

Cultural Daily

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REVIEW: The Wayside Motor Inn

David Sheward · Wednesday, September 17th, 2014

A lonely salesman phones in his orders to a computer, longing to speak to a human being. A grandmother complains about the decline of personal service. A waitress advises a customer not to eat her employer's food because it is filled with chemicals. Occupants of an anonymous motel attempt to reach out to each other as they go through painful life transitions but the speed of modern life prevents their connections.

These may seem like contemporary figures voicing 2014 concerns, but they are characters from A.R. Gurney's rarely-seen 1977 play *The Wayside Motor Inn*, now in a precise and biting revival at the Signature Theatre Company. As he has done with many of his other plays, the prolific Gurney examines the WASP upper middle class's sense of displacement and alienation as they find themselves cast adrift in a society where they are longer the top dogs. That's just one concern of the nine guests and one employee of the Wayside. Each is facing a major life change and finds no comfort in each other or their bland surroundings.



Marc Kudisch (Vince) and Will Pullen (Mark). Photo: Joan Marcus

Like his long-running Off-Broadway hit, *The Dining Room*, this play features multiple, unrelated plotlines playing out in a single setting. The generic motel room outside of Boston is designed with proper period blandness by Andrew Lieberman, lit with sensitivity by Tyler Micoleau. There are ten characters enacting five different stories, each set of two—elderly husband and wife, father and son, estranged couple, amorous college kids, salesman and waitress possibly hooking up—acting as if the others weren't in the same room. If this sounds a bit confusing, it can be at first. As the play starts, a seemingly endless stream of guests enter the suite as if they were in an updated version of the famous stateroom scene from the Marx Brothers' classic *A Night at the Opera*. But Gurney and director Lila Neugebauer pace the action at just the right clip so that things don't get too blurry.

The superb specificity in the acting also keeps the varying plot threads untangled. The most riveting moments are provided by Rebecca Henderson as Ruth, the divorced wife engaged in a pitched battle with Andy (a properly subtle Kelly AuCoin), her former husband, over who gets to keep the family stereo and the snapshots (remember this takes place in the pre-digital era.) As Ruth enters the room and confronts her ex-spouse, Henderson conveys volumes of anger, love, and longing in the stiff, sharp way she moves and talks. You can tell what's going on underneath her veneer of civility and when her emotions boil over as she snatches photos from her equally enraged ex-partner, it's devastating.

There's also much to admire in Jon DeVries's crotchety old codger on the brink of heart failure, Lizbeth Mackay's overly solicitous spouse, Marc Kudisch's bullying yet loving father, Will Pullen's quietly rebellious son, David McElwee and Ismenia Mendes' ambivalent young lovers, Jenn Lyon's argumentative waitress and Quincy Dunn-Baker's lusty and isolated salesman. The variety and richness they and the playwright bring to these seemingly ordinary people belie the dullness of the motel-world setting.

Now—Oct. 5. Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Schedule varies. Running time: two hours including intermission. \$55-\$75. (212) 244-7529 or www.signaturetheatre.org.

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