

Suppering Fools: "The Dinner Party," at Black Hawk College through April 19

Written by Mike Schulz
Thursday, 16 April 2009 05:59



Neil Simon's *The Dinner Party*, written in 2000 and currently being staged at Black Hawk College, concerns three formerly married couples who meet for a *très sophistiqué* evening at a Paris restaurant: Claude (played here by Bryan Woods) and Mariette (Elizabeth Cook, alternating performances with Cayla Freeman), whose shared passion for literature outweighed their passion for each other; Andre (Paul Workman) and Gabrielle (Elizabeth Paxton, alternating with Kristen Lynn Raccone), whose sexual rapport wasn't enough to keep Andre faithful; and Albert (Thomas Riley Ratkiewicz) and Yvonne (Kaeleigh Esparza, alternating with Lynn Aaronson), whose obsessive devotion to one another eventually resulted in them getting divorced - *twice*.

Though seemingly invited by the gentlemen's attorney, the first guests to arrive quickly discover that their host is nowhere on the premises - a phone call to the lawyer reveals that he has no idea who gathered them together, nor *why* they've gathered together - and more than 60 minutes into this 105-minute one-act, Claude finally voices the premise that Simon has spent the first hour establishing: "It's like a goddamn Agatha Christie dinner!"

You can be forgiven for thinking that the playwright has already *covered* this terrain, as his screenplay for 1976's *Murder by Death*

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found a mysterious dinner host assembling pairings of "the world's greatest detectives" (including parodies of Christie's Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple) for reasons unknown. Yet while the Simon scripts do share obvious similarities, what

The Dinner Party

actually feels like is a wisecracking cousin to

No Exit

, Jean-Paul Sartre's famed existentialist drama in which three characters find themselves trapped in a sinister hotel room, gradually realizing that "hell is other people." And thankfully, the committed and frequently funny performances by director Dan Haughey's cast ensure that Black Hawk's production is by no means hell to sit through ... even though, for this viewer, at least, the playwright sure doesn't make it an

easy

sit.

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Contrary to common perception - including, sometimes, my own - I don't reflexively hate Neil Simon comedies. There are even a few, such as *Barefoot in the Park* and *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, that I quite like. But unfortunately, *The Dinner Party* features a little bit of everything I can't stand about his works: the incessant quipping, with characters concealing their broken hearts through insults and snappy comebacks; the ham-fisted moralizing, with dialogue making explicit themes that are already abundantly clear; the shameless self-references (describing Yvonne's breathless introductory speech, Claude says, "She did a short comic monologue and left"); the nearly complete disregard for narrative logic. (Why, here, are we told that the dining room's doors are locked from the outside when we plainly see someone locking them from the inside?) No matter the talents of those producing them, I rarely believe in a Neil Simon play, because so few of his creations speak or behave in ways that make sense or that are recognizably human; even the characters that Simon establishes as slow-witted, such as *The Dinner Party*'s amiably dopey Albert, deliver zingers with sitcom-honed precision.

Needless to say, though, plenty of people adore Simon's style - there was nearly consistent cackling at Black Hawk's Tuesday-night performance - and I'd be lying if I said that *The Dinner Party* didn't make me laugh several times. (When you're thrown a new punchline every 10 seconds, a few of them are bound to stick.) Yet what was interesting, and inspiring, about the show was how much amusement was generated with so little help from the script; when the actors were really cooking, it was their characterizations, and not their characters, that sold the material.

For the life of me, I couldn't make heads or tails of Yvonne, who is required, alternately, to be supremely composed and powerfully ditsy, sometimes from one line to the next. But Esparza is so radiantly endearing and flaky in the role that she transcends its inherent absurdity, delivering her lines with wonderfully winning speed and surprise. (Esparza's best moment, however, is a nonverbal one; she earned Tuesday's biggest laugh after reacting to Albert with an exasperated sigh and a perfectly timed drop of the head.) As a character, Gabrielle - a sophisticated, highly sexual "woman of the world" with apparently unlimited funds and connections - is no less vexing than Yvonne, but Paxton portrays her with a comically seductive playfulness that makes her every utterance sound like direct, and dirty, come-on; the delight Gabrielle takes in making

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others (particularly Andre) squirm is, in Paxton's hands, teasingly, richly entertaining.

Woods is stuck with *The Dinner Party's* most tedious character - it's the sort of generically bitchy, epigram-spewing part that George Sanders used to specialize in - but the actor gets a nice, understated rapport going with Cook, who salvages her underwritten role by playing it with as much honesty and credibility as it can sustain. (Cook is also terrifically, and subtly, inventive when the claustrophobic Mariette begins aching for ventilation.) Though hindered by a tendency to direct lines face-front when he should be addressing his co-stars, Ratkiewicz's lightly stylized sing-song deliveries add rhythmic freshness to a lot of stale jokes, and he's even better when *not* speaking; his silent-comedy routine with Yvonne, with whom Albert refuses to speak, reveals an inventive comic mind in action. And Workman comes the closest to suggesting an actual *person* amongst Simon's programmatic conceptions. He's intensely likable as a centered, if somewhat conflicted, cad, and saves the play's early scenes by seeming as fed up with the forced cleverness as some of *us* are; while still funny, Workman also appears *sane*, which in this context is a considerable blessing.

It's to Haughey's and his cast's credit that the intermission-less hour-and-three-quarters never feels overlong, and even if you tire of the dialogue, there's always something pleasant to *look* at ; Laykin Mlekush's set design is admirably spare and elegant, while Cindy Breecher's costumes - basic black offset with a flash of color - are uniformly impressive. And happily, except for *The Dinner Party's* script, just about everything here *is* . This Neil Simon hors d'oeuvre may have gotten stuck in my teeth, but at least Black Hawk's participants are doing what they can to make it a tasty one.

The Dinner Party runs April 17 and 18 at 7 p.m. and April 19 at 2 p.m. For information, call (309)796-5419.