his way into the lives of a wealthy New York couple, Ouisa and Flan, by telling a convincing sob story and claiming to be the son of the famous actor Poitier. But as clues about Paul’s true identity unfold, the foibles of upper-class society — the greed, self-importance and insular nature — are exposed as the couple tries to reconcile the new information with their initial impression.

“Paul is accepted because he is witty and articulate and dresses smartly,” said director Gail Smogard, who is also director of the Metropolitan Theater Program, adding that the hint of celebrity also elevated Paul’s status in their minds.

Anna Vogt, a Metropolitan State University student who plays Elizabeth, suggests that another societal nuance entered the equation. The con man’s targets are “quick to believe him because they don’t want to appear racist.”

The racial component weighed more heavily during the plays original run and is one reason the performances take place during Black History Month. (The play is scheduled to run Feb. 17 to Feb. 20). However, Smogard thinks that today, the play is more about class.

“We’re all excluded from some aspects of society,” Smogard said, noting social signifiers such as education level, religion, race and birthplace play a big role in first impressions that can define one’s role in life. “But it doesn’t make you any less capable,” said Smogard.

In today’s hyper-connected world of smartphones and social media, Paul’s gambit would fall apart pretty quickly. However, the lasting themes and strong characters ensure that the impact of “Six Degrees of Separation” is not lost.

“He’d just have to do his research a little more,” said Elyse Evans, a Metropolitan State student who plays Ouisa. “Paul is very smart.”

Paul is a social chameleon, according to actor Mark Stewart, a senior theater major. Only his methods would change. The vast amount of online information that allows you “to know [people] before you meet them” can make us vulnerable, which Stewart believes Paul would use to his advantage.

“Without any way to prove who you are, you are nothing,” said Stewart.

The increase in identity theft in recent years supports that notion, according to Vogt.

However, more than the convergence of race and class issues, Paul’s motivation, the need to belong, is timeless.

“I can relate to him, in terms of finding myself,” said Dorian Lucas, the MCTC student playing Paul. “I don’t think he’s a bad person.”

More than anything, Paul is just lost at sea. According to Lucas, Ouisa is the mother figure he lacks in his life, and his victims are a type of surrogate family.

New media has increased the quantity and speed of our connections, but not necessarily the quality. And, like it or not, at some point everyone is an outsider.

“Everyone must feel accepted somewhere,” Lucas said.

What: Six Degrees of Separation by John Guare

Where: Whitney Fine Arts Center Main Stage, 1424 Yale Place on the MCTC Minneapolis Campus

When: 7 pm Feb. 17­–20 and 1 pm Feb. 20

Admission: Free, though audience members are asked to bring nonperishable food items to be donated to the MCTC food pantry