

SUMMER 2016

# UMASS *Amherst*

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## Loving the Alien: *Collidescope 2.0*

*UMass Theater presents an otherworldly view  
on race relations in the United States.*



MacArthur “genius” Fellow Mimi Lien designed the stage to look like the holodeck of an alien mother ship.



IF AMERICA'S race history were to be viewed by another planetary culture, what would it look like to them?

The premise of the original drama *Collidescope 2.0: Adventures in Pre- and Post-Racial America*, produced by the Department of Theater in late April, is one of an alien etiology—as off-worlders aboard a mother ship trace the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin to its point of origin in the injustices that were present in pre-Constitution America.

After an “establishing shot” of a plain white holodeck, a solemn procession of hooded figures surrounds the fallen body of Trayvon Martin, and from there the actions of the play sweep forward—yet not in a straight path, but in an orbit, expanding and contracting through time, and illuminated by projections from the ship’s database: a domestic comedy that skirts close to the edge of peril in 1939 Chicago; a debate of the Fugitive Slave Act in the Dickinson (yes, *that* Dickinson) home in Amherst in 1861; a ball at a Charleston mansion on the eve of the Civil War; an epidemic of lynchings in Georgia in 1918; a virtual lynching by the House Un-American Activities Committee; a monologue by James Baldwin; and the testimony of Fanny Lou Hamer at the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

The production revisited the original *Collidescope*, which Judyie Al-Bilali, assistant professor of performance and theater for social change, saw at the University of Maryland in 2014. UMass students researched additional material—the incidents at the Dickinson home, as well as hate speech occurrences on campus, customizing the work for a local audience and implicating them in the relentless tide of events that lead to Martin’s death.

Under the direction of visiting artists Ping Chong, a winner of the 2014 National Medal of Arts, and innovative playwright and dramaturge Talvin Wilks, the production team imagined an alien perception and set of values and which elements would most catch an off-worlder’s attention. “The design carves out the space of the historical events, dividing, compressing, or emphasizing moments in time and space,” says lighting designer and MFA student C. WEBSTER MARSH ’18.

Occasionally the lighting and sound design would reveal the artifice of the reenactments: a light stuttering when a white character utters a racial slur; nonactive characters at the cotillion ball in a “holding pattern” of stereotypical postures while they wait to be reengaged; performers fluidly enacting different races, genders, manners, and cultures wearing symbolic costumes and bearing standardized props—connecting incidents to create an ineluctable momentum.

Is something ever so broken that it can never be repaired? Can something so fundamentally flawed at the outset ever be structurally sound? After their forensic investigation, the aliens find us wanting, and the mother ship leaves us behind. —Laura Marjorie Miller