

Jackie Still Stealin' the Scene

Bums the word in new play on Brooklyn 'Home'- town hero

By David Hinckley

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Imagine Pee Wee Reese, the Hall of Fame shortstop on those great Brooklyn Dodger teams of the late '40s and early '50s, as a middle-aged drunk, flopping around in a cheap bar telling a hooker about his repressed homoerotic desire for Jackie Robinson, who played alongside him at second base.

That's the opening scene of "Stealin' Home," a new play about Jackie Robinson written by Fred Newman and being performed week-ends at the Castillo Cultural Center, 500 Greenwich St.

You may not like the opening, but it does get your attention. In fact, Jackie Robinson is getting

almost everyone's attention this year, because it's the 50th anniversary of Jackie putting on a Dodger uniform and breaking one of the most significant barriers of the 20th century: major league baseball's color line.

Many of those remembrances will be romanticized, and not unjustly. Robinson not only broke the color line, but buried it with a combination of grace and skill that left no ground for anyone to argue that it should be retained.

Valid and useful as a noble image is, however, there's invariably more to the person behind it. Just ask fans of baseball's other 20th century titan, Babe Ruth.

Purely as a player, Robinson was simply superior. Although he didn't reach the majors until he was 28, which means he lost five or six prime years, he played 10 seasons with legitimate Hall of Fame numbers: .311 batting average, 197 stolen

bases, 137 home runs, and a marvelous ratio of 740 walks to 291 strikeouts. He also helped his teammates, because once he got on base he always had to be watched, meaning the opposing pitcher would be paying just a little less attention

and wanted to be the first in the stream with a pan.

"Stealin' Home" makes Robinson, a man with an active mind, into a virtual oracle. He tells Reese in the early '50s that baseball wants to integrate mostly so it can grow at the same explosive pace as postwar America;

that O'Malley will pull the Dodgers out of Brooklyn and move West, and that the game as it was played for its first 80 years is disappearing as marketers start making the sports decisions.

Almost as a counterweight to these melancholy reflections, though, "Stealin' Home" closes with a scene that's too good to give away, but which can stand pretty much un-

challenged as the ultimate Brooklyn Dodgers' fantasy, with Jackie Robinson at the center.

As a footnote, "Stealin' Home" could have been kinder to Pee Wee Reese, who describes himself in one late scene as "not much more than a journeyman." In reality, Reese played 16 seasons at the toughest position on the field, got 2,170 hits, captained a great team and was elected to the hall of Fame in 1984.

But the point here remains, of course, Jackie Robinson, and that point is the right one: Jackie didn't steal home as much as he claimed it.

"Stealin' Home" is at the Castillo Cultural Center, 500 Greenwich St., Thursday-Sunday through March 2. Call (212) 941-1234.



to Hodges, Snider, Furillo or Campanella in the batter's box.

"Stealin' Home" acknowledges all this. It also notes that Robinson's later off-the-field work was not so universally admired, particularly when he signed on with the Republican Party because he saw in "black capitalism" the quickest path to self-sufficiency.

In "Stealin' Home," Robinson's toughest knockdown pitch comes from a radical sister, several years after his playing days have ended.

Robinson's story is also set against the bittersweet legacy of those Dodger teams, who too often lost the last game of the season and who in the end were run out of their own ballpark, Ebbets Field, as if they were just some ragtag kids on a vacant lot.

Except that the man who chased them was the man who owned them, Walter O'Malley. He smelled gold in California