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Theater: Alan Rickman's *Seminar* Needs Another Edit

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SEMINAR ** out of ****
GOLDEN THEATRE

Anyone who has ever participated in a creative writing class of any kind will relish the premise of this new comedy by Theresa Rebeck. In a real writing class, everyone is exquisitely sensitive to the need to be polite when commenting on someone else's work. You begin with whatever positive comment you can muster ("I really liked the use of the adjective 'bumbling' in describing the old security guard....") before tenderly suggesting that perhaps the story wasn't quite ready for printing in *The New Yorker* ("I was a little confused by the, uh, um, dialogue in the first, second, third, fourth

and sixth paragraph. But the fifth paragraph was great!").

But in *Seminar*, we know the class will be led by Alan Rickman and that he promises for \$5000.00 to eviscerate the work of aspiring writers with the complete freedom of a man who was once a major writing star and is now reduced to a "servant" who helps other writers either through his work as an editor or in these classes. Is he bitter? Yes, thank goodness. So if nothing else you get to live the fantasy of saying exactly what you want to your fellow writers through Rickman. When he purrs "whorish" and other devastating put-downs to the gaggle of writers assembled at his feet, you smile with delight. They're not at his feet for adoration but rather to make it easier for Rickman to kick them when they're down.

That's the sole pleasure really for this too familiar work riddled with ludicrously unrealistic moments. The four aspiring writers immediately fall into types: Jerry O'Connell nicely plays Douglas, a privileged go-getter who knows how to use his wealthy connections to network his way to success. It helps that he's already published in literary magazines and actually has a competent sort of talent, just enough to make him be read by others but not enough to actually make a name for himself; it would be nicer if anything he said actually made you believe he could write a decent, competent story. "You'll never be on a panel," is how Rickman skewers him.

The lovely Hettienne Park plays Izzy, who unabashedly uses her looks to further her career. Rickman's Leonard will skewer her as well, but in a much more graphic manner more beneficial to both of them.

Hamish Linklater is Martin, a writing snob who loathes Douglas, yearns for Izzy and either can't or won't recognize that his best friend Kate is in love with him. Kate is played amusingly by Lily Rabe as a neurotic, frumpy dresser who hides her beauty under sexless clothing and hides her insecurity by diving into ice cream and cookie dough at every turn.

The show is filled with twists and turns but detailing any of them wouldn't be a spoiler since you can spot them a mile away. The main question is whether Rickman's Leonard is a bastard or actually ruthlessly trying to help these writers. And are any of them any good at writing? Ultimately, we don't care.

Rebeck's play is filled with foolishness, especially the idea that Rickman doesn't read anything until he shows up for class, which means they must sit in silence while he peruses someone's short story (or novell!). The result is that throughout the show we watch Rickman and the students glance at a paragraph or two or at most scan a page or two and immediately start declaring this or that work is genius or wildly commercial or pure and utter crap. They don't even need to read an entire story or even half of it or even a third of it or even just three pages before being convinced of its worth?

This conceit has to be accepted but it's completely unnecessary and frankly lazy on Rebeck's part, a device to create instant suspense by having them watch Rickman's reaction while he sees the work for the first time. Suspense could just as easily and more realistically be created by having the students hand out work at the end of a session. The following week the students arrive first and we figure out their reaction by what they say to each other before Leonard arrives. Maybe they're jealous or embarrassed or surprised or bored. Then we watch with suspense to see how that attitude changes when Leonard weighs in. Instead, we're left with the absurd sight of people who claim to care about the written word barely bothering to read one-tenth of a story before tossing it aside.

This device taints the entire show because it's impossible to take any of their opinions seriously since they're almost always based on the most superficial reading. Rebeck might have mined this for comic effect if it happened once: if Rickman was forced to read a short story right away (against common practice) and then never got past the first line because he eviscerated it so completely in its construction, why that would be funny. Having the entire show work this way beggars belief. So do many other elements.

Kate has written and rewritten one story over and over again for the past six years, apparently not working on a single other piece. Really? And Martin, her best friend since high school, has no idea that the massively luxurious nine room mansion she lives in on the Upper West Side is rent-controlled.

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Really? (This does however lead to one of the show's most amusing moments when Martin and the rest corner Kate and force her to reveal the rent she pays on the place; it's a genuine New York moment.) Martin pays \$5000 to attend this seminar, leaving him broke and homeless since he can't pay his rent... but he refuses to bring in any of his work. Really? One student dashes off an entire book in one week and the result is so rich and intriguing that even Leonard recognizes its potential. Really?

Seminar might have been a satire of scheming writers struggling to get ahead, but the show isn't that vicious. It might have used a genuine love of writing and literature to bring these characters alive in their struggles to create, though beyond references to Jack Kerouac they almost never really discuss literature or writing or their favorite authors. You might expect their conversations to be peppered with "David Foster Wallace" or "Jonathan Franzen" but except for Martin's pro forma defense of Art the issue never really comes up.

Rickman does his level best with Leonard, especially a juicy monologue about the arc of his career, but he simply doesn't have enough to work with. O'Connell and Park are fine, with Rabe squeezing out the humor of her part whenever possible. And why did Linklater shave his hair? (That unruly mop served him so well in his brilliant turn in *The School For Lies*. It will be a terrible shame if that production doesn't see further life.) Here Linklater is adrift in a clueless character we never fully accept because Martin is never fully drawn by Rebeck. Still his natural skill keeps Martin compelling enough.

Director Sam Gold should have sent Rebeck back for another few rewrites but otherwise keeps things moving along. As long as you don't think too deeply about anything that happens or try and make sense of these paper-thin characters, the quips arrive regularly thanks to the able cast. David Zinn's costumes are on the money but his set for Kate's apartment feels wrong. The colorful painting along the back wall is a distraction and it's hard to imagine a writer who would have books color-coordinated and arranged by their spines instead of their authors or subjects (one shelf is all blue books, two more all-white, one all black and so on). If the point is that she's not at home even in her own home (it's not clear where her rent money comes from so maybe the decoration is her parents' work), then we should have had some further indication of that in her behavior. Finally, the scene change cues by John Gromada make it sound like we're in a British dance club rather than an Upper West Side home discussing literature.

This is a distant cousin to *Master Class*, another show in which a major artist works with neophytes on their craft. While we happily don't get flashbacks to Leonard's life, *Seminar* sorely lacks any insight into or love of writing. We don't see Leonard specifically and genuinely revealing why this bit of writing doesn't work and that bit of writing does. We don't get any sense of their love of literature or why they've chosen writing over some other career. We don't see anyone realizing they don't have what it takes or enjoying a creative breakthrough. In short, at this *Seminar*, we don't get our money's worth.

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Greenwood *

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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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