

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Old Money and New Judy

David Sheward · Wednesday, September 23rd, 2015

A.R. Gurney is one of our most prolific playwrights. From the 1970s until now, in over 50 shows including *The Dining Room*, *Love Letters*, *The Perfect Party* and *The Cocktail Hour*, he has compassionately and humorously chronicled the diminishing fortunes, both financial and psychological, of the WASP upper class as the American population becomes a majority of minorities. This season alone will see several productions of his works including the 1995 *Sylvia* opening on Broadway next month and the new *Love & Money* now at Signature Theatre Company. This slight piece incorporates several of his favorite themes: the corrupting influence of wealth, the encroachment of the lower class on the privileged, his love of Cole Porter—referred to as the poet of the upper crust, the disappearance of grace and class in our culture, and the theater as the last hope of saving these qualities. But he fails to say anything new about these elements or replay his familiar complaints in a fresh and arresting way.

Not only is Gurney repeating himself, but he's borrowing from others. The main thrust of the plot is a direct lift from John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* (he even acknowledges this in the dialogue) with an African-American con-man attempting to charm his way into the good graces and sizable purse of his white hostess. But the author gives that true-life based story a less cynical twist.



Joe Paulik, Maureen Anderman, and Gabriel Brown in *Love and Money*

Credit: Joan Marcus

Mega-rich dowager Cornelia Cunningham is about to donate all of her money and property to various charities. She feels guilty over the robber-baron tactics her late husband used to acquire their fortune and how said filthy lucre contributed to the early deaths of both her children. She is leaving just enough to live on in a retirement home and for her two ne'er-do-well grandchildren not to starve. Just as she is about to sign the papers finalizing her plans, an unknown third grandchild appears on the horizon and guess what, he's downstairs and—surprise—he's black.

There's very little tension or suspense since the interloper's story is obviously fake and all is happily resolved very quickly. Gurney delivers a few pointed observations on class divisions, but he's made them all before in the plays cited earlier. Even at 80 minutes, *Love and Money* feels padded with several Porter songs inserted for the flimsiest of excuses. (Cornelia has a player piano she wants to donate to the Juilliard School, allowing barely motivated renditions of lovely curios like "Make It Another Old Fashioned, Please" and "Get Out of Town.")

Director Mark Lamos and his cast deliver a pleasant enough diversion. Maureen Anderman adds spice to the too-saintly Cornelia. Joe Paulik provides much needed push-back as her contrary young lawyer. Gabriel Brown is attractive and energetic as the con man, but he fails to compensate for the character's arrogance with the necessary charisma. It's difficult to believe he would enchant the generous but intelligent Cornelia. As the Juilliard student, Kahyun Kim has a lovely voice, but there's not much she can do with such a nothing role. She's basically there to sing. As Agnes, the no-nonsense Irish housekeeper, Pamela Dunlap gives lessons on how to enliven a tiny part. She makes every one of her lines count with sharp delivery and pointed intention. A play by Gurney about Agnes might have been more interesting. At least it would have been different.

Also Off-Broadway, *Judy*, Max Posner's melancholy and moving new play from Page 73 at the New Ohio Theatre, is something different—a melancholy and moving look at the present through a futuristic lens. We're in the year 2040 in the suburban basement of three adult siblings. One nondescript set (designed with eerie minimalist accuracy by Arnulfo Maldonado) serves as the single environment of this drifting trio. Technology has shattered the psyches of Timothy, Tara, and Kris who sit alone at separate computer screens attempting to find comfort in cyberspace.

Each has suffered a devastating loss. Timothy's wife, the unseen Judy of the title, has left him. Tara is launching a new religion through the Internet to fill void of her sterile marriage to Saul (also offstage) and to avoid dealing with her troubled adopted son Calvin. The eldest sibling Kris is still dealing with survivor guilt for living through a mass murder at a nationwide chain of yoga studios 14 years ago. (The event is referred to as "1-16" for the day it occurred in a pointed echo of 9-11.) She finds temporary relief with Markus, a much younger man who services the "System" which runs the web and power for the entire community. (Though having a human technician make house calls seems an inconsistent impossibility in Posner's impersonal world.)



Danny Wolohan and Birgit Huppuch in *Judy*

Credit: Jeremy Daniel

Posner combines a wicked satiric sense with compassionate observation. His characters are simultaneously ridiculous and pathetic. In one hilariously sad scene, Timothy covers himself in Judy's clothes, sits a wheelchair used by his late parents, and attempts to communicate with his distant teenage daughter Eloise by pretending to be a long-lost twin brother, reasoning Eloise will open up to a stranger in a way she wouldn't with her authority-figure dad. Timothy's clumsy efforts at reaching out and Eloise's confused but perceptive response are riotously funny and touching.

Director Ken Rus Schmoll skillfully combines these two strains in a subtle staging and the cast plays their absurdist aims straight, reacting seriously in a crazed universe. Danny Wolohan is a desperately intense Timothy, Birgit Huppuch a cool but frazzled Tara, and the incomparable Deirdre O'Connell's expressive features illuminate Kris' pain. Marcel Spears is equally eloquent in his emotional reactions as the sensitive Markus. Frenie Acoba and Luka Kain display talent beyond their years as the struggling kids Eloise and Calvin.

At times Posner is too clever for his own good. He occasionally points out his futuristic devices and themes too obviously as in the climactic seance scene where Eloise and Calvin summon forth the spirits of their grandparents. All societal changes are explained to the ghosts (impersonated by Timothy and Kris) as if the author is saying, "See, here's the point I want to make about today's

tech advances blighting human relationships.” Fortunately, Posner keeps a lid on this telling rather than showing and *Judy* is mostly an absorbing and scary peak into our future and an unflinching comment on the present.

Love and Money: Aug. 24—Oct. 4. Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue.—Fri., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: 80 mins. with no intermission. \$25. (212) 244-7529 or www.signaturetheatre.org.

Judy: Sept. 10–26. New Ohio Theater, 154 Christopher St., NYC. Tue.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 5 p.m. Running time: two hours including intermission. \$30—\$40. (866) 811-4111 or www.ovation.org.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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