

Theater: Heir Ball; (Sur)Realistic Joneses

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THE HEIR APPARENT *** 1/2 out of ****

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CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

Shall I compare the new David Ives comedy to his last adaptation of a classic comedy (Moliere's Misanthrope), what Ives calls a "translaptation"? The production of School For Lies, also at Classic Stage Company, was quite simply brilliant. The Heir Apparent is very funny, but perhaps slightly broader and not an absolute home run. It's a triple. And who going to bat wouldn't be thrilled with a triple?

Shall I compare The Heir Apparent to all the other new comedies of the theater season? It is far, far better and far, far funnier than anything else I've seen. I've sent people to it and want to see it again. If, like The School For Lies, it doesn't extend or transfer for an open run, it will be a shame.

Based on a play by Jean-Francois Regnard I'd never heard of, it's a silly tale of miserly old men, scheming relatives and servants who suffer these fools while trying to get a little something of their own. Eraste (Dave Quay) is a foppish fool waiting for his tiresome uncle to die already so Eraste can claim what he expects to be a major chunk of change and marry the pretty Isabelle (Amelia Pedlow). They are madly if superficially in love but what's that to her coldly calculating mother Madame Argante (the formidable Suzanne Bertish). If Eraste secures his fortune, all well and good. If not, no dice.

His uncle Geronte (Paxton Whitehead) may be at death's door (indeed, Geronte's every word sounds like the final croak of doom), but Geronte refuses to walk through. What's more, he's making up his will and has several surprises -- large settlements will be made on distant, dubious relatives who have popped out of the woodwork. And rather than bestow cash on Eraste and secure the lad's happiness, Geronte would rather marry Isabelle himself, sire an heir and bequeath the money to the as yet to be conceived child.

Complicating matters is the imminent arrival of Scruple, the shortish lawyer who has never met Geronte but will draw up the will (hmmmm!). Leave it to the able servants Crispin (Carson Elrod) and Lisette (Claire Karpen) who love each other in a practical sort of way and must stop Geronte from getting married, ensure Eraste's happiness, keep Madame Argante at bay, pull the wool over the eyes of the diminutive scribe and make sure they get a little something something out of all this as well.

(Photo by Richard Termine)

In other words, it's all stuff and nonsense, delivered in hilarious rhymed couplets that range from the juvenile (fart jokes, bad puns and the like) to the even more juvenile (rhyming "far Crimea" with diarrhea). The Heir Apparent is deliriously silly. For a while, especially in the first half, it feels a little more slapdash than the strongly rooted in character work The School For Lies. When one of the guys dons a dress and pretends to be one of those scheming distant relatives in order to disabuse Geronte of leaving those people money, you are far from surprised when another guy does the same thing and even less surprised when one of the women shows up as well. It's funny, in a music hall sort of way.

Everything changes in act two because the show provides what has been missing: someone of authority to mock and confuse and mystify. Geronte has been too feeble and Madame Argante took nakedly avaricious herself. But with the arrival of Scruple (David Pittu), everything clicks into place. Scruple has been referred to so often as tiny that it's no surprise to see Pittu literally arriving on his knees (a flowing robe covers his legs). It's a simple visual gag, but his lack of height is not what makes Scruple so hilarious. Yes, he's touchy about his stature and imagines insults where none reside, but he's also fastidious and demanding and the voice of authority. Idiocy swirls around him and he is bewildered, bewitched, suspicious and yet too proud to admit he's not exactly sure what the hell is going on. Indeed, he's the perfect foil for the lunacy, the figure of power desperately needed to anchor this comedy in something other than schtick.

As a capper, the play proves at the last to have an actual purpose, for Geronte realizes everyone has been waiting for him to die and if that's what your life has come down to, he says, you've screwed up. (Geronte uses a more colorful phrase. It doesn't rhyme but somehow it's very funny. When If/Then used such language, it felt like a forced attempt to be naughty and adult. Here it feels absolutely spot on.)

Somehow, the limited space and budget of CSC always brings out the best in set designers and John Lee Beatty is no exception. All the tech elements are excellent, from the costumes of David C. Woolard (jokey outfits rarely work for me, but he pulls it off nicely in one scene) to the lighting of Japhy Weideman, wig and hair of Paul Huntley (especially well done) and sound design of Nevin Steinberg (unashamed to take a bad joke and repeat it, flatulence-wise).

Director John Rando has brought together an excellent cast (with casting by Calleri Casting) and molded them into an ensemble. I felt they were getting away from him for a while in the first act, but it all gelled beautifully in the second. Pedlow is not a detriment, but she's the only one that is notably less present than the others (though I liked her very much in You Never Call Tell with the Pearl Theatre Company). Karpen is very good as the sensible, truth-telling servant Lisette though she mostly must support the plans of the men. The handsome Quay is game and amusing as the desperate to inherit Eraste. Carson Elrod (so good in Peter and the Starcatcher) is the star here as the servant Crispin, doing literally everything for a laugh and winning us over from the start.

It's no discredit to him or the others to say they stand in the shadows of masterful work by their elders. Olivier winner Suzanne Bertish is immediately commanding as Madame Argante, effortlessly conveying the weight of authority that only old money can provide; even sitting quietly on a couch she draws your attention. Whitehead is equally good in the bigger role of Geronte. His voice is such a croaking death-rattle, I fear for his throat. Geronte's transformation later is literally a miracle, but this is indeed the same actor. What fun he's having and us with him.

