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## Jane Alexander Shines in Sitcom-ish *Grand Horizons*

David Sheward · Wednesday, January 29th, 2020

Few performers can endow the simple culinary acts of making a sandwich or ladling gravy with as much meaning as Jane Alexander. The reserved, precise manner she pours out the brown sauce for mashed potatoes or the laser-beam side-eye she gives a non-communicative spouse as she spreads peanut butter speak of every slight and grievance in a 50-year marriage. These seemingly minimal actions reveal volumes about Nancy, a 70-ish woman on the brink of a major transition, in Bess Wohl's uneven but blisteringly funny new play *Grand Horizons*, presented by Second Stage on Broadway at the Helen Hayes Theatre.



James Cromwell and Jane Alexander in *Grand Horizons*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Alexander creates a moving and real portrait of a woman yearning to burst out of a marriage based on deception and Wohl's script is effectively humorous, delivering major guffaws on relatable topics such as the pain of aging and the challenge of keeping a marital union together—thanks to expert timing of the cast and Leigh Silverman's clockwork-reliable staging. But the play's horizons are too easy and narrow.

Set in the titular retirement community where Nancy and her husband Bill (nuanced James Cromwell) have recently moved (Clint Ramos designed the appropriately sterile, generic set), the action is set in motion in the brilliantly acted and directed opening scene. After the couple prepares an evening meal in frosty silence, Nancy casually states, "I'd like a divorce." Bill replies just as coolly, "All right." The scene abruptly ends. Then the pair's adult sons, anxiety-prone lawyer Ben (marvelously neurotic Ben McKenzie) and emotionally barren high-school theater teacher Brian (hilariously jittery Michael Urie), along with Ben's wife Jess (comically solicitous Ashley Park), an empathetic and heavily pregnant couples therapist, descend on *Grand Horizons* to "fix" the situation. It turns out Nancy has always been in love with another man and now seeks fulfillment through charity work while Bill has lately found a new amour who shares his enthusiasm for stand-up comedy.



Ashley Park, Michael Urie, Jane Alexander, and James Cromwell in *Grand Horizons*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

There is a lot of genuine, sharp observations on the buried resentments and hidden agendas in families and marriages, but Wohl settles for too many sitcom laughs and forced set-ups. Parents

graphically describing their sex lives in front of embarrassed adult children comes across as schtick to trigger giggles rather honestly motivated revelations. The gay son Brian unbelievably sneaks a pick-up into his parents' house because the latter conveniently has roommate problems and Brian needs to deliver some exposition. Predictably there are unfunny bits about miscommunication during sexual role play and unearned judgements from people who just met each other. Despite the rigged nature of this segment, Urie and Maulik Pancholy manage to endow the encounter with a modicum of truthful acting. Likewise, Alexander and the resourceful Kelly Bishop lend a dose of reality to the highly theatrical meeting between Nancy and Carla, Bill's clandestine girl friend.



Michael Urie and Maulik Pancholy in *Grand Horizons*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The hijinks reach a climax at the end of the first act when a startling and unexpected development crashes the couple's expectations (no spoilers, but it brings the house down in more ways than one.) Fortunately, in most of the second act, once the sitcom-ish humor has been played out, Wohl allows the characters to speak to each other with candor and without punchlines. We see a real family dealing with a credible crisis in a naturalistic fashion, a rarity on Broadway.

Jan. 23—March 1. Second Stage Theater at the Helen Hayes Theater, Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 15 mins. including intermission. \$59—\$199. (212) 541-4516. [www.2t.com](http://www.2t.com).

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