Written by Joy Thompson
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Spinning into Butter, Riverside Theatre's third production in its 21st season, is a sometimes-humorous look at very serious subjects: political correctness and racial politics in the new millennium. The work and the production have local roots. The play was written by Rebecca Gilman, who has an MFA from the University of Iowa and is an acquaintance of Ron Clark and Jody Hovland, co-artistic directors at Riverside. (*Time* magazine hailed Gilman as "an important new theatrical voice.") And director Bruce Levitt is a former University of Iowa faculty member and was director of the MFA. actor-training program at the school from 1977 to 1980.

Levitt has assembled a first-rate cast and has managed to coax real menace and suspense out of scenes that could have easily dissolved into melodrama. Instead, the audience is treated to a tense, spare, hard-edged examination of a subject most would rather ignore.

Hovland and Clark play dueling deans at a small new England private college – not an Ivy League institution but one of the second- or third-tier private schools that mark the New England landscape and attract the graduates of prep schools to their quiet, well-designed campuses. When a series of threatening notes appear on the door of an African-American student's dorm room, the campus is thrown into an open – and very difficult – dialogue about racism, racial politics, and political correctness in a hopeless quest to contain the damage before the national media begin reporting on and dissecting the situation. Lives are changed, careers end, and the problems are never resolved, which makes for some electric scenes.

But the work is not one-dimensional. Racial politics are overlaid with sexual politics and even organizational politics in an accurate, if sad, portrayal of university life and what frequently motivates decisions, choices that are not always made in the best interests of the students involved.

Many critiques have compared Gilman's *Spinning into Butter* to David Mamet's *Oleanna*, an exploration of sexual harassment on campus. The parallels are certainly there to make, but Gilman's examination of racism in the most liberal of American institutions – the academy – raises real questions about the progress (or lack of progress) our society has made since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

Spinning into Butter *runs through December 9. TalkBack Fridays provide an opportunity for audience members to discuss the play with members of the cast following performances. For ticket information, call (319)338-7672 weekdays between noon and 5:00 p.m. In conjunction with the current production, Riverside will also be holding a reading of Gilman's*
Boy Gets Girl
on November 26 at 7 p.m. A discussion will follow the reading.