But I fall to my knees to praise Pittu, who fell to his knees for the role of Scruple. His every grimace is hilarious, his every suspicious glance a master class in comedy. He can literally do no wrong here in surely one of the must-see performances of the year.

THE REALISTIC JONESES * out of **** LYCEUM THEATRE**

Tourists will surely be heading to The Realistic Joneses for the chance to see stars Michael C. Hall of Dexter and Six Feet Under, Emmy winner Toni Collette and Oscar winner Marisa Tomei (along with playwright and actor Tracy Letts) up close and in person. But for canny theater-goers, this is the Broadway debut of playwright Will Eno, one of the sharpest and most distinctive voices working today. It might never have happened -- Eno is more like the next Beckett than the next Neil Simon -- but it's a testament to his originality and the draw his work has for actors that it's happened now.

The Realistic Joneses is not the breakthrough work that will allow his talent to reach a wider audience, but it's a fine introduction to his voice and certainly deserved a sharper production than this one overseen by director

Sam Gold which repeatedly lets Eno done in the tech elements. That said, the cast is in sync with the material, the writing is wittily intelligent and unsettling and there's enough to chew on here to make it a satisfactory evening. Tourists might be a bit bemused but the show leaves no doubt that Eno is the real deal; he just hasn't dealt aces yet.

Set in a smallish town near some mountains, *The Realistic Joneses* is not quite surreal enough to enjoy as an off the wall effort nor willing to be real enough to mine genuine human emotion. But it's simple enough to grasp and does indeed anchor Eno's playful dialogue in more plot than usual. Jennifer and Bob Jones (Collette and Letts) live quietly, dealing with the strain of Bob's illness from a rare and terrifying disease. Bob puts all the burden on Jennifer's shoulders and prefers to simply swallow the pills he's handed and ignore as much as possible what is going on.

In contrast, their new neighbors are John and Pony Jones (Hall and Tomei). Pony does not like distress of any sort, faints at the sight of blood (and sometimes even faints without seeing blood) and even when her husband seems to have a seizure of some sort, she leaves it to Jennifer to sort things out and see to his care. These two couples under tremendous stress meet awkwardly at home and in town, sparring verbally as they dance around the disease that stalks them and the disease of unease that can sneak into a marriage.

But it's funny! The temptation is to endlessly quote Eno's dialogue ("Ice cream is a dish best served cold" is hard to resist). But it's not the dialogue on the page that entrances so much as the dialogue brought to life by the strong cast. Hall has the most vivid role and runs away with it. John Jones is an oddball with an oddball sense of humor that's aggressive and circuitous at the same time. John has a tendency to state what people are doing: when he meets Jennifer at the grocery store and after some awkward chitchat she says she's got some stuff to buy, he bluntly makes clear that she wants the conversation to end, an accurate but off-putting comment that leaves her unclear if he's upset by it or just noting it. When he then soon is holding her arm in a not-quite hug after saying she has sad eyes, she feels obliged to say she's happily married. That only prompts John to say he wasn't making a pass; he's not sure what he's doing but it's not that. Every scene with John keeps the other characters on their toes and Hall is a pleasure to watch. He can encourage Bob to have an affair with his wife and then get angry about it and it all makes perfect sense as played by Hall.

As his somewhat dim wife Pony, Tomei has the least interesting part but finds her rhythm in it. Collette and Letts are on more traditional ground (Letts' Bob lashes out from a place of fear over his illness) but they too savor the constant word play that is the currency of the show. It's not quite cerebral at the expense of reality -- secrets are revealed, affairs are had and the like. But ultimately it's not the journey of the characters or the emotions their plight prompts that you remember but rather the off kilter perspective of the playwright.

Director Gold has the cast on the same page, but drops the ball with the technical elements. David Zinn doesn't offer a set design so much as a yard sale, with two sliding doors indicating the homes of the two Joneses and stuff littered about the stage, missing only price tags to make the effect complete. It's not terribly difficult to keep track of where everyone is at (the left side of the stage is the home of Jennifer and Bob while the right side of the stage is the home of their new neighbors). But you shouldn't really have to think about which home people are entering and leaving even for a moment, should you? (And I think they broke the rules and had everyone enter from the right door when they were going to the backyard of the home on the left; friends and I argued for a bit about this, which is not a good sign.)

This vague jumble of two homes is just the start. We can see high up into the rafters, with exposed backstage equipment hinting at the artifice on display. The costumes by Kaye Voyce are innocuous but the lighting by Mark Barton and the sound design by Leon Rothenberg feels bizarrely ominous. Whatever was called for in the script by Eno, it's strange to hear a doom-laden groan of sound at the end of many scenes, with the lighting dramatically calling up another primary color in the rafters at the same time. Exactly what they were going for, I haven't the slightest, but it weighed down the proceedings.

Put all that aside. Eno is a marvelous talent. For me, his play Middletown is the most mature effort yet from him - - it was slightly more surreal than The Realistic Joneses but had more emotional impact. Thom Paine (based on nothing) is a monologue piece that made his name and was a finalist for the Pulitzer. At Signature, they just staged Open House, which offered a clever conceit (the actors in a family all left the stage one by one and returned as different characters), though again it had more intellect than heat. For all the faults of the production, The Realistic Joneses lets four actors spar with dialogue that is inventive and fun and is the Broadway debut for an artist who is approaching greatness. He's in the right neighborhood at least. Maybe he'll flower with work that is more traditional or work that is less traditional, but flower he will.

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