

Cultural Daily

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John Guare's Wild Nantucket Sleigh Ride

David Sheward · Wednesday, March 27th, 2019

John Guare takes us on a wild romp through personal ups and downs, toxic pop culture, murder mystery tropes, literary and cinema allusions in his off-kilter new play *Nantucket Sleigh Ride* at Lincoln Center's Off-Broadway Mitzi Newhouse Theater. As in his best-known works, *The House of Blue Leaves* and *Six Degrees of Separation*, the veteran playwright mixes his unique take on our celebrity-saturated world with piercing insights on humanity's infinite and equal capacity for cruelty and love, viewed through a farcical lens. Walt Disney, Roman Polanski, Rene Magritte, Alfred Hitchcock, Jorge Luis Borges, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Jaws* are just a few of the landmarks on this bumpy roller-coaster ride through Guare's consciousness. Jerry Zaks' attuned direction, balancing guffaws with sobs, gives the play the right breakneck speed and askew demeanor, but the characters and situations still come across as too goofy and off-beat to be entirely moving.



John Larroquette and Will Swenson in *Nantucket Sleigh Ride*.

Credit: T. Charles Erickson

John Larroquette is an essential anchor to the confusing action as Edmund Gowery, a stand-in for Guare. In this fictional version of the author's reality, Guare—or Gowery—gives up the theater for a more stable career in finance after a traumatic encounter on the titular Cape Cod island with an eccentric family and circle of friends, all of whom have appeared in an amateur production of Gowery's one hit play, *Internal Structure of Stars*. Parallels between that play and the Nantucket denizens illuminate Gowery's blighted psyche as echoes of his past cause him to mistreat lovers, chums and fans. Recounting the plot beyond this simple introduction would be an equivalent to the eponymous ride which is mariners' slang for harpooning a whale and being hauled by it until it dies of its wounds or the sailors drown. Suffice it to say that Gowery's cavalier attitude towards his craft and his relationships causes ruin and devastation, but in hilariously funny ways.



Clea Aslip, Will Swenson, German Jaramillo, John Larroquette, and Tina Benko in *Nantucket Sleigh Ride*.

Credit: T. Charles Erickson

The overlap of comedy and tragedy which works so well in *Blue Leaves* and *Six Degrees* does not quite fit here. Guare introduces the specter of sexual abuse suffered by two children of the weird clan, but never really examines its full impact, and this devastating trauma becomes just another quirky incident on Gowery's whacky sojourn.



Adam Chanler-Berat, Douglas Sills, and Grace Rex in *Nantucket Sleigh Ride*.

Credit: T. Charles Erickson

Fortunately, Larroquette and the able company, many playing dual roles, avoid turning Guare's bizarre characters into cartoons, but soften their sharpest satiric edges. Douglas Sills infuses Schuyler the father and a cryogenically frozen Walt Disney with manic energy. Adam Chanler-Berat and Grace Rex capture the haunted fragility of the children Poe and Lilac both as mischievous kids and empty, yearning adults. Tina Benko finds the soft center in Antonia and Alice, Gowery's brittle girlfriends. German Jaramillo provides a ghostly presence as the spirit of Borges. Stacey Sergeant has humor and bite as a no-nonsense cop and quirky secretary. Clea Alsip is a saintly presence as the mysterious mother, Will Swenson a sexy Vietnam vet obsessed with love and lobsters, and Jordan Gelber a rough-hewn, fast-talking lawyer.

There are many pleasures on this bumpy ride, but once it's over, it's hard to figure out what it was all about and where Guare wanted to take us.

March 18—May 5. Lincoln Center Theater at Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre, 150 W. 65th St., NYC. Tue 8pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours including intermission. \$92. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

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