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Nelson's Gabriels Are Back in *What Did You Expect?*

David Sheward · Wednesday, September 28th, 2016

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Once again playwright Richard Nelson mixes politics and cooking for a rich feast of thought in *What Did You Expect?*, his second play in the series *The Gabriels: Election Year in the Life of One Family*, at the Public Theater. Like his Apple Family plays presented from 2010 to 2013, this new trilogy focuses on a middle-class clan in Rhinebeck, New York, as they discuss their own economic and emotional crises which reflect the tumultuous state of the nation at large. Each play takes place during a single significant day during the 2016 election cycle. The first piece, *Hungry*, was set on March 4, the Friday after the Super Tuesday primaries. The current work takes place on Sept. 16 (also opening night), the Friday before the first debate between the major party candidates. (The third, *Women of a Certain Age*, will open on Election Day.) Once again we are in the family kitchen and a meal is being prepared. But this time, instead of dinner for themselves, the characters are fixing an elaborate picnic for a potential rich client of brother George, a carpenter desperate for employment.



Amy Warren and Jay O. Sanders in *What Did You Expect?*

Credit: Joan Marcus

All of the Gabriels are on financial and psychological edge, just as their countrymen are spooked by an hysterical national election between two equally mistrusted candidates. (“Everybody’s scared,” George’s wife Hannah remarks.) George and Hannah have recently sent their son to college while George’s elderly mother Patricia has fallen victim to a cash-advance scheme. In order to raise funds, they are selling the beloved family piano. Meanwhile, memories are dredged up as the papers of Thomas, George’s recently deceased brother, a playwright, are sifted through by Karin and Mary, Thomas’ first and third wives, both now living in the family house. They are seeking anything of literary value that can be sold.

Like the confused aristocrats of *The Cherry Orchard*, the Gabriels are bewildered by the shifts in their circumstances and have somewhat contributed to letting their security slip away. “What did you expect?” asks George’s cynical sister Joyce. Mary’s license to practice medicine has expired. Patricia’s rent for her retirement home has gone unpaid for months. They are equally flummoxed by the country’s political dialogue (or lack thereof) and the news media. “Everyone is screaming at each other,” says Hannah of the state of election coverage. References to America’s forgotten literary heritage provide ironic commentary on its shallow present. The picnic they are preparing for is meant to recreate a famous outing whose participants included Hawthorne and Melville, but it’s being planned by George’s possible patron, who is portrayed as frivolously wasting his wealth.

Directed with understatement by Nelson, the tightly-knit company is so natural it feels as if we are eavesdropping on private conversation rather than sitting in a theater. The verisimilitude is so deep you can almost feel the weight of the family's sadness as their scratched but cherished piano is sold. Jay O. Sanders captures George's flummoxed but earnest struggle to stay afloat amidst economic squalls, while Lynn Hawley conveys Hannah's starchier pragmatism. Maryann Plunkett continues to astonish as the bereaved Mary, nursing her widow's sorrow and soldiering on, while Meg Gibson's Karin hovers on the edges of the action, seeking a way into the family. Roberta Maxwell skillfully portrays Patricia's helplessness and the shadow of her previous strength. Amy Warren's Joyce balances anger with wry observations.

All of Nelson's Apple and Gabriel plays have captured frightening and real moments in America's national dysfunctional family drama. The politics are never forced, the dialogue is always life-like. Unspeakably moving in its intimacy and poignant sense of loss, *What Did You Expect?* is my favorite so far.

Sept. 16—Oct. 9. The Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Tue—Sun, 7:30 pm; Sat, Sun, 2 pm. Running time: one hour and 45 mins. with no intermission. \$65. (212) 967-7555. www.pubictheater.org.

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