

Theatre . . .

By Claude Reed, Jr.

The First

Martin Beck Theatre
NYC
Director:

The First recounts the events leading up to Jackie Robinson's breaking into baseball's major leagues and the ordeal of racism that he had to endure. The year was 1947, when Blacks were viewed disdainfully whether in the North or South. The nation had a serious love affair with the game of baseball—the "national pastime." In fact, fans and supporters were so 'into' this sport that baseball became synonymous with patriotism. However, a severe contradiction existed—Blacks were excluded from participating in major league baseball with white players.

Although many whites conceded that Black baseball players were athletically good (even superior) the white consensus of all but a few was that Blacks did not possess the mental stamina to function under the pressure of "organized" competition. Scouts from major league teams had seen Blacks play whenever they chose to watch a game between teams in the Negro League. They saw the awesome skills of such legendary players as Josh Gibson and Satchel Page. Many of these Negro League baseball players compiled remarkable records that reflected not only skill but stamina. Negro League teams regularly played two games a day not just an occasional double-header. But the stigma of mental "laziness" persisted, so most of these great players were destined to never play on a major league baseball diamond.

This double standard, however, bothered one man to the extent that he became obsessed with ending the injustice. The man was Branch Rickey, president of the then Brooklyn Dodgers. Mr. Rickey knew well of the prowess of Black baseball players and had no reservations in admitting to their often astonishing athletic feats. He was a total realist and was also cognizant that a special kind of Black man was needed to handle the adversity in store for the first Black to wear a major league baseball uniform.

Clyde Sukeforth, a Dodger scout had told Branch Rickey about an exceptional baseball player named Jackie Robinson. Jackie had all of the attributes necessary to make it in the majors. The first 4-letter man at UCLA, a military veteran and a fine scholar, Jackie Robinson had the essential elements—athletically, competitively and intellectually. He also had

something that catalyzed these elements . . . courage.

As *The First* unfolds, a touching story is conveyed giving insight into the strength of resistance Robinson and Rickey faced and the strength they demonstrated in redirecting resistance to acceptance. Jackie Robinson was insulted by fans, members of opposing teams and even by members of his own team. Dodger manager Leo Durocher and short-stop Pee Wee Reese were Jackie's only early team allies. Regretably, the relationship between Robinson and Reese was not fully developed in the play, but this oversight does not take away from *The First's* overall impact too greatly.

With Blacks today losing their awareness of the important legacy of our past, *The First* rekindles our memories and reiterates the value of knowing from where we have come. This is more than just Jackie Robinson's story, but a story with a vital lesson for us all. It is a story of superior skills, but more importantly, superior character, which has ever greater meaning today than in 1947.

Candida

Circle in the Square
NYC
Director: Michael Cristofer

Candida marks the Broadway return of Joann Woodward after a 17 year absence. And once again (as with a number of B'way offerings this season) the play's star is also its main attraction. For those who are fans of Joanne Woodward, she will not disappoint you. Ms. Woodward delivers as fine a

performance as the George Bernard Shaw script allows. Unfortunately, there is little else to cheer about.

This play was first produced in 1894 and was one of two plays which brought initial fame to Shaw as a dramatist. Technically, *Candida* is solid but its most severe problem is a time-dated plot. With better than average performances by all of the cast, throughout the play one seems to expect something more to happen that would give real impact to the actor's efforts. But by the three-act play's conclusion it is an emotional letdown to realize that Ms. Woodward has resolved a conflict that in 1894 was deep but runs much too shallow in 1982.



Michael Edward-Stevens and Lonette McKee in a scene from "The First".



Katherine Hepburn in "West Side Waltz